

I am not Disney nor British. I have

This is what I would call ***Off the Rails*** Chapter 2TEMP, and is one of two Super Bowl presents I am going to post for my fellow 'Mericans. Mainly because I didn't get the regular polls up in time for me to concentrate on an ongoing fic...

Anyway! This consists of AN ENANCED Harry-centric portion of the night in the cave, and then... well, it could eventually have the first week of the group's time on their new planet, but that will depend on the poll I'll put up in the heels of this post. This part is mainly about what goes on in that time on Coruscant. I'm not entirely pleased with the Senate portion, but the rest, yeah, I like all of that. I hope you all will too.

You should see the new collection if you can link on this. I will be doing some things there, and with some of the other collections going forward, as well as the poll I mentioned above. We will see. This month, like I said, is going to be as much about maintenance and other issues as much as RL stuff and the two poll winners. So many different RL things, ugh.

This isn't Grammarlied. Gonna have no time tomorrow due to Family Time.

This is important. I have upped Barriss Offee's age. Canonically, as on the wiki, this is all happening in the year 35 BBY (might have said 36 before, my bad). That is, 35 years Before Battle of Yavin. Barriss was, um, in canon this would make her five years old. Ahsoka's one year old, for those wondering. Considering what I plan for Barriss in terms of joining the romance, I am upping her age to be eleven at this point, more of an age with Aayla rather than Ahsoka as in canon. Mind you, romance is always up in the air at this early in a fic to a certain point. See Hela in ***ATP***, Akeno's return in ***FILFy***, no one joining Shaak/Ranma and a few others. I'm still wondering about which of Daphne, Hermione, Angelina and Luna to include in the pairing too, so give me your thoughts on that score.

Now with that out of the way, here we go.

{2/9: swiftly edited to remove the notes and the {} within except for the vote one. I also moved the second HP portion, as it shouldn't have been there at all, my bad.}

Off the Rails Chapter 2(1/2): While you were Sleeping...

Unaware of the mass of events, both physical and otherwise, their arrival had caused across this new dimension they had been forcibly dropped into, the majority of the teens slept through the night. Even Roger and Luna had both fallen asleep a bare few hours after the others had.

Alone of the group Harry, his magic once more nearly buzzing inside him, didn't sleep, instead staying up with Hedwig. His fingers slowly stroked through her feathers as the pair stared out

into the rain from around the awning that the twin had constructed, sitting with their backs against one of the cave's walls. As Hedwig kept an eye out for anything dangerous, or small and squeaky, Harry let his mind wander over the events of the day.

Back with his so-called relatives, Harry had often liked the sound of rain, yet this storm was nothing like what he had seen before. This storm made it look like the sky had declared war on the ground, the rain coming down so hard and heavy the very air thrummed with it, to say nothing of the sheer amount of lightning that had begun soon after they reached the cave, accompanied by the crashing of thunder in the distance.

It was clear to Harry, and Roger and Luna when they were awake, that they had reached the safety of the cave with minutes to spare. It was almost as if the Point-me spell (and Harry wasn't certain calling it a spell was all that accurate, really) had taken into account how far they could go when it directed Harry, Daphne and Luna to the cave.

Regardless of that, the storm was intense, and Harry just lost himself in watching. The power of it called to him, the primal nature of weather unleashed almost tugging at his mind and magic alike. As if he could direct it, or, or take it in somehow.

Harry didn't know how long he sat there, but eventually, the night started to lighten. Very little in the way of light came through the storm clouds and the intense rain, but enough did to make Harry realize he'd stay up the rest of the night. Despite that, Harry made no move to wake up someone else to take over his post.

Instead, he pushed through the strange amount of blankness his mind had inhabited most of the night as he went through the day's events. Instead, he turned his mind away from the rain, to concentrate on what the future might hold.

I wonder, I wonder what about magic we'll learn here that isn't in all those books? I... I think magic here is, is different from back home, not just stronger, but different. I, I'm not certain how to put it into words, but the feelings there. I think Miss Angelica's got the right of it when essays, theories and what-have-you won't be important here, but still, I think we need to learn more about what we can and can't do with magic.

I think Luna and I have proven we don't need wands, but... is that going to be true across the board? Or will some of the others still need them? Better, what about those rune things that Miss Angelina mentioned? Harry had no idea what they were beyond a vague idea, and that she seemed to be enthusiastic about them. And potions too, Neville and Blaise both mentioned them, and I tried to read some of the potions book we were assigned. I wonder what kind of potions we could make from whatever is out there and what we've got on hand.

Ugh, I know we gathered as much resources as possible, but I only followed like... half of the stuff the others thought were interesting beyond the books. My fault I guess, as a leader, or whatever I should know about everything we've got, right?

That thought still blew Harry's mind, and he shook his head. I still can't get my head around that, honestly. I, I guess I stepped up, but now that we're safe, I have to wonder if Miss Angelina and Mister Roger should take over. Why, why would anyone look to me to lead them, especially if they don't believe that whole Boy Who Lived brain rot, like Blaize called it.

Besides that, anyone, well, even caring for me is still new to me. I knew Hagrid liked me because he liked my parents, and I know Hedwig loves me because I can feel it and I love her for it. Luna calls me her friend, and that's really nice. So is Hermione calling me her friend too. But I can handle that way better than people looking to me for, for leadership.

Harry was quite used to differing to authority, as doing otherwise would cause him to be punished back with the Dursleys, well, more than he would otherwise have been for breathing, that is. People looking to him to be the authority was **weird**, although of course he'd never had any thought of abusing it. Now that the crisis was over, thought, Harry was much more comfortable fading into the background.

But... but are we really safe here? I mean, I haven't seen any animals out there, but there might be some that'll come out after the rain passes. Well, Harry snorted just a tiny bit as he remembered one particular story book from school. Unless this is a Noah's ark kind of situation. Then we might have even more trouble.

And what about food? We've got some, sure, but how long will it last? Hermione's right too, most of that stuff is filling, but it's mostly snacks, sugar and chocolate.

What about diseases and stuff. Neville taught us a spell to keep bugs away, but what about actual animal bites or airborne germs? I don't think soap is going to be enough on a planet like this one. Then there's Poison Ivy or the equivalent, and... well, heat exposure too. I remember fainting several times when I was out in the Dursleys garden. Here it's been too dang muggy for that kind of thing, but ooh, what about just the sun? UGH. My getting burned that one time was way worse than fainting.

Harry's thoughts came to a sudden halt as he suddenly felt as if someone was looking at him. It didn't feel like whoever it was, and he was certain it was a person rather than an animal, and further it felt more confused and sad than anything else.

Behind Harry in her makeshift bed, Daphne Greengrass had begun the somewhat halting, lengthy progress of waking up at someone snorting nearby. She wasn't very much of a morning person at the best of times, and the physical, emotional and mental exhaustion of the day

before had certainly not been the best of times. However, even after her mind had come fully awake, Daphne stayed where she was for a moment, simply watching Harry from behind as he stroked his owl's head, before slowly pushing out of her sleeping bag to join him.

As she did, she noticed the other guards, Roger was asleep snoring. *Wherever is Luna, but oh, that is so unattractive* she thought, amusement dancing through her mind, *although I'm not exactly surprised that I could sleep through it. Morgana knows that I dealt with that kind of thing from Tracy often enough.*

The thought of her best friend had Daphne pausing in place for a moment, half crouched as she rolled out of her sleeping bag, before she pushed the thought of Tracy away. Of the fact Tracy's head had been crushed during the disaster.

Push it down, be cold, feel nothing. Only let your emotions out if you are alone, and even then, do not cry, Daphne could almost hear her father intone, his voice cold as always while he looked at her from over his large desk. *You are a Greengrass, crying is what you cause among your enemies, business and social alike.* That had been the mantra since she was teething. Not even as a toddler had she been allowed to show anything but perfect poise and silence in public.

But why though? a small voice in her head that sounded remarkably like Tracy's, asked, as she always did. Ever since they had first met and become the oddest of friends, Tracy had tried to break down Daphne's walls and did to a degree that would have appalled her father if he ever learned of it. *No one here cares about that pureblood nonsense. There's no politics here. You don't have any enemies, not with that idiot Flint running off to get himself killed, no one you have to make friends with to keep your family's neutral status. According to Lovegood and Johnson, this is an entirely new dimension. So why not start new?*

For a few moments, Daphne just crouched there, frozen in place where she had been pushing out of her makeshift bed, struggling to think through the building sadness about Tracy's death rising within her. She eventually pushed it all down, turning it into more chill ice within her mind, only to open her eyes and find Harry had turned to look at her. That caused her to start a bit, but when he held a finger to his lips, Daphne nodded. When he motioned for her to join him, she stood up and made her way over as she had originally planned.

For his part, Harry studied Daphne for a moment. Now that everything was settled down, he could take in her features more, thanks to the four hovering lights that Roger had created during the night. They'd yet to go out, and Harry had wondered if they needed to be canceled or were permanent a few times throughout the night.

Looking at her now in the light of those orbs, Daphne reminded Harry somewhat of a documentary he had once put on when he was cleaning the Dursley's first floor. It'd been about Vikings, and it had shown several kings and queens and so forth. Daphne put him in mind of a,

admittedly much younger, Viking Princess, all cool control and penetrating stare with blonde hair and, well, an extremely pretty face.

Yet Harry had seen her freeze in place for a moment, had seen her eyes go wide and unseeing. He had... he wasn't certain if he had seen or felt her confusion and grief, but he was certain that after a moment both had disappeared. Pushed down like Harry always pushed down his frustration and pain when with the Dursleys, only... cooler? Colder? Harry wasn't certain where that thought came from, but, perhaps because of her family ice magic, it seemed to fit well.

Harry set such observations to the side as Daphne joined him, sitting down next to him on the other side from where Luna had slipped down to place her head in his lap. His legs were quite asleep by this point, something that had embarrassed Harry at the time, particularly with the amused hoot Hedwig had given. Daphne also looked around Harry at Luna's sleeping, one eyebrow raised, showing no further reaction before she looked over at Harry. "How long have you been the only one awake?" she whispered, gesturing with her chin at Roger.

"Since well before dawn. I can't, I don't think I'd be able to sleep, really. My magic, it's buzzing too much, if that makes sense? It's no longer demanding I use it, but it is, it's fueling me somehow, I guess."

Daphne thought about it for a moment, then closed her eyes and examined her own magical reserves. This was a prelude to a magical discipline called Occlumency. As she had yet to become even a teenager, to say nothing of fully forming her own mind, Daphne couldn't use the full form, but she had been taught many of the stages leading up to it. Including rigid emotional control.

Now, she used that to examine her magical core and found it completely full. Indeed, it was almost bursting. She wouldn't describe it as buzzing, but Daphne also noticed that she wasn't feeling very hungry just yet. Which, considering they'd only had snacks in the past... twenty-four hours? More? That was saying something. *Interesting.*

Daphne also noticed that her hands, which had been sore and aching from hanging onto her broomstick, and some other aches and pains were gone. Her magic had healed her, something that she had only rarely seen when she was younger. That kind of thing was supposed to stop, though, when you were old enough to start consciously directing your magic through your wand. Daphne said that aloud, and Harry shrugged.

"I wouldn't be able to tell you. I think, well, looking back on my life after I found out I had magic, I think my magic did a few things for me. Helping me heal faster was definitely one of them. And... Well, maybe helped me regrow my hair when my relatives gave me this horrible haircut."

Harry paused suddenly, wondering why he had shared that first bit, before deciding that it had simply slipped out. The night of introspection and silent contemplation of the storm had put Harry in a very strange frame of mind before he started to think about the future and everything.

"We call that kind of thing wylde magic in my household. I remember when I had a wylde magic moment, it was the first time I saw my father smile when people beyond family were about," Daphne admitted, not commenting on what Harry had just let slip. "One of the only times, to boot."

Blinking as she had not intended to add that last, Daphne looked down at Hedwig, raising a hand to stroke the bird's wings. Hedwig preened, enjoying the attention, and Daphne allowed a faint smile to appear on her face, her inner ice cracking just a little bit more. "She's beautiful. Is she your familiar? I told you all about Herodotus, but he wasn't my familiar like this one seems to be for you."

Harry winced, remembering how Daphne had described what had happened to her owl. "Er, I'm sorry," he said, almost automatically.

"For what?" Daphne asked, confused.

"I, I just... I think all of this is because of me," Harry confessed. That had been something which had occurred to him in the night, and he'd put it aside, but now with one of the other teens in front of him he felt he had to apologize. "I mean, well it doesn't take much thought, right? The Boy Who Lived comes to Hogwarts, and suddenly something like this happens with the Express? And, and hagrid told me that Voldemort had a lot of supporters."

"Don't... I was about to say don't use that name. He created a Taboo on it. But not only has he been dead long enough for that to not matter, there's all this, isn't there?" Daphne mused, her eyes going unfocused as she gestured out to the world beyond the cave.

Then those exceptionally dark blue eyes flashed for a moment as they locked back on Harry, another feeling pushed through her inner ice, annoyance and anger, although the anger didn't stay for long. *It isn't as if I can take revenge on whoever it was personally after all.*

"But you think someone did it on purpose? I had thought that myself. Yet even if that is the case, it certainly is not your fault," She said aloud. "It is altogether the fault of the person behind whatever happened to the train. Taking on any kind of guilt yourself is stupid, Harry Potter. And I refuse to associate, let alone be led by someone who is stupid."

Harry twitched, almost flinching back away from Daphne, but her glare had him frozen as if she were a snake and Harry a particularly foolish meal. He could somehow sense she was being sincere though, and even meant well, but the chill that she gave off was weird to deal with.

Hermione was easier, her eagerness to prove herself and to help remind Harry of himself in some ways. Even Luna, with all her insistence of hugging him was easier than dealing with this extremely self-controlled young girl who acted much older than she looked. And who, Harry's mind pointed out to him again despite his best efforts to stop it, was quite pretty, in a haughty, regal sort of way.

"I will have no more about your feeling guilty, about something that someone else did because of your presence, Harry Potter. It is not a sin to be alive. It has never been a crime to survive," Daphne continued, staring hard into Harry's eyes.

Something in her tone made Harry nod convulsively, knowing instinctively that she wasn't saying that just about himself, but about something deeply personal. He wondered what caused that intensity, but he could no more argue with it than he could stand against the tide. "Er. R, right."

"Good." Daphne looked back down at Hedwig, whose knowing gaze very much did not make her feel any less embarrassed. *Ugh, I've heard that familiars become more intelligent the more powerful the wizard is and the deeper the bond, but that is just ridiculous.*

"Um, Do, do you want to talk about it?" Harry asked. "Er, in all the movies and books I've read, keeping things buttoned up is never good for you."

Daphne stiffened, her walls coming up again, but Harry reached over, touching her shoulder for a second, brief, but warm touch acting like a blow dryer on Daphne's frayed control. "I'm not going to judge you or anything. I just think you need to, to grieve. For Herodotus, and, and everything. I don't because, well, I don't have anything back I'm I really miss, but you and the others..."

"Those shows of yours would not have met my parent's approval," daphne muttered, looking away. "I... I lost a friend in the accident. I, for the longest time, she and my sister, who I won't ever see again, they were the only ones to encourage me to not be, be ice. Be cold. The ice princess, Blaize mentioned the nickname? Its hereditary, Ice princess or prince. We are Greengrass. We are of the north, and we are of ice. It, it's a way of life."

"That, that sounds like a lot of pressure. I, I know a bit about expectations and that. Were they, did they ever..."

Realizing what Harry was implying, Daphne shook her head. "No. They didn't need to. Cold voices, chill glances, magical punishments for lapses in control once I reached a certain age. No mark left, just discipline instilled," Daphne shook her head.

"But here, you can start over, be your own person, right? I mean, do, do you like being the ice queen? It doesn't seem like it. And I think no one can live their live frozen, you know? You

need some sun and life too, you know?" Harry said, trying to both give some advice, when he felt woefully inadequate for doing so, and hoping to cheer Daphne up a little. "And, and would Tracy want you to push away your grief, or acknowledge it?"

"...Tracy would have said the same thing, if in a somewhat more corny manner," Daphne smiled faintly before nodding. "I, I'll think about it. Some things, some things might be too deeply embedded. But, thank you, Harry. You're right. At least, here, no one will judge me for being less than what they demanded me to be."

Harry nodded, understanding that feeling, if somewhat in reverse. For a moment they looked at one another, smiling, then Daphne, feeling embarrassed again, shifted the topic, looking out into the rain again. "Now, tell me about your magic yesterday. How were you able to use spells like that? They were well beyond what I would expect most adult wizards and witches to be able to do. And all that without a wand to boot. You then were able to do the anti-bug spell with just your fingers, and create your own version of a Point Me spell."

Harry eagerly explained what he had been feeling from his magic since coming into this world. As if it had been behind some kind of wall and then had simply begun to flow out into him, buzzing with power. He explained how it was as if his magic wanted to be used, **wanted** to be called upon, and responded to his thoughts and visualization.

He did not bring up the pain he'd felt when he'd first arrived. Not the gunk that had come from his cruse scar. His mind shied away from that memory of pain like a beaten dog, and he just could not bring himself to think about it right now, despite knowing that what had happened to him was in no way normal.

Daphne listened, as behind them, some of the others began to stir. She listened, taking in what he said, then turned resolutely towards entrance to the cave. "Let me try it."

For several moments she stared, doing nothing, just staring, her brows furrowing.

Harry watched for a few minutes, then hesitantly asked, "Um, what spell are you trying, er, that is, what effect are you trying to um... imprint, I guess, on the world?"

"Imprint or create, either would work. As for the spell, I was trying to recreate your golem."

Daphne answered, her eyes not leaving the expanse of rain outside.

"Um... then, it's, I think magic at it's core is all about imagination and will," Harry explained, his words speeding up in his enthusiasm. "Create an image, but don't try to link it to a word and don't try to just copy mine, you've never seen Hagrid, just your will. Then let your magic flow out of you, flow out like the magic of this place is constantly flowing in."

Frowning a bit, Daphne nodded, and slowly the image she wanted changed. She had wanted to craft something huge, like the golem that Harry had created, only for the image to not stick in her mind. No, what she found there was ice. *An ice golem, then?* She thought, amused, the chill within her mind and soul cracking still further. *Morgana, but Tracy would've loved that. A giant snow man, like that strange Frosty creature?*

A smile on her face, Daphne allowed her mind to go back to the time when the two of them had seen that strange muggle show on the television at Tracy's place. Then, just as the image started to take shape, something interrupted her. Out in the rain, there was a stirring, a presence that both young folk felt somehow in a way that neither could explain.

Staring in that direction, Daphne and Harry both stood up, staring as a roar reverberated out from whatever creature was coming towards their cave. That bellow woke everyone else, but before anyone else could move, even Harry, Daphne clapped her hands together in front of her, pushing them outward at the same time, a near-manic grin suddenly crossing her features. "FREEZEEEE..." she hissed, imagining.

Instead of the playful image she had in mind a moment before, all the cold within her, all her already cracking self-control flowed out in a wave of chill wind and ice.

The beast outside in the torrential rain was a six-legged preying mantis with a very odd head, taller and armed with serrated mandibles. But before it was able to get close, it was caught by the expanding cold front, its limbs freezing even as it was pushed backward by the ever-expanding ice. It shrieked, trying to wrench its way out, but then Daphne clenched her hands, the image shifting in her mind. Suddenly the ice shifted form, slamming numerous pointed ice needles up into the creature.

As blood seeped out to join the rain pouring down, Daphne stared at the creature, remorse for killing it going through her for a brief moment, before her emotions firmed. The thing had come to eat them after all, and no predator entered a fight without knowing that it could be their last.

She nodded, then allowed her hands to relax back into her lap, breathing in a few times before she turned eyes on Harry, a smile flashing across her face for just a brief moment as her self-control faded away. "Well, that was fascinating! And somewhat therapeutic."

"True, even from back here it was fascinating to watch, my dear. But you're not exactly disproving your Ice Queen label," Blaize drawled. "Indeed, I think you just made your nickname permanent."

Daphne glared at her childhood acquaintance, then smirked slightly. Releasing all of that ice had... Well with the talk with Harry it had helped clear her mind in a way that she had never

known for years. As if something which had been building up inside of her had just been given an outlet. *Now, how would Tracy respond to that comment?*

As the others watched, Daphne raised a clenched fist, then very slowly raised her middle finger as she stared at Blaize. "Fuck you, you Italian Primadonna."

For a moment, everyone one stared, then, a appalled Hermione sputtered, Angelina broke out into laughter, followed by the Weasley twins. Everyone else followed, even Neville as Blaize mimed shock. The laughter dispelled any concerns or fears that the others might've felt at the roaring of the monster which had finished the process of waking them all up, including Roger, who was staring at where the ice began just beyond where his feet had once been sticking out near the end of the cave.

"And you did that without your wand?!" Hermione suddenly exclaimed, staring down at where it lay in Daphne's makeshift bed roll. Her eyes flicked from Harry to Luna and then to Daphne, before her expression firmed. "That means it wasn't a fluke. We can all maybe do magic without our wands here."

"That's right. I think, I think with magic, with all of us working together, I think we'll be fine," Harry said, trying to give a rousing speech, but unable to find the words. But his voice and tone firmed as he went on, counting points off of his fingers, his mind harkening back to what he had been thinking about before he felt Daphne's eyes on him. "There's a lot of dangers here, and I think we all need to sit down and talk about how we're going to deal with it all. Exposure to the sun when it comes out, the heat generally speaking, I mean, even in this rain, you can tell it's hot and food. Clothing is going to be an issue too, if we start moving around a lot, I mean, the pants and everything I was wearing won't last long if we move through jungle terrain and so forth. Neville told us about that spell to deal with bugs, we need more like that. We need to plain, prepare, and practice with out magic. More than anything, though, we need to work together."

"Agreed," Angelina said, standing up and moving over to one of the trunks. She wasn't really feeling hungry, but she knew that might be a feeling brought on by the background magic of this place. Magic could sustain them, but it would be a constant drain on their resources which would be better served in other ways. "Let's all get some food in us, then we'll need to set out some goals, plans and resources. Harry's right, spells to deal with exposure and heat and everything else like that go first."

"What about—" one of the Weasley twins began. From here, Harry couldn't make out their features, as the two of them had taken a position at the back of the cave last night, and right now, their features were in shadow from the magical lights Roger had created.

"That big beastie out there?"

“Will its corpse—”

“draw in further predators do you think?” The second Weasley said.

“Considering it’s frozen over entirely right now I rather doubt it. Frozen meat like that doesn’t have any smell to draw in predators. Good grief, even its blood has frozen,” Luna observed. She had pushed herself up out of Harry’s lap and danced forward. Awake once more, the sheer magic in this place was making it exceedingly hard on Luna to feel anything but delight.

The others just stared at her out in the rain, somehow ignoring the deluge that was coming down all around her, as she stared at the beast quizzically. “Interesting that it got so close to us, although I could put that down to the storm, but that look in its eyes when it spotted us, not quite sentient, but certainly very, very focused. Beyond even that of a normal predator... I wonder if it was using magic in some fashion. This whole place is so magical, I wouldn’t be surprised if there were species out there that did.”

“Plants will also evolve to use magic in various ways, that’s how we get magical plants in the first place,” Neville agreed, causing Luna to beam happily over at him as she skipped back into the cave. That caused Neville to stutter in turn, but he held out a portion of his blanket for her to wipe herself down with, looking away politely as he did, trying hard not to notice that she wasn’t old enough for a bra just yet, and was wearing a white shirt currently.

I’m glad that Luna doesn’t have anything to show at the moment. If I had done that, in my nightclothes? I’d be giving these boys a bit of a show, Angelina reflected, handing out some snacks to the others. “Good points both of you, but that kind of thing we’ll have to deal with as we run into them. Planning in terms of defensive spells and overall goals now I think, as well as further organizing our library and everything else we gathered.”

The others all nodded, with Harry the only one to wave away food, only to twitch as Angelina gave him a glare and forced a packet of Sugar Quills and a chocolate frog on him. “Eat,” she ordered. “You might not think you’re hungry, but you shouldn’t rely on your magic to keep you going all the time.”

Cowed, Harry nodded, before twitching as he looked past her towards the unconscious form of Angelina’s friend. That young lady hadn’t stirred since Harry had first seen her, but she did so now, one hand rising to her forehead.

“Ugh, did Charlie sneak a dragon in and let it tap dance on me or something?” she groaned, and to Harry’s surprise, her black hair flickered to white and blue.

Angelina and Roger moved over to her, kneeling down next to her, followed by the twins.

“Tonks! You’re finally waking up, huh, lazy girl,” Angelina laughed with relief.

"Angie, you might be queen lioness, but if you take that tone with me again when my whole body feels like someone set me up as bludger practice, I'm gonna---" the older girl's voice trailed off for a second, as seemingly everything that had gone on with the train crash came back to her. "That wasn't some really weird dream, was it? The train, everything went---"

"Sideways and through dimensions," Luna supplied cheerfully, bouncing up and down in the middle of the cave. "The Portentous Pollywaddles were right as always, although even my father and I didn't expect the scale of this disaster."

"... You're a lovegood right? Think I've seen you once or twice over at the Burrow," the girl murmured.

"And you are Nymphadora Tonks. I've heard Miss Weasley talk about you a time or two. Don't worry though, I always prefer to make my own impressions of people," Luna said, still smiling happily.

"... Good to know." Tonks said at last, after staring at Luna for a few seconds, before deciding that she really didn't want to dive too deeply into what Miss Weasley, who hopefully she would never see again, had said about her. *Merlin, it wasn't as if I dumped Charlie, Charlie dumped me to work with dragons! What, did she think I should've been doing more to attract him or something? Screw that!*

She then glared, her eyes flashing red along with her hair. "And don't call me that name. Just Tonks if ya know what's good for you. Your Lovegoodness won't save you from my wrath, got it?"

While Luna nodded, Tonks looked over at Angelina. She could remember stopping in to talk to the young girl, who had, despite only going into her third year, come to run the female side of the Gryffindor Tower. Then she remembered something had happened, a feeling of being airborne, and then...nothing. "So what's the prognosis?"

"You took a bad hit to the head, which is no longer bleeding thankfully, I don't think you'll need stitches, but you might have a concussion," one of the Weasley twins, George said, for once forgoing their doublespeak as he pulled the makeshift wraps off the older girl's head.

"Don't worry though, we're all safe so you should have time to recover," Angelina added. "Here, have some chocolate frogs, and we'll start filling you in on everything." She winked over her shoulder at Harry before turning back to Tonks. "Starting with how Harry Potter over there really is as big a hero as some of those storybooks make him out to be," she said teasingly.

Harry blushed, stammered, and held up his hands as if to protest, but Tonks heard none of it. Instead, she simply stared at her cousin, realizing that yeah, this was to be Harry's first year in Hogwarts going through her. Before this, before she had laid eyes on him, that hadn't really

registered. Tonks had been looking forward to being single, partying it up, killing her tests and graduate. Now though, staring at his small, spare frame, she found herself a little offbalance, and really guilty that the thought of searching him out hadn't ever occurred to her.

"Er, Wotcher, Harry. Already leaning into the G in your Gryffindor in your blood, huh?" She tried, causing Harry to blush still more.

Sensing something was up with her older friend, Angelina stuffed a chocolate frog into her mouth, then looked over at the others. "So, who wants to start this tale for our old friend here?"

"Less of the old Alpha bitch, or I'll show ya the difference between experience and bravado," Tonks warned, before groaning and holding her head. "But yeah, lay it on me, all. Where are we, why are here, and... what the heck is with the weird ice sculpture?"

{More here? Vote!}

OOOOOOO

Bail Antilles leaned back in his chair observing the Senate for a time, which was, as was usual, acting the part of a den of children who assumed that volume was more important than actual intelligence. *Mind you, it's not nearly as loud as it could be. There's, what was the last count, three hundred of our fellow Senators out on various diplomatic missions? Mind you, I don't miss most of that lot, but Senator Boneteri's absence has seemingly removed some of our good sense, alas.*

The last five days had been quite tumultuous both here in the Senate and abroad throughout the Republic. The collapse of the Jedi had created massive waves in how the Republic ran itself, well beyond the actual number of Jedi.

Jedi missions could largely be put on into three different categories, and all such missions were considered important by the Republic or the local government that called them in. Those missions were combat, investigative, or diplomatic-oriented, with quite a bit of carryover from one to the next admittedly, but regardless of the mission the Jedi collapsing for any length of time was a Very Bad Thing.

There had only been a few dozen reported deaths among the collapsed Jedi directly linked to that collapse, mainly thanks to most of the Jedi having young padawans with them who didn't collapse for very long or at all to get them out of trouble. However, that had gotten worse in the days after, that number had rocketed up more than a hundred and fifty Jedi killed in the line of duty before their padawans could extract them from their investigative duties. Many times, their padawans had also died, or possibly worse, disappeared into the underworld.

Indeed, the Senate was getting reports from some local governments that many of the criminal elements the Jedi were investigating galaxy-wide had started to attack hospitals, searching for patients who had suddenly collapsed at around the same time The Shift. Moreover, the Bounty Hunters guild was now taking **open** bounties on the Jedi, and the Black Sun and other galaxy-spanning criminal elements had begun to act more openly.

That was on the investigative front, but even though it hurt Bail to think of, the deaths of the Jedi assigned to such operations was but one aspect of what the Republic was dealing with. The anti-pirate and other direct combat missions was another, but there, few Jedi had been entirely alone on such operations, and those that had been alone, had constituted many of the dead in those first few hours. Since, the padawans had pulled back their masters or they had already been working with local forces, the deaths from direct combat had stopped quickly.

The largest issue for the Senate and the Republic as a whole was, quixotically, the lack of Jedi on diplomatic missions.

*This has been a severe lesson for us all, he thought, shaking his head as he looked up at where the Chancellor sat, browbeating a group of senators back into their positions rather than simply shutting their hover seats down as he could. The Jedi had begun to handle so, **so many** diplomatic issues at the behest of the Senate that we had not been prepared to step up and take those missions on themselves.*

It didn't help matters that a large segment of the Senate had almost seemed frozen by events, and not just the fact that the Jedi had all collapsed. No, a lot of senators were entirely thrown off by one of their own, the popular Sheev Palpatine, having collapsed similarly to the Jedi along with his aide. The fact that his two other aides had quickly disappeared had not been missed either.

That certainly looked guilty to a lot of people. And when other senators tried to rise to his defense, they too started to get looked at very closely indeed by Garm and others. Those Senators were still here, and indeed, could not leave. *Oh no, my friends, you're going nowhere, Bail, the leader of the Internal Activities committee thought, his thoughts a near-croon, no, you are not. I want you all right where you can be watched, thank you. The fact Palpatine was a Force user is one thing. How many and varied Senators have tried to occasionally demand his 'release' from the Jedi Order or have tried to argue that his being a Force user is not important, oh, that has been most interesting.*

In all honesty, Bail knew that his committee would probably not find anything much. Palpatine was as clean as most of the Senators were and his being a Force user wasn't enough to condemn him on its own. But it was enough to bring enhanced awareness down

on him and anyone who spoke for him. *Of which there have been many who were not open friends with Sheev, and many who were not politically aligned with Palpatine and the Centrists.*

Regardless, the Senate had floundered for several days when faced with the rash of diplomatic demands. But while the Senate floundered, like a mini handed monster, powerful but slow to act on input from the many minds that controlled those hands, it had fallen to separate senators and their home planets to start picking up the pieces on the hundreds diplomatic fronts, going around the Senate rather than working with it.

In that, Antilles had never been prouder to be from Alderaan. His planet, his king and queen, had put forth their own diplomatic missions, acting with a clarity of vision and understanding that many in the Senate seemed to lack. Nor had they been alone in that. Raxus, Alsakan, Malastare, Corellia and a dozen other planets had stepped up, doing what they could to continue the work of making certain the Republic kept running.

Indeed, this whole crisis had brought Alderaan closer with one such: Dac, the home of the Mon Calamari species. Already he had been hearing musings about some new trade and economic agreements between the two star systems. As for Corellia, Garm had just been telling Bail of how the dockyards there were competing for a new contract, a new type of fast courier ship for diplomatic missions.

Leave it to the Corellians to want to build an entirely new ship on the basis of a political disaster, Bail thought wryly now, shaking his head, before one of the empty pods in the Senate Hall was filled by young Aayla Secura stepping out into it from the entryway beyond.

How she had come to be the leader of the younglings who had taken command of the Jedi order in this time of crisis, Bail wasn't quite certain. He was certain that Garm had something to do with it, judging by the way he grinned cheerily at the site of the young blue skinned twi'lek and began to wrap a few fingers on the protective edge of his bubble. *He looks like he's waiting for a show. Why? Wait...*

Corellia, Antilles remembered suddenly, had its own homegrown Jedi. *The Green Temple or something?* He wondered how they had been dealing with this crisis, and if, like here on the capital, there were people pushing to try and change the nature of their relationship with the the local powers-that-be.

That had been a popular reaction. That the Senate could take this opportunity to put the Jedi under more senatorial control, to work more like an arm of the Senate than they already were. Thankfully others, like Bail himself, had argued that they were in this position because they had relied too heavily on the Jedi in various ways, and it was the Senate who needed to be broken away from the Jedi, and perhaps vice versa.

The Chancellor finally got all of the senators to quiet down like so many recalcitrant children and return to their places, with the last two, a member of the Trade Federation and a new senator for the Da'Astan Sector being the most reluctant to give way to the Chancellor's authority, having been butting heads on something or other.

Through it all, Aayla had simply stood there, her arms classed at the small of her back as she stared out across the Senate floor, poised and controlled in a way that she hadn't been the last time that Bail had seen her, having gone over to the temple to see for himself what was going on there. That had been two days ago, but whatever had been going on in the past two days, it had seemingly allowed young Aayla to find her center once more. She stood poised, unflinching under the eyes of thousands of Senators who were older but, Bail knew, no wiser in far too many cases.

"Jedi Secura, thank you for agreeing to speak to us. You are here to answer questions from the Senate about the Order and its various duties to the Republic. But before we get to our own questions, do you have any new reports for us about Master Yoda and the other leaders of your order?" The Chancellor asked. Valorum had somewhat been too slow to move to make friends among the younglings who were now the voices of the Order, but he tried to seem as if he cared. "How are my friends, Yoda and Windu?"

It falls flat, though, Bail thought. Valorum's too much the bureaucrat and politician to come off as genuine like Bonteri and Garm did right after The Shift.

"As to Grand Master Yoda or Master of the Order Master Windu, there has been no change in their health, Chancellor. That is to say, they still remain unconscious, their minds only slowly taking in the changes within the Force," Aayla answered promptly. "Several other young knights however have begun to awaken elsewhere in the Republic, along with significant numbers of older padawans over the past few days. I am also happy to report that the last Jedi out on missions for the Order and the people of the Republic have been accounted for."

Interesting wording, Bail mused, his own political antenna suddenly standing upright. Someone has been coaching young Aayla, someone with certain views on who the Jedi serve. Praise the Force!

"Among the last hundred and ten Jedi and padawan pairs to have yet checked in with the Order, there have been two deaths. According to his padawan, Master C'baoth died in a hover car crash. Master Sia has also passed into the Force in a fire on the planet of Druckenwell. Her Padawan, Vola, survived and has gotten off planet."

Despite talking about the death of two of her elders, Aayla still seemed to be poised and in control, and indeed she was. It was very un-Jedi like to say, but she had never even known

the two who had passed, and indeed, hadn't known any of the Jedi who had died since The Shift or during it.

There was also some confusion as to what Master C'baoth had been up to, as he hadn't actually been supposed to be on the planet he was reportedly dead on at all. Master C'baoth was somewhat infamous within the Jedi Order, according to some of the records, for going his own way and for even having declared himself a Jedi Master rather than the High Council to raise him up to that station. Which was highly unusual.

Aayla was also feeling composed and controlled because the temple had heard from Master Tholme, Master Vos's own former teacher. He had started to recover earlier that day, although he was in no position to get back to the capital just yet, embedded in a investigation. He had gotten very lucky in being in a safe place to collapse when The Shift hit, but that was a big difference from getting off planet. Even better, though was he wasn't the only ones. Knight Fisto and a dozen others had started to recover elsewhere, along with Master Giiett, on a mission to Onderon, and Master Saa in the Gaulus Sector.

All, that was a good sign, and Aayla hoped that her own master would start to recover soon as well, even if there didn't seem to be any kind of rhyme or reason or who were covered first. A few of the youngsters had posited that some flexibility of thought was needed to help the unconscious Jedi deal with the changes in the Force, how different it now felt, the, the vibe and energy to it, before they could wake up.

Which is funny to think, because you would've thought that master Yoda was really flexible of thought, but apparently not. Aayla thought even as she listed off a few other Jedi who had checked in and were making their way back to Coruscant. She even fielded a few questions, having prepared for this, while her inner thoughts went elsewhere. *Perhaps only flexible in certain ways? That, that seems... disloyal? Something like that. Like it is almost wrong to think that Master Yoda isn't up to the challenge. Hmm...*

She did not mention Tholme, Giiett and Saa, the most senior of the Masters who had begun to recover. They had all had been very clear on the fact that they didn't want the Senate to know they were coming, or that they were bringing friends. Why Master Tholme had mentioned that to Aayla, she had no idea, but she was willing to keep it a secret along with everything else.

"It's good to hear that more of your Jedi are recovering, but that leaves me to two other questions what about the good Senator from Naboo and his aide?" Valorum took up the questioning once more, his emotions a mixture of vindictive pleasure and a personal delight for some reason. "Have they so shown signs of awakening?"

“I am afraid not, Chancellor. We’re still keeping them in the penitent cells, and we have fed both Miss Moore and Senator Palpatine intravenously over the past few days to keep them healthy, but neither of them have so much as twitched so far,” Aayla answered easily. *There’s a lot of questions about those two, but in terms of my own priorities, they barely register.*

“And with Jedi Knights and older padawans starting to awaken, how soon will you be able to resume your duties? I believe I speak for my fellows that we have been forced to realize how much we had leaned on the Jedi on the diplomatic front, and it was a harsh wake-up call that we do not wish to repeat. But even if we continue to do so, that still leaves investigative and combat related missions.” The Chancellor shook his head, his face shifting into a wry look.

A look Aayla could tell was somewhat fake. Valorum didn’t see Aayla or the other padawans as young people. Aayla could not sense any kind of empathy from the man, even as he said, “It hurts my pride as a man in a way I haven’t felt since I was a young buck just getting out of college to ask this of a young girl such as yourself. Yet the Force does give you all a bit of a leg up on any other kind of investigators or even fighters.”

There were some grumblings about that, which Aayla let pass by before replying. “I am afraid, Chancellor, that any questions about resuming missions for the people of the Republic will have to wait. While I will be the first to tell you that many of the older padawans who have woken up here on Coruscant in the past five days would willingly go on missions of that sort, not all of them are suited for it. I can compile a list of around a hundred and fifty here in the Temple, and I am linked to another further one thousand three hundred elsewhere throughout the galaxy that could be willing to resume missions, most of whom are older padawans who would be willing to act without their master’s guidance for a time. However, most of those are Consulars, not Guardians or Sentinels. With access to the Jedi archives notes on their various lightsaber styles and abilities, I would be leery of sending most of those into combat. I could compile perhaps compile a list of over two-hundred names from that list that I would trust on combat missions.”

That brought an even larger reaction from the Senate, and many of the Senators shouted at her, but Aayla waited them out. Again, Master Tholme and Giiett’s orders had been plain: no Jedi was to be sent into danger until someone more senior could vet their skills. *And with the Senate actually doing much of it’s own legwork for once as well as Alderaan and other planets stepping up to provide neutral intermediaries, there aren’t many non-dangerous missions to pick from.*

The Chancellor slowly got control of the Senate again, then elected a few of the Senators to speak one after another.

One of them was Senator Garm from Corellia, and he stood forward, his normally debonair face set into a frown, even though his emotions were almost jubilant to Aayla's empathic ability. "This actually highlights a problem that the good Chancellor mentioned a few moments ago. That the Senate itself had begun to lean heavily on the Jedi to be our voices, to handle diplomatic missions which the Senate itself should have. Could you tell me, which came first in this instance, the chicken or the egg?"

The almost teasing way he said this brought smiles to many of the Senators, and some of their consternation faded, while Aayla simply shrugged trying hard not to keep a bout of giggles from escaping. *Why do I get the impression Senator Iblis is pushing his own agenda here, and that I should just go along with it?*

With the Force giving her no more than that faint feeling, Aayla answered honestly. "I've been looking through the archives, and there was a time when the three branches were balanced within the Jedi Order, however, that began to end around three hundred years ago, as more Jedi became Consulars due to how peaceful the galaxy was back then. This continued to around seventy years ago, where the preference among young Jedi for that sect over the other two grew tremendously. With that in mind, I feel like that was in response to the sheer number of diplomatic missions we were being sent on."

"Yet now, crime and piracy are both on the rise throughout the Republic. The Green Jedi of my home system have not become our diplomats, they have become our investigators and our hunters, to be sent after dangerous pirate bands, criminals, and various, alike," Garm said, addressing the Senate as a whole rather than Aayla. "I think Senators, we should continue what we have been doing over the past five days: taking more of the diplomatic missions into the Senate's own hands. Even when the Jedi Order recovers fully."

This sparked a debate, but Aayla took no part in it, stepping back and observing, reining in her empathic abilities. With this many people around, if she lost control of them, the amount of emotions could well overwhelm her ability to control. With no one speaking directly at her, she had no single person to anchor her empathic skills on. *Good grief, I knew Master Vos said the Senate resembled a creche arguing about whose turn it is to play with the toys, but this is just silly! I wonder what the common folk out there would think if they saw their leaders just shouting and yelling at one another like this?*

Ten minutes later, though, Aayla did click the button indicating she had something to say when a few of the senators started to shout how the Senate should be in charge of the Jedi

Order's curriculum since it seemed they had not been able to handle it themselves. That the Order should, in effect come under direct control from the Senate.

"I would like to address the point that Senator Ask Aak raised, as well as the one put forth from the senator of Fedalle. "You use the term 'temporary measure' sir, and while I am no great historian, I have studied governments and laws on several planets, and I know for a fact that there is nothing so permanent as a temporary measure. Furthermore, Senator Aak, you mentioned taking control of the curricula of the Order. How would you even know what is most important for force users to learn?"

While Aako opened his mouth, Aayla continued on, determined to make her say heard. *Master Tholme is kind of scary. How did he know we'd heard demands on this score? Even if he didn't walk me through how to answer, Stavos helped me enough I can do so easily.* "The Senate only sees the finished product, or, today, a very unfinished product in myself. How many among you have thought of how much training, effort and tears go into becoming a Jedi, about the pitfalls we all have to deal with from a young age?"

She waited a second, letting her eyes sweep the Senate, keep her empathy powers under firm control. "You have no idea about the training that younglings need to do in order to keep their thoughts to themselves, to reach out solely to the Force and not be influenced by one another's feelings and thoughts. You have no idea how it is that we are trained to follow our instincts through the Force, or how to teach someone to use the Force in general. You have no idea about the pitfalls, about the Dark Side or why Jedi need to always have a certain amount of control, and how we teach that. You would teach our younglings as if they were typical children but they are not."

Aayla gestured to herself, letting a brief grin cross her features, feeling the Force around her, a warm blanket and almost like a puppy, eager to obey commands and play. "The Force helps us learn at advanced rates, retain at advanced rates. You all initially saw me and those of us who have stepped forward to command this chaos as inexperienced children, and in a way we did need help. But I hope that we have proven over the past few days that there is far more to us than that. We are not quite adult, and I'll be the first to admit I am **not ready** to take my knighthood trials. But you don't even know what those are, you do not know the difference between a Master and a Knight, or a Knight and a padawan save for who is in charge and age. There are vast differences, and there always will be."

Again, Aayla let those words sink in, then gently made her hover bubble, something she'd found rather ridiculous when it was described to her, so she shifted forward, allowing the pickups to all see her at once as she turned, staring around the proscenium. *Now to make the point that Tholme nearly demanded I pass on. I could wish Stephen was here, or Shodarr, but*

Master Tholme's existing connection to me made me the natural choice to deliver the message he wanted us to. Even if I'm only thirteen, drat it all!"

"Furthermore. We Jedi do not take orders solely from this body. We like to work with local governments, and even the Senate, yes. But we are such good investigators and problem solvers because we have the Force. We are a neutral party, and a trusted one the galaxy wide, because we answer to the Force, and through it, our steps are directed. We Jedi must **always** be free to follow the Force, because without it, we are nothing. Through the Force, we serve the Republic's people, not just the governments that control them."

This somewhat fiery response drew many a heated shout from the Senate, but at just as many yells of approval, while Garm began a slow clap, soon joined by dozens of other senators, then hundreds. It wasn't enough to drown out the shouting and vitriol, but it was enough to mute it, and Aayla turned her hover bubble back, shifting it to its former position. When it clicked into place, she stepped fully back into the shadows, opened the door behind her, and exited, leaving the Senate to its own devices. Aayla had said the things the Masters had wanted her to say, answered the questions that she had been called to answer. Anything more, was beyond her purview, and their prior planning.

If they had sprung even one question on me that I didn't know the answer to, I think my self-control would've unraveled the young turian twi'lek thought, leaning against the hallway outside the Senate Hall, breathing in deeply. She remained there for several moments, then centered in the Force heading out of the giant Senate building, walking towards the temple.

She nodded to the senatorial guards on duty on this side of the bridge, then the two Jedi on duty on the other side, noting with relief that they were both temple guards, clad in that sect's traditional body armor and helmet. They nodded back, with wry amusement and a surprising amount of respect radiating off both of them despite their tight control. *I could wish they were willing to take over some leadership roles, but given everything that's happened, I can't deny the need for a full guard force on duty at all times, drat it!*

Several extremely enterprising members of the underworld had attempted to attack the Jedi Temple over the past few days in the Order's moment of weakness. Thankfully, thanks first to the Senate's guards and Padawan Hrimiyarr, the first effort had been repulsed. The second and more serious attempt had involved some off-world forces, but by then, several Temple Guards had recovered, and they had slaughtered the attackers for only one of them going down in turn.

Those crime lords are definitely painting big, big targets on their back once the Jedi order gets its feet completely under it again. Going after black son is going to be a mission I'll treasure if it's assigned to master Vos and me, she thought, gleefully looking forward to it,

and not just because of the amount of good taking out that giant criminal syndicate would do for the galaxy as a whole. *It will be very, **very** good to just go back to being a regular padawan again. My self-control and nerves can't take much more of this!*

Inside the presidium, a youngling on the cusp of the age where they would be chosen as a padawan but not quite, waited. He and others like him were helping to deal with a lot of the daily running of the temple, looking after those younger than themselves, and generally passing messages and so forth. She had heard that the term gofers before, and it certainly served for these younger cells. *Although... I find it quite hilarious how none of the teachers or minders have woken up yet.* Not mind you that these gofers are all that much younger than me.

With that, she smiled cheerily at the younger boy, giggling internally at the blush that suffused his features. "I'm back. The meeting with the Senate went as we expected, and I laid down the law a little bit. Master Tholme and the others were right, and I'll be sending messages to that effect later. But if you could tell the Padawan Council that I'm going to stop in for a bite to eat before meeting with them, that would be helpful."

The youngling nodded and raced ahead of her, while she shifted her direction towards the commissary. She was not altogether surprised when, halfway through her meal, she was joined by the rest of the so-called Padawan Council. It was a silly name admittedly, but all of them had thought it important to name it like that, to have some measure of continuity to how the Order would organize itself in more normal times. *And as for them coming down to eat with me, well, we're all young. With young appetites and young metabolisms,* she thought, cheerfully continuing to eat even as she waved one hand at her fellows.

One after another, the group of padawans who had stepped forward to lead the temple after The Shift occurred slid into place. None of them have been replaced just yet, but all of them were eagerly looking forward to that moment. Still, until Master Tholme, Giiett and the others arrived, they were still in charge.

Aayla had only known a few of them before The Shift occurred but had gotten to know them all very well over the past few days. Indeed, she would even say they were friends.

The Wookie Hrimiyarr was a rock of good sense, keeping his thoughts on the daily running of the Order with the protection of the temple in particular, being his charge until the first Temple Guards began to revive. Since then he'd kept communicating with them and continued to be in charge of the daily maintenance and taking care of the Temple's gardens with a small team of helpers.

Although not nearly as many helpers as lessons for the younglings and seeing to the toddlers and babies called for, whose organization fell on the shoulders of Urno Moga. A

young human from Chandrila barely a few years older than Aayla, he had already chosen to become a teacher, having a caring and giving personality that had... well, Aayla had found herself looking at him with some seriously un-jedi like thoughts. The least of which was that he'd make someone a fantastic househusband.

Another young human, Stephen, who had no real interest in anything but books and reading had come to be the aide to everyone else and the one who was most at home in the archives. *I doubt his abilities with those archives will save him from a tongue-lashing from Master Nu, though. Unless Master Yaddle revives first, she'll protect him.*

The Miralukan Shodarr handled the daily communications for the temple, along with a score of dedicated helpers. She was the only one that Aayla would have called a friend before this, the pair of them from Clan Womprat, and the two young girls exchanged smiles now.

The Council was rounded out by the young Miralian named Barris Offee.

Well, I call her young, but she's barely three years younger than I am, Aayla thought ruefully. We're all too young for this, but we've all had to deal with it. And thankfully, we've had the Force to do with with. She's part of this Padawan Council for a reason, remember that.

That reason being that Barris had shown a marked ability with using the Force to heal almost as soon as she could walk. And right now, Bariss, despite being a youngling still, the only one on the council, was the closest thing they had to a Jedi Healer to look after the thousands of unconscious Jedi that filled the temple. To say that was a daunting task was an understatement, but with a judicious use of help offered from the Senate, and putting several hundred padawans and her fellow younglings to work, Barris managed it.

Still, I hope that some of the healers start reviving soon. I can tell it's grating on her.

As they all set to with a will to their food, the two human preteen exchanged jokes about what one or the other had gotten for food, Aayla filled them in on the Senate meeting. Which thankfully didn't take very long.

"In a way, its good they're pushing for the Order to resume our normal functions. There are a lot of missions out there we need to start moving on, and a few that I think we would be better served stepping away from the Senate for. Even if the Senate was the one that gave us the initial order," Shodarr said, frowning thoughtfully.

She reached up, tugging at her long braid for a moment, the stark white of it contrasting sharply with her light reddish skin. "Especially that last group that came in yesterday, that group of fifty Jedi sent out to the planet Kalee under Master T'chooka D'oon? I looked over the details of that mission with Stephen's help and those of the padawans on it, and I'm

still uncertain why a verdict was already reached as to which side of the conflict to approve of.”

“T’chooka Doon’s a Guardian, one who’s taken nearly all his missions from the Senate rather than using the Force to direct his movement. I looked him up and I... well” Stephen shrugged. “He’s taken a lot of diplomatic missions that turn out violent at some point, and... he seems to be just, well, always siding with the Senate?”

The implications of that was not nice, but they all nodded as he continued. “Based on that, and the sheer lack of investigative-type missions he’s been on, I wouldn’t call Master D’oon very good as a diplomat or investigator. Nor the rest of that group.” Stephen shrugged with a smirk. “There’s a reason not even one of those padawans is here with us right now.”

“is the Force telling you anything specific?”

“I’m getting the impression that going into that mission we need should keep our eyes open, and our minds wide,” Shodarr said, smiling cheerily at the laughs this got from her fellows. For a Miralukan like her, those two things were synonymous. Their race had evolved away from having eyes thousands of years ago, developing their Force to the point where they used it to replace their eyes entirely. “Beyond that, nothing specific. A certain feeling of danger maybe, but I’m no Master. If I can get that out of the Force then surely master Doon-”

“Remember that the Force is lighter,” Hrimiyarr reminded them all, his voice a low growl that all of them easily translated thanks to the Force. “We have all felt it, the feeling of darkness banished in The Shift and how easily the Force comes to our hands in comparison to before. The Shift might not have been intended to do that, but the Force is certainly far, far easier to commune with than I have ever felt in all my years.”

Wookies were actually one of the longer-lived races in the galaxy. They could live as long as four hundred years or more, although Hrimiyarr wasn’t actually older than the rest of them mentally because if his people didn’t mature quite as quickly as other races. Thus he’d been forced to shift from one Clan of learners to another twice, but as he was not the first Wookie the Order had seen by far, it had been dealt with easily.

Still his point was well taken, and all of them exchanged brief grins for a moment, fingers tapping on the table, rattling dishes, as and a few of them even snickered and began to lift their place up off of the table with the Force, little things like that that they would never do around their elders, and indeed would’ve found hard to concentrate on while also maintaining a conversation and eating. However, now, doing so didn’t take nearly as much concentration, and the Force flowed through them lighter, like water after sludge had been removed almost.

Still, Hrimiyarr's point was well taken. The Force might be telling Shodarr that this mission was important, but there was no telling if Master D'oon or any of the Jedi with him would feel the same thing.

"Stephen, would you mind researching that mission a little bit? I get the impression that if it's important, we should have a plan of action ready to submit to Master Giiett when he returns." Micah Giiett was the only one of the three known Masters to have recovered that was on the Council, and he would be the leader of the temple until more members of the Council woke up.

"I already was," Stephen said, his voice just a tad smug. "The mission was indeed one that could lead to violence, hence why a group of fifty Jedi were being sent. The Senator for Skagos demanded a full intervention in a war between the Yam'rii and the Kaleesh. Ostensibly, the Kaleesh have become belligerent expansionists, and have wiped out whole Yam'rii colonies, while the Yam'rii, who are a bug-like species while the Kaleesh are near-reptilian, have tried to end the war through diplomatic means."

He shook his head. "However, all the resources the group under Master D'oon had in that territory and all sources of information on the war come from the Yam'rii. Nowhere does it say that they colonized Kalee first, or who actually started the war. However, the Yam'rii are known to have violent tempers, and be natural predators, whose young grow to full age within a few months. We're not getting the other side of this story at all."

"That's a familiar refrain," Urno groaned, running his hand through his hair for a moment. "How many missions have you been looking into that that was the case for since we started to organize after the Shift? I know it's not my place, and when the Masters and Knights start waking up more, I know it will go back to normal, but I think we seriously have to remember that the Senate might have its own reasons to tell us things, and few of those reasons will be straightforward, let alone lawful or right."

"Agreed. As for this mission, since it is one that involves ongoing violence on a planetary scale, I think we need to look at it now. We can't wait for the elders to wake up," Shodarr said, not letting even a hint of concern enter her voice as she reached out to gently pat Bariss's thigh under the table, a wordless show of encouragement the youngster needed right now. "It might only be a matter of time before more wake up, but that could mean thousands of Kalee and Yam'rii dying."

"Who to send on that mission is a question. There aren't a lot of us who are awake just yet and able to take on missions that I trust with a mission that is both diplomatic, investigative and combat related in scope," Aayla said ruefully. "Before this disaster, I hadn't handled anything diplomatic related with my master. Investigative, sure. We went on several

missions of that kind, and most of them did involve some measure of balance. But diplomacy? Even with a whole day of lead time, I felt like I was coming apart at the seams today.”

“How many other missions involve ongoing conflicts?” Hrimiyarr asked. Among them, he was the one who was most likely to be sent on a mission that would involve conflict. Not only did he have natural advantages as a Wookiee, but he had determined after becoming padawan that he would become a guardian quite quickly. The only problem was his Master was still comatose.

Stephen quickly pulled up a data slate, letting it hover in the air for a moment, then flicking it around the table, so that each of those interested could read and touch it. “See if the Force tells you anything about these,” he said, once more showing why he had become so invaluable for the others.

Seventeen was the number of ongoing missions that involved what the locals would term large scale violence. Six ongoing turf wars between different gangs, who the locals just wanted to shut down entirely on Core World ecumenopoli. On those planets, gangs could call on literal armies of criminals.

There were also several ongoing issues with the Harch, a expansionist race that looked somewhat like spiders with several of the neighbors. These involving actual, if small, fleet actions. The rest were anti-pirate missions, with one anti-corporation mission, which would be just as much investigative as combat related.

“The High Council determined the Kalee/Yam’rii conflict needed fifty Jedi. I think we need to at least double it if we’re not sending any actual Knights or masters. If we can get some of the Temple Guard to go, that would be better,” Hrimiyarr mused. “As for the rest...” Closing his eyes and very visibly reaching out for the Forces the others waited patiently, before he shook his head, indicating that none of them resonated with as much urgency as that one.

The others all did the same, and although none of them had a great mastery of reaching into the future like this, or indeed much experience in doing so, they had been taught how to do it. With the Force the way it was now, this meant they got back just as much information as older Masters might have. After a few seconds, nods went around the table, as none of the other missions screamed as much importance as the one to Kalee. “Do you think we can put it off until Master Giiett and Master Saa arrive?”

Master Saa had said she could get to Coruscant in two days the day before. Master Giiett said he would be there in two days at around the same time, so they were working on the same assumption for both.

They all looked at one another, but on this point, the Force was silent, and before any of them could suggest alternate ways to perhaps probing the Force for that answer, a voice hailed them from the entrance into the cafeteria. "Hello there. I understand that you all are in charge here? If that is not a sign of the apocalypse I don't know what is. Of course, given everything that's happened, perhaps that hits a bit too close to home."

Allison turned, and breathed a sigh of relief, seeing a semi-familiar face. Obi-Wan Kenobi was an older apprentice, who was friends with her master. They weren't of an age with one another, Obi-Wan was a little younger than her master, but he often said he was the more mature of the two. And continued saying it even after Vos was elevated to knighthood.

"Well, if you're volunteering Obi-Wan," she said with a smile, "I will happily hand over everything to you."

"Those are not words that I wish to hear when I walk into the temple." Obi-Wan murmured, before shrugging. "I was knocked out too, but thankfully, neither Master Jinn nor myself were in any danger. We had just arrived at our destination and had yet to go down to the planet. He's yet to wake up, but I think he will soon. I don't think it is just a youth problem, or else I wouldn't be surprised to see my old friend question up on his feet soon. I think it's a flexibility issue. And while my master is decidedly inflexible in some ways, his view of the Force is not one of them."

"You have no idea how much I can only hope that is the case," Aayla murmured, before introducing Obi-Wan to the others. He was somewhat known to Hrimiyarr and Shodarr, but the others hadn't ever met him before, although the smiles on everyone's face meant his humor had hit home already.

It took several hours for Obi-Wan to be brought up to speed as the group sat and talked there in the cafeteria, with other younglings and padawans coming and going. Many of those greeted Aayla and the rest, who waved at them, and Obi-Wan even drew some smiles as well, which he responded to. After they all had finished catching him up on what had been going on within the temple and on the Coruscant, Obi-Wan leaned back thoughtfully, dabbing his forehead with a napkin, before setting it down.

"I have nothing to add to anything that you've been doing in the temple itself or with the Senate. I might not have taken that hard a line with them in this latest meeting, Aayla, but since Master Tholme walked you through what to expect via Hypercom, I'm not going to gainsay him there. Do you have any idea what they're up to?"

"Master Saa is the Watchman for the Gaulus Sector and I believe she was leading an investigation into the disappearance of one of the Lost Thirteen," Stephen replied for Aayla, as she waved at him. "As for Master Tholme, I have no idea."

He looked over at Aayla, who **did** have an idea. Master Tholme was Master Vos's former teacher, and he was a Jedi Shadow, one of the Jedi who specialized not only in clandestine activities, abutting hunting down anything to deal with the dark side. Since the New Sith Wars, the call for that Order had lessened with every hundred years that passed, but there were still a handful of them within the Order. They tended to be secretive even on normal missions, acting solely as Sentinels for the most part, but they acted more often than not off the grid from the rest of the Order.

She shook her head, and Obi-Wan nodded thoughtfully, although as a good friend of Quinlan, despite their different ages, he well knew what his friend's Master was.

"Beyond that, two unknown Force users within the Senate feels extremely suspicious, to say nothing of the fact they were working together. I can't say I agree with the decision to put them behind bars, but I can't say I disagree with it. Did you search them?"

"We did. Nothing incriminating. No lightsabers or anything like that," Hrimiyarr snorted. "If they'd been red light sabers, that would've made the whole thing a lot less mysterious, wouldn't it?"

That won a nervous laugh from anyone bar Obi-Wan, whose eyes went far away for a moment. He'd had some experience with Fallen Jedi, not that he was going to share that at this point.

As he thought that, Obi-Wan leaned forward. "Has anyone thought about reaching out to the agricultural corpse and their various outposts out there? They are force users too."

Allison's wide eyes were his only answer, and Shodarr cursed. "They wouldn't have been given any kind of recall order, and there might be a lot of trouble there! KRIFF! Farming and such like isn't the type of job you can just fall unconscious to and assume nothing's going to happen!"

Obi-Wan had a few other suggestions and questions, and internally, Allison smiled a bit. He might not be willing to take the lead, but once someone else was doing so, he was more than willing to become an advisor, and his suggestions were all pretty good.

When he was done giving bits of advice, Obi-Wan solemnly asked Stephen for the list of missions, then, his eyes closed as the others had, he let his fingers rest on the scroll screen for a few moments, before blinking, shaking his head quickly. "Well now, that was interesting. I'm still getting used to how much more reactive the Forces is these days, but that was definitely a nudge in my direction. The Force wants me in particular to go on this peacekeeping mission on Kalee."

“Knight Shaak Ti is due back tomorrow morning,” Stephen said, looking around at the others. “Perhaps we can wait until she arrives and put her in charge? With her, and a few of the Temple Guard, you should have enough of a physical strike force at least. Obi-Wan and others can bring more investigative-type help to the table, as well as diplomacy.”

After a few moments, they all nodded. While not all of them were well acquainted with Knight Ti, what they knew of her was helpful. A Togrutan, Shaak Ti was a newly made Knight, around six years older than Obi-Wan, who was the oldest there. She had also Hrimiyarr been one of the first Knights to wake up after The Shift occurred.

Unfortunately, she had also been one of the ones who had been injured when she went unconscious, having actually been in a running gun battle alongside several local constables against a group of drug runners. She’d taken several plasma bolts before she been pulled into cover, and, on top of being unconscious from the Force’s Shift, she’d needed to spend time in a bacta tank.

Aayla knew Shaak Ti personally. There’d been a few times when she had come in to speak to the youngling’s, specifically those having issues with body image and self-worth. Shaak was calm, collected, a solitary individual, which was surprising given her species, who were very communal and pack oriented. She was also extremely good with a lightsaber, and a good diplomat. She was perfect for a mission like this, and everyone there nodded.

“In that case, I am going to go check on my master and start meditating. If any of you need any help from me, I don’t want to rock the boat or anything as you all seem to have everything under control, but I am here to help if you need it,” Obi-Wan said.

Everyone there nodded, while Aayla gave Obi-Wan grin, and a thumb’s up. “We just have to keep this going for a few more days, then Master Giiett and Master Saa at least will be here to take it all off our shoulders.”

Obi-Wan suddenly smirked, reminding many of them that there had been a time when he was a youngling who had, according to rumor, gotten trouble for sneaking out of the temple into the lower districts of Coruscant. “Are you so certain that they will want to? You’ve been doing such a good job after all, and it wouldn’t be very Jedi-like to remove someone simply because of their age if they have indeed been doing a good job.”

The look of horror on Aayla and everyone else’s faces at that had Obi-Wan laughing even as he walked away.

Obi-Wan’s smile slid from his face as he walked out of the cafeteria. His destination, the penitent cells. There, he paused, frowning a bit as he realized there were no guards on duty.

Something that will need to be corrected. *The others haven't had any dealings with Fallen Jedi. I have*, he mused.

Reaching for the Force, Obi-Wan's frown deepened a little. It was still roiling and twisting, changing in a fundamental way now days after The Shift. And yet at the same time, it came when he called to it easily, allowing his senses to flow over the two prisoners. Whereupon his mind almost instantly recoiled. It was as if something inside the pair was completely anathema to him. *Or, or they are so self-contained and trained they have subconscious shields against the Force. Brock and Xanatos did not have anything like that.*

Yes, he mused, *getting a pair of Temple Guards down here is a very good idea*, he mused before turning away.

When Sly Moore woke up, the first thing she felt through a migraine the size of a planet was fear. Because although her mind was wracked by agony, Sly Moore fully remembered that she and her Master, her Lord, the True Sith Lord, had been at a political party before that pain came. Before the Force itself shifted, like a tectonic plate moving sideways hundreds of miles, upending everything on its surface. Fear that she had been found out.

But eventually, that fear faded, replaced by another horror, the dread of her Master. What her Lord would do if she was discovered and if that led to him, if that led to a danger to the Great Plan.

That fear buoyed her normal reflexes, gave her strength in the Dark Side, and even as the two Temple Guards stirred outside, she pulled her Force Stealth around her, hiding her presence in the Force even more strongly than her automatic defenses had.

Sly kept her eyes closed, any hint of her being conscious under control. She listened to two sets of footfalls, waiting. A murmur of voices, one brash and cocky, the other calm or more wary. “—said that there wasn't any way they could be stirring without us feeling it in the Force. Not with how reactive the Force has become since The Shift. Besides, they're stuck behind bars, and have no weapons.”

“Senator Palpatine and Adjutant Moore both collapsed because they are Force users of some kind. Since when do closed doors or bars matter to those of us who can use the Force? Your arrogance does you no credit, my young friend.”

“Maybe, but I'm still right in this instance. Obi-Wan is jumping at shadows. Now, I don't say Obi doesn't have reason for it. Not after what he's faced in the past, with the runaway Xanatos and his machinations. But I think he's off base with these two.”

“The other members of the padawan council didn't agree.”

That ended the argument and Sly kept her eyes closed keeping her breathing even and everything else the same as best she could. For what felt like an hour, the two guards simply looked at her, a feeling like goosebumps on her skin, and then they turned away.

Sly did not strike then. That would have been premature. Instead, as they pulled back, she opened her eyes slowly, then looked around, wondering where she was.

What she saw proved Sly's worst fears accurate. She was captured. Captured by the Jedi. Only the Jedi would have jail cells like this, so lacking in modern technology as well as amenities. There was a cot, a small table, and nothing more. No window, no place to go to the bathroom, just the bars of the cell.

Even worse than that for Sly though, a sight that had her hyperventilate almost, was what lay in the cell across from her. Her Master, her lover, her teacher, her God. All of those would have been accurate to describe the feelings Sly Moore felt towards Sidious, and to see that he had been laid low was infuriating. Rage boiled within her, rage and hate enough to nearly break through her Force Stealth.

But she waited, she waited until she heard the two guards patrolling coming back her way. How long that took, she didn't know, but still she waited, her anger and fury bottled up behind her Force Stealth, waiting to be unleashed.

Sly was not a powerful force user. She was no Darth Maul, a warrior trained only for violence and death, let alone a true Darth, steeped in everything the Dark Side had to offer. Yet for all her lack of strength, Sly was better than Maul at Force Stealth, and she had supreme control above of her force powers, and she was literally loyal unto death to Sidious. Sly had been taught numerous skills and abilities with the Force to be an agent in the Senate for Sidious, which included a lot of subtle Force powers.

When the two guards turned away from the cells to resume their patrol back down the corridor, she struck. Before either guard could feel it through the Force more than a single tingle, Her Force powers struck their target.

The two men were a strange pairing most of the time, a Temple Guard and a padawan. Normally, Temple Guards worked in pairs, but only seven of them had woken yet from the mental turmoil of The Shift. With two guards on duty at the entrance from the Senate district and four more at the entrance from the Temple's personal landing area, that only left one man to be assigned this duty.

Although in this case, perhaps it would have been better if he had been alone, because while he marched with his light pie in in hand, the padawan accompanying him had his

lightsaber on his belt. The green blade came on as it came off the padawan's belt, slicing the padwan's hand off before cutting the temple guard's arm off at the shoulder.

Unlike Sith warriors, the pain eroded their ability to use the Force. both fell to their knees, howling, with the one who had lost his arm howling for a purpose. "Alarm! Alarm! The prisoners are—"

that was his as far as he got before his companion's lightsaber twirled through the air under Sly's command, slicing his head off. The other tried to raise his remaining hand, tried to use a Force Push, but the young cosian was unable to concentrate through the haze of losing his hand. A second later, the cosian's own lightsaber stabbed him straight through the back and through his chest, killing him instantly.

A vindictive sneer on her face, Sly twitched, and the glowing lightsaber flew to her hand, whereupon she cut her way out of the cell, her sneer deepening at how arrogant the Jedi were. These were supposedly penitent cells, but what if someone in them was not feeling very penitent? Then they were less than useless against a Force user. Seconds later, she had sliced her way into her Master's cell.

With her fear and anger still riding her, Sly had no thought of prevarication or even attempting to try to talk their way out of this situation. Not before she had killed her guards and certainly not after. Not for herself, not for her Master. Instead, she tucked the Light Pike of the temple guard into his belt just in case before making an attempt to wake him up. It didn't work, but she could feel that his mind was starting to recover, hidden behind the automatic Force Stealth that the Master had taught Sly. Hopefully soon, she thought, before turning her feet towards the hallway leading up to the presidium.

There been no response yet, but there surely would be soon as someone felt the deaths of the guards. With that in mind, Sly moved swiftly, carrying her Master via Force Levitation behind her.

OOOOOOO

Sly was quite correct. Others had indeed felt the deaths of the guards. As Aayla and a few of the younger leaders reeled, unused to feeling such sudden hate in the force as well as the death of fellow Jedi, Obi-Wan leapt to his feet, nodding his head towards Hrimiyarr, who had already grabbed up a communicator. "Hrimiyarr, with me, Aayla, grab several of the senior padawans, order them down to the presidium, and warn the Temple Guard. Something's happened in the jail area."

With that, Obi-Wan was off, Hrimiyarr on his heels, then passing him quickly in the loping stride of his species, further assisted by a Jedi's force enhanced abilities, passing a dozen younglings and toddlers heading the other way.

Thanks to two floors being between them and the cells chosen for the strange Force users, they arrived to join the defense at around the same time that Sly Moore came out of the hallway leading downward, Senator Palpatine floating in the air behind her. However, the four Temple Guards on duty there had also formed up, and had warned the younglings and padawans in the area to retreat down the halls to the classrooms on this floor.

For a moment, as Obi-Wan peered around the Temple Guards, he saw the Umbaran woman quail. But that fear just lent her more power. Obi-Wan watched aghast as for the second time in his life, he saw someone's eyes turn yellow in response to the amount of Dark Side energies they were pulling in. Even as one of the Temple Guards shouted, "Surrender, Adjutant Moore," the woman was charging forward, and over the body of the senator came the two bodies of the dead guards. She hurled them ahead of her, and the Temple Guards automatically shifted away, turning their half circle into a full circle as they went to attack.

Unfortunately, this had isolated one of their number. Diving down at his feet almost like a snake, Sly sliced one of his feet off, causing him to cry and crumpled to the floor, but not before she stabbed upwards in an economic move, her lightsaber taking the youth in the lower stomach even as she twirled around, blocking a blow from a Light Pike.

Palpatine was forgotten on the ground, laying face down, still clad in his senatorial robes from days ago, as the guards closed in on Sly. Obi-Wan and Hrimiyarr

along with several other older padawans, along with Aayla and a few others, Obi-Wan saw also circled around, waiting for an opening. With so many lightsabers and so many friendlies around. Unable to join the Force Gestalt that the guards were trying to create quickly, they all knew they would get in one another's way.

The Light Pikes of the Temple Guards crashed and slashed in, threatening to overwhelm the woman, but a Force Push slowed two of them enough for her to only fight one of them for a second, and she hurled herself up and over his Light Pike. With a tug, the Light Pike from the slain guard came into her hand, and she whirled it, slamming the butt down into the leg of another guard who had stepped just a little too close. Her weapon came up, but a Force Push was launched at the same time, battering her away. The next second, she was forced to leap upwards and away from another strike that would've cleaved her from behind.

“By the Force, clear the presidium!” one of the guards shouted, but too late. Eager to help, many of the older padawans had arrived to replace the youngsters that had already been removed.

Sly jump landed her among several green-bladed padawans. Her lightsaber blazed, slicing into one before it was stopped by another, but that one grunted in pain as the first person's lightsaber leapt up, activating and slicing her leg off at the knee. Within a few moments, she used strikes that almost looked like those of Djem So, but angrier and wild, battering aside several other padawans, but slaying no more before they backed off, letting the Temple Guard back in, even as Obi-Wan and Hrimiyarr made to join them.

Jumping over several of the other padawans Obi-Wan lashed out with his lightsaber, only to find it deflected, and then had to twist around and dodged through several strikes from Light Pike's, hissing a bit as one of them nearly hit his leg, searing away his clothing but not hitting any flesh. And that will teach me to work with others, blast it.

He slid along the ground, coming to a stop against the far wall for second as he watched the fight, Sly Moore forced back the way she had come into the hallway leading to the cells. Many of the Temple Guards were very good combatants, but they specialized in anti-blaster combat, but the three remaining were working well, defending one another and pushing the woman back. So why is the Force whispering a warning to me?

Sly used Force powers better than her lightsaber, Pushes, subtle jabs, tugs at arm and leg, but she was tiring,

Sly's anger, fear and hate for the Jedi, hate for what they had done to her Master, fueled her power, but it wasn't enough. A strike nearly hit Sly's shoulder, another one nearly cut her across the center of her chest, burning away clothing, but not skin. Only a desperate Force Push hurling her attackers away saved her and she retreated further along the hallway.

The Jedi could feel it too, and one of the Temple Guards, his face obscured by his helmet said, “Surrender, Sly Moore. This can only end one way. There's been enough death today.”

Wait, she wasn't... the Senator! Just as Obi-Wan remembered that Sly Moore had been carrying the body of the senator of Naboo, Sheev Palpatine woke, and everything changed.

It was as if someone had released a bomb of black ink onto a canvas previously streaked with white and grey. A Miasma of cloying darkness, of hate and rage thrummed through the Force. All of them felt it, every Jedi conscious in the temple, every youngling, and child. It drove many of them to their knees, younglings falling to the floor, babies and toddlers wailing, and even the padawans stepped back.

Obi-Wan was the only one who had felt someone like Sly Moore through the Force before. His confrontations with Brock and witnessing his Master's confrontation with the fallen Jedi Xanatos had prepared him for the impact of a Dark Side user on the Force and worse, their Force Precognition, a necessary skill for any Jedi. Yet not even Xanatos had emitted the raw anger and hatred and how were of the individual creating impact in the Force now.

Sidious had laid on the floor near the entryway into the penitent cells, practically forgotten as Sly was pressed back nearby then passed him as she was forced to retreat. But Sly Moore had been quite correct. He had been close to waking up.

Perhaps Sly should've waited, perhaps she should have thought to act alongside her Master from the start to escape. But Sly's fear, not her anger or hatred had driven her.

That was, in point of fact, the underlying reason why she had never been a true apprentice. Fear had always been the controlling factor with her, fear and adoration for Sidious himself. That made her useful, but only rarely as a blunt object or someone making quick decisions.

For Sidious, as for most Darths, the feeling they drew from the most was hatred. Hatred of the Jedi, hatred of anything and anyone standing in his way of what he thought was his destiny.

A destiny, Sidious knew even as he rose, hands clasping the staff of the Light Pike that it been stuck haphazardly through his belt, that Sidious knew would never come to pass now. Even if Sidious had somehow been able to talk himself out of being discovered in having collapsed like the Jedi, being outed as a Force user would've been enough to bring far too much attention to him, far too many eyes from the Order when he was supposed to serve as the subtle knife, the consummate politician who would rise as Emperor. But it was too soon, too soon for all those plans, and now none of them would come to pass. Sidious's destiny lay broken at his feat, the Great Plan ruined by the sudden change in the Force.

As he thought of that change and could feel out the Force through the Dark Side, it almost made him hate the Force itself. How dare it change how so much, how dare it do away with the Veil of the Dark Side through that shift, as if it was but an afterthought! For indeed, that was the case. The change in the Force had torn apart the Veil, the construct of Sith Alchemy and Dark Side powers that had been the culmination of centuries of work by the Sith Order. That should've been his to fuel his ascension.

And it was gone. Gone just like Sidious's destiny. Just like all his hopes for the future, from killing Plagueis and becoming the sole Sith Lord. Just like the final, true victory against the Jedi Order.

And now here he was, surrounded by Jedi, surrounded by the hated enemy. Surrounded by targets for his hatred.

Four padawans died even as everyone turned towards the man, Sidious's Light Pike taking three of them in the back, then stabbing a fourth through the head even as their lightsabers were tugged off of their belts, three of them sent hurling all around him, being desperately blocked by other youngling's. The fourth, a blue lightsaber, slipped into his hand as he roared. "DIE, JEDI!!"

The feeling of his hate was like a physical force on all of the padawans. None of them had faced anything similar, and indeed even those Knights who had passed their Trials hadn't faced something so strong. It weakened their Force Precognition, slowed their reaction times, and soon more were falling to Sidious as he charged forward.

Only Obi-Wan was able to withstand that initial push, along with two other older Knights, both Consulars who had come to the battle late. One of them died as the man flew through the air, faster and more accurately than any Jedi that any of them had ever seen outside perhaps the greatest of the order's duelists. The Knight desperately tried to block, but the lightsaber of his enemy slid past his riposte, slicing into his fingers, and then Sidious was past. A backhand blow removed the man's head before flicking around to block a blow the second Knight, while Obi-Wan came in from the side, before shifting position up and over the man, his lightsaber lashing down.

Obi-Wan found his blocked almost lazily by the man, then hurled away by a Force Push, slamming into the ceiling with enough force to nearly break ribs.

With a roar, Hrimiyarr attacked, now wielding twin blades, while more padawans and young Knights also pushed in, but the man laughed, blocking them all, dodging, slaying. "Die, die! I will kill you all, I will slaughter the Jedi in this temple!" he shouted, as the Temple Guards shifted away from Sly, rushing to attack him. This forced several of the padawans to turn to her, even as more of the wakened Jedi arrived. More Knights, even, some of whom were Guardians.

One of whom, Jedi Knight Olo Bay, a Trandoshan, died instantly, followed by another, then a third as Sidious howled with madness and hatred, his presence in the force a wound, weakening all their Force precognition as his own soared to new heights.

On any other given day, Sidious would've been a match for nearly any Jedi Master in the temple. His Force power, his training, both were sublime. Only Masters of the blade could have faced him with any chance of victory. None of those had yet to recover, not Master Yoda, not Master Windu, Dooku, or anyone else.

Worse, his anger and hatred for the Jedi was fueling his powers even more than normal. Sidious's strength, speed and reaction time made young knights and padawans alike look slow, and more died, more flew away from him, cut down. Even a Master, the first to wake up in the temple itself, a young caretaker, found herself sliced into pieces, her last attempt to protect her former charges amounting to nothing.

Desperately, Obi-Wan tried to parry a blow, tried to center himself in the Force, and as Sidious turned his attention toward him, the twenty-two year-old slid entirely into a defensive stance, shifting from his normal Ataru into the third form, Soresu. And for the first time, Sidious's Juyo form, a form based on chaotic movements and aggressive use of his Force powers, was blocked.

Qui-Gon Jin, Obi-Wan's master, had always focused on Ataru, which was the style he personally used. He had found himself unable to truly teach any other style, having shifted onto Ataru from the basics that all forms shared so early in his training under Master Dooku, whose own dismay at Qui-Gon's lack of ability with the blade had shown through all too often in their training.

However, Obi-Wan had been given a few lessons in the third form, and while unable to help him with it, Qui-Gon had never forced him to stop training in it.

Now, it was as if it the final piece of a circuit had been set into place, allowing power to go through a computer. It felt right, it felt natural in a way that flying had never felt, and Obi-Wan's Force powers shifted to match.

Sidious's eyes narrowed, and he lashed out with a Force Push, but Obi-Wan rooted himself in the ground, remaining there like a stone against the buffeting wind. A Force Grab was similarly blocked by his powers, and his lightsaber came up in a quick economical block. Several more blocks, all economical, all flowing from one form to the next as Obi-Wan defended his allies, with Hrimiyarr shifting into a force Gestalt with him. The three Temple Guards did the same, as the other youngling's and padawans pulled back in a way, knowing that they would only get in the way.

However, this let Sly free. And Even as she smacked aside the blades of young padawans, she reached out. Many of the lightsabers of the dead rose, stabbing and two of the Temple Guurds fell, their Force Precognition no match for being near Sidious.

Seeing that, Obi-Wan, surprising himself, shouted, "Padawans, pull back! Force Pushes!" A bit of sophistry there, but I'll allow it just this once.

At that command, all of the younger padawans there, and even a few scattered younglings, desperate and frightened in a way that none of them had ever dealt with before, lashed out.

Their fear gave Sidious power, but not all of them was feeling it, and there were so many of them. The two Sith found themselves hurled against the wall, and then Obi-Wan led Hrimiyarr and the Temple Guardian, trying to hold them there along with several of the other padawans and remaining knights.

But Sidious's skills were too much, and more young knights began to fall again as Sidious worked around Obi-Wan's iron defense. More Force powers lashed out, pushing tugging, crushing, and bodies fell.

However, now the padawans and the younglings started to surprise Sidious and Sly. One of them grabbed up some debris from where the wall had cracked under a hurled body. Hurling it forward with the thought that he wanted them to go as fast as arrows, both he and the target, Sidious, was startled to see the bits of stone transform into so many stone arrows.

"What, what is that!?" Sidious growled, even as he dodged the attack his lightsaber threatening to bisect another Jedi youth.

"I, did I do that?" The padawan in question, more of an age with Aayla than Obi-Wan, stared at her hands, then grabbed several others. "Come on, like this!"

Pushing what she had done out into their minds, the fivesome all raised their hands. Several bits of debris levitated into the air where they transformed into needles, arrows and even a spear from a chopped tree, all of which was hurled forward.

Now Sly had some trouble, with one of the spears taking her ear off, and several of the arrows nicking the sides of her neck, but not doing enough damage. Sidious too snarled, and lashed out with a bolt of Force Crush only for the Temple Guard to interrupt his attempt, his light pike nearly taking Sidious's leg off. He twitched away in time, and as Obi-Wan blocked Sidious's strike, Sly's hit home, stabbing the Temple guard through the chest.

Sidious's next Force push hurled that group of younglings and padawans away. Two died as they struck the opposite wall, their necks snapping with the impact. The others cried out in pain, but it nearly cost Sidious as the Wookie padawan's furious lightsaber nearly caught him in the side.

Yet even as Sidious drove them all back once more, forcing them into a purely defensive stance, the padawans and younglings still in the presidium looked at one another. Their faces firmed, and in groups around the area, they reached for the Force.

Aayla, on the other hand, quailed as she watched another newly awakened Knight falling to this, this monster. It was like watching a group of toddler's fight the Grand Master only the Grand Master wasn't playing. He was trying to kill them all.

Still, she was about to reactivate her lightsabers and join the fight when a hand grabbed her shoulder. She looked around and turned, staring into the wide, distraught eyes of Barriss. "No! You can't. We're not, even with what the others are planning..."

Her voice trailed off as the ground beneath the two Dark Side users rose, trying to entrap them, the stone of the Temple flowing like water. A large group of padawans and younglings gasped and fell unconscious at doing whatever they had, but it didn't work. Sidious just grabbed Sly and leaped upward and away, Lashing down with a Force Push that smashed into several other groups of young folk as he crowed, "Your younglings fight better than you do fools! They will make excellent Sith, those that survive!"

"We're not going to win, not like this," Barriss nearly whimpered, but her hand on Aayla's shoulder showed no sign of releasing.

"What would you have us do! We can't let them escape either!" While that honestly would probably be a better plan than continuing to try to fight the this to some and get slaughtered, Aayla doubted that, given the man's shouting rantings, either of them were in the mood to run away. Not now.

Bodies literally lived world the entire proceeding him, twenty or more, knights, padawans, and older youngling's alike. "If we can't keep him on this floor, he'll just start slaughtering the unconscious Jedi everywhere."

"I know, but we can't fight him like this. We need, we need to wake some of them up! Your empathy, it might, if we work together maybe..." Barriss stammered, trying to put together a plan.

Aayla frowned, then turned, seeing the roiling Dark Side energies almost like a giant tentacled monster around the senator, the hidden Sith. He could be nothing else. Aayla watched as his force power reached towards a youngling behind one of the Jedi fighting. He grabbed his foot, pulling him forward into the fighter in front of him, the strike taking his attention away for a lethal moment.

Obi-Wan's desperate attempt to deflect nearly cost Obi-Wan his own life as Sidious as twisted his attack towards him, but Hrimiyarr blocked the blow at the last second, only for Sly Moore to cut down another padawan. She nearly fell a moment later as another rain of spears struck, but Sidious smashed them out of the sky with his lightsaber, and then

leaped away, cutting down another pair of younglings before Obi-Wan and the others could follow. “Hahahah, sending children to their deaths, what else would I expect from the Jedi?!”

Seeing that, and knowing her young friends words were all too accurate, Aayla nodded, and the two raced away, heading up higher into the temple. “What are you thinking?”

“None of us have the skill to beat that monster, so we have to force some of the Masters to wake up. It’s risky, and might hurt them and us, but it’s better than nothing,” Barriss explained, grabbing several youngsters. They had remained in the area, listening to the conflict, unable or unwilling to just retreat higher into the temple. “Come on, all of you. We’re going to get some help!”

Master Yoda and many of the other Masters who had been in the temple when The Shift occurred had all been placed on the same floor, the ones used by the High Council and the Council of First Knowledge. Those rooms were incredibly crowded, as was most of the temple with so many comatose Jedi being brought home. Indeed, the temple was packed more than it had ever been, as far as the records Stephen so loved told them.

Aayla grimaced at that thought, then wiped it away. Stephen had been one of the first padawans cut down by Palpatine when he woke. She would need to deal with that and Urdo’s death later. Urdo had died moments ago, Aayla had felt his passing as they raced up here.

“A, alright, so, um, first, everyone connect to the Force. R, reach out to me and Barriss,” She stammered before breathing in, centering herself. “I’m going to need your power, while Barriss is going to reach out to the minds of the Jedi Masters and try to, well, open them up to hear me.”

This was based on a Force technique to wake and heal the mind of those who had fallen unconscious due to physical damage done to the brain. Barriss, as a youngling, hadn’t learned anything to do with damage done by mental attacks yet. But it was the only thing she could do right now, just like asking Aayla for help. Barris hoped that combined, the two techniques would punch through the fog and changes to the connection with the Force that had done so much damage to the masters minds. Most of that damage had healed by this point in the majority, but they remained asleep, their bodies still dealing with the impact.

All those who knew how to link to one another reached out to the Force, joining with her as she and the others knelt in among the cots and beds currently housing the older members of the order. Then, Barriss reached out to Aayla, and Aayla in turn began to broadcast down the link Barris had created.

Fear, hopelessness, a plea for help. She pushed it all out, pushed it all into the minds of the unconscious members all around her. PLEASE, we need you!

Some of them didn't respond. Cin Drallig, the leader of the Temple Guard, barely twitched. Most of the teachers didn't even move, and Jocasta Nu could as well have been a corpse for all her reaction. The more mentally inflexible members were still unconscious.

Others did stir but didn't wake up. Their minds had begun to slowly deal with the changes. A few had their minds started to react, before falling back into unconsciousness, not quite there yet. Yoda, Rancisis and Yaddle were all in this group.

But some, some did react. Some had been on the cusp of waking up, and now jolted upright, the desperation and hopelessness of Aayla's message acting like a spear through a wall of paper, startling them all awake.

Quinlan was the first. Feeling Aayla's desperation, knowing her mind and feel through the Force so well, he instantly responded, his eyes snapping open, sitting upright abruptly, his hand grabbing for his lightsaber, eyes flicking around for enemies, his teeth barred.

Qui-Gon and Master Plo Koon, a member of the High Council, also awoke. Plo Koon had a strong sense of justice and a desire to help people, and feeling so many minds crying out was the final straw he needed to push through the impact on his mind from The Shift in the Force. Qui-Gon in contrast was a proponent of the Living Force philosophy. He lived in the now, shifting as the Force willed him from one moment to the next, and because of that Qui-Gon had been the closest one to waking naturally.

There was one other, however, whose wakening somewhat surprised Qui-Gon when he saw who it was that had suddenly sat up on his cot. Master Dooku stirred, his senses flaring, pushing past the sudden confusion as to where he was and what had happened to what was going on now, sensing the Dark Side energies from the first floor of the temple.

Anyone who knew him as a padawan or even a Knight wouldn't have called Dooku very flexible in his thinking, yet that had been years ago. Since then, his own arrogance had caused Dooku to walk into several errors of judgment. He had thus begun to be a proponent of the whole Order grow and change, to shift away from the Senate and even the Republic as a whole. He had become more flexible, more willing to look for alternate sources of knowledge, and that had impacted how The Shift had in turn influenced his mind.

Dooku looked around, nodding to Qui-Gon, mentally making a note to talk to his first padawan later, then frowning at the young Kifar Jedi, reaching out and grabbing him by the

shoulder. “Calmly, young man! There is far too much anger in you at the moment. Center yourself, or fighting the Sith below you will only be a target for his control.”

Quinlan bared his teeth, but as Aayla reached over and took his hand, closed his eyes and began to do so. “S, sith?” Quinlan had always fought with his inner anger, his inner darkness. His Kifar powers, the powers of psychomancy, had always made him see too much. Now, having been woken up but through feeling his padawan’s fear, horror and growing despair, was it any wonder that he had nearly lost himself to his own anger?

“Indeed. Someone as powerful as what I am sensing can only be a Sith, one who has been trained from the start in the Dark Side. No Dark Jedi could match that mix of power and control. And as such, feeling anger yourself would be the worst thing possible. It would power him, and he could even perhaps turn you against us. Such has happened in the past,” Plo Agreed as he stood up, making certain his body was no worse for wear for his possibly extended stay in bed.

Hearing that, and under the gaze of the three Masters, Quinlan pulled himself together. As he did, he slowly shook his head, feeling the absence of the Veil of the Dark Side, which had begun to cloud the vision of the Jedi around the time he began training, as well as how reactive and almost... alive wasn’t quite the right term, but the Force felt more chaotic, for certain. Not in a bad way, though, more like... well, later for introspection and meditation. We have an enemy to fight. “Your pardon, Masters. I will meditate on this, but we need to move.”

“We do. But I will demand that you stay here afterwards for a time, young man. Your first emotion should not have been angry fury upon waking, even to the threat to your padawan.” At that, Dooku allowed himself a smile. He too had been feeling out the Force, the changes in it, which astonished and intrigued him alike. “You could say that was the wrong motion, right action so to speak.”

With that, and before Qui-Gon could stare at his old master for actually attempting to do a joke for too long, Dooku was up and moving, with Plo Koon beside him. With a start, the two younger Jedi raced after them, heading down the steps to the lower floors.

What they found was chaos. Obi-Wan, Hrimiyarr and a young Knight named Bultar Swan still stood, but five more padawans and two more Knights had joined Sidious’s other victims, while Sly Moore had accounted for three other padawans and a handful of younglings, collapsed from their exertions. Bodies were literally strewn everywhere across the large gathering hall, and several trees had been shattered or cut down.

But that wasn't the only change. The small groups of younglings had been bolstered by still more, and Shodarr was staying back away from the fighting, directing them in small groups and then retreating deeper into the temple whenever the younglings tiered themselves out.

Under their direction, the very ground had shifted in places, cracking here, shifting upwards into spikes or hands there. Other spikes stabbed out from the walls and ceiling also stabbing downward. Tiny needles, strange spears, and more transfigured material lay everywhere, and there was even a few signs of fire and ice.

It made for a very strange, and also incredibly horrifying image to the Jedi Masters, who instantly lit up their lightsabers and charged towards the center of the room, where Palpatine and Sly Moore still stood.

Dooku moved first, fast, faster than any one there had ever seen, blocking Sidious's strike to Hrimiyarr, then forcing him back in a series of slashes thrusts and small movements, twirling in place to keep up with Sidious's. Every move Dooku made was economical, controlled, pointed and direct, showing a mastery of the lightsaber that none of Sidious's enemies, not even Obi-Wan, who took to Soresu like a duck to water, could match.

Within seconds he had broken Sidious and Sly's defenses, forcing them a few steps apart, right before Plo Koon, Qui-Gon and Quinlan arrived. Plo Koon shifted in to attack Sidious, while the other two Masters attacks Sly, pushing her away quickly, before Qui-Gon twisted around, launching themselves towards Sidious to join the battle against him as they sensed Sidious getting used to Dooku and Plo Koon's presence.

Neither of the Masters had ever fought alongside one another, and they found a Force Gestalt difficult to form because of that and the strange wild nature of the Force as it was now. However, Qui-Gon had fought alongside Dooku on uncounted occasions, and the two of them easily reconnected now, despite the lingering issues between them. Similarly, while Plo Koon and Qui-Gon hadn't yet fought alongside one another, they had talked and even debated several points of law occasionally, and while they could work nearly as seamlessly as the former padawan/master pair, their styles complemented one another.

Exhausted, Hrimiyarr and many of the other padawans pulled back, letting Quinlan fight alone with Obi-Wan, who found a second wind. While the others drove Sidious further back and away from her, Sly was quickly overcome. Soon, a strike from Quinlan got through her defenses, removing her hand, and Obi-Wan's lightsaber took her in the side, nearly cutting her in half.

However, Sidious was a very different kettle of fish. He was still going strong, still filled with the Dark Side, and he had picked several new tricks from watching the youngsters. For several moments it looked like they had the advantage, but then a brief surge of the Force

into the floor created a dagger-like spike that stabbed upwards, catching Plo through the foot, holding him in place for a second. This broke his ability to work with the other two, and even as Sidious battered aside a blow from Dooku, he reached out, picking up and hurling a lightsaber towards Plo Koon from barely an inch away, the blade activating as it was in the air.

Plo Koon's eyes widened, and he desperately brought up his lightsaber, but suddenly the Force shifted, and a shield of energy appeared, blocking the lightsaber.

It didn't come from Shodarr. Her entire body gleaming with yellow energy, she shouted, "You won't hurt him! You won't hurt anyone!"

Seeing that, an energy shield created by Force power, caused Sidious to hesitate for just a second too long. Dooku's strike battered his lightsaber just a bit out of position, and before he could recover, the return strike removed Sidious's forearm.

"ARGH!" His lightsaber fell to the ground as Sidious stumbled, howling in pain and fury. But even now, he wasn't done. That pain, that fury fueled him still more, and Sith lightning lashed out from him in every direction. Dooku barely got his lightsaber up in time, and Qui-Gon howled as the lightning danced across his body until Obi-Wan was able to interpose his own body and lightsaber, deflecting it into the ground even as he winced.

Yet the shield was the main defense. Other youngling shouted, thrusting their hands outward, instinctively linking their minds to Shodarr as they had several times during the battle. The shield expanded, creating a bubble around Sidious and their seniors.

Redirected the lightning coming towards them up into that shield, Dooku reached out with the Force, pulling the same lightsaber that Sidious had been using towards his other hand. He wasn't very much a proponent of twin sword technique, but needs must.

He then lashed out, whirling into a series of strikes, one sword blocking the lightning, the other lashing out towards Sidious. Sidious's Force Lightning broke off, and another lightsaber from a dead Jedi whirled into his hand, which he used to block the two strikes from Dooku, who dropped his second lightsaber to the ground, pushing Sidious back hard, Makashi against the Sith Juyo.

The two of them fought for several moments, then in as the Dark Side tried to blare a warning, once more Sidious was just a little too slow. Instead of going for a strike that he was certain he would get through Dooku's defenses, he pulled back, but too slowly. Plo Koon's blow hit his arm, cutting it off at the elbow, and then Dooku's lightsaber stabbed, taking Palpatine in the throat.

Sidious fell, dead, and the Force practically exploded, the Dark Side energies in him bursting out, pushing Dooku and Plo back.

The future had just changed explosively. So many possibilities, so many futures, so much that could have happened would no longer that the cutting of those strings of possibilities resounded back to the moment where that initial string had been caught causing a reverberation that all of the Jedi there felt, while a gleeful, clear clarion sound came cry as the Light side of the Force rejoiced.

For a moment, as the storm of Dark Side energies passed, Dooku and Plo Koon stood, staring at one another for a few moments over the body of their enemy, then, Dooku flicked his lightsaber up into a formal salute, which Plo Koon returned, before turning their lightsabers off and shifting their attention to the carnage around them. There would be a lot of questions, a lot of mysteries that needed to be cleared up about this Sith Lord, about what his hiding inside the Senate meant, but that would be for later. They had wounded and the Order to see to now.

OOOOOOO

Late that night, Aayla, who'd spent most of the remaining evening with her Master, Quinlan himself, Hrimiyarr and Shodarr, were summoned up to the high Council chamber. That summoning almost acted like a balm to Aayla, a sign that things were going to change back to normal in a lot of ways. That a lot of the burden that had been on her and the others would be removed, taken up by more deserving shoulders.

Master Plo Koon and the others had also allowed them time to mourn. The two Sith had killed forty-two Knights, padawans and younglings between them and crippled nearly as many younglings and padawans more before the rampage had been stopped. It would've been far worse if Barriss's desperate plan and Aayla still felt drained from it all as she walked beside her Master into the temple's high Council chamber, and Barris was still unconscious from her efforts, while Aayla could barely reach out to the Force, her mind felt so raw.

Master Plo Koon sat in his normal council seat, the only one of the three Masters there who would normally be part of the Council. So did Qui-Gon, while Dooku stood, staring out over the view at one of the windows. Master Quinlan left Aayla's side for a moment, shifting ahead to take a seat on the floor rather than in one of the Council seats. Whatever happened, he was certainly not going to be in charge of anything, a sight that made Aayla both smile in relief, and have to hold back a burst of giggles.

At a gesture from Master Plo, they all walked forward, and Dooku began to speak, still staring out into the night of Coruscant. "At one point, not too long ago. I had been beset by

anger and fear. Fear that the Order, that I have come to devote myself to, had stagnated. That we had become too hidebound to change, too staid to react despite knowing that there was more to learn about the Force. The Shift is an opportunity, before us and as an Order, to change. But we wouldn't be able to seize that opportunity, to change like that, if not for all of you and the work you have done since the Shift afflicted all of us."

With that, Dooku turned, striding through the chairs of the high Council, then knelt in front of the padawans, bowing his head. Not once, but to each of them in turn, as Plo, Quinlan and Qui-Gon all bowed their own heads. "Thank you. Thank you for your loyalty, for your hard work and your minds," Dooku said.

"Without the work you all put in, even setting aside the issue of the two Sith, the Order would be in no position to push forward on our own terms. We would instead be further roped into the terms of others, dancing to their tune rather than that of the Force itself," Qui-Gon said, adding his own words to that of his former master. While Qui-Gon simply nodded, happiness and pride radiating from him as he stared at Obi-Wan.

There were still some things for the pair to work through, and some guilt and worry in Dooku that Qui-Gon wanted to get to the bottom of, but in this they agreed. The Jedi Order needed to serve the Force, and through it the people, not the Senate.

"You have taken on burdens that no padawan let alone a youngling should ever face." Behind his gas mask Plo smiled at Aayla, then the others in the room. "Thank you for your courage, your strength and adaptability. You all are exemplars of what the Order aspires to be."

Quinlan too felt proud for Aayla's role in everything, beaming at her almost like a proud parent, causing her to flush and look away.

"Many of the Masters who have yet to wake might have issues with how you have done things, with the fact that you did take on this burden, but they were not there. They were not faced with the choices you had to face. Hold your head up high young ones," Qui-Gon finished.

Straightening, Dooku shifted to his feet, then settled down into one of the chairs, gesturing, to Aayla surprise, herself and the others to do likewise. "Adaptability will be paramount in the following days. The Force has changed, what we can do with it has changed likewise. Our training, our education, our understanding of the Force must change to match it even once everyone else is awake. And until they are, none of us will try to shunt you aside, to push you back into the role of padawan or youngling, unless that is what you wish."

"I can sense that within you, the hope to return to what you had once been. I will not fight it. Nor, will any here censor you for feeling grief and sadness. So long as you do not let it consume you," Plo added. "Release it into the Force, leaving only the feelings of those positive moments you shared with the dead behind, and you will get through this all the stronger."

"We will all talk you through that, talk you and everyone else here in small groups how to do that, how to feel about... what happened today. But that is for the future. Right now, tell us your thoughts on everything. Tell us what plans you made for the future, about what is going on in the galaxy as a whole through your eyes." Qui-Gon said, glancing at his master, "We are, none of us, too old to learn after all."

Hours later, most of the youngsters were sent to bed, but Aayla remained at a gesture from her master. Plo looked at the pair of them for a moment, then stated, "Do you think that the two of you could find Master Tholme?"

"I know what planet he's on Master, if that's what you're saying. He passed that to me via a code that Master Vos taught me. Finding him on that planet is going to be a different story though," Aayla said, tugging at one of her tentacles thoughtfully, fighting back a yawn.

"I can find him from there," Quinlan agreed, resting a hand on Aayla's shoulder, something he had done several times during the tale of the past few days to show his appreciation of her as she and the others told Plo and the rest what was going on. "But if Tholme said he would be coming back to the temple, then what would be the point?"

"We don't want him to," Qui-Gon interjected firmly.

"The last time the Order had even a hint that Sith had survived the New Sith Wars, it was barely anything, a rumor of a Jedi who died on a mission in Hutt space, a phrase passed onto other Jedi," Plo said, leaning back slightly in his chair and tapping his metal-clad fingers together. "Two Sith, Master and padawan, was the rumor. One master to control the knowledge, an apprentice to gain it and usurp the title. A logical way to pass on their lore, their hate, and not be discovered by the Jedi by having too many members, or too many voices directing the Sith."

"So what's the problem?" Aayla asked, perhaps a bit querulously, a shudder going through her as the memory of Palpatine's face flashed through her mind. "There were a Master and a student right here..."

“Perhaps, but the woman, Sly Moore, she was in no way a real, trained Sith judging by the stories of how she fought. And given her age and how long she had been on Palpatine she should have been,” Plo explained.

“Moreover having the two be in the same place so often would be strange. The Sith have been careful, exceedingly so. Why then would Moore and Palpatine be so closely connected? If they were the only Sith?” Dooku shook his head. “No, that is foolish.”

“So... you, you think Palpatine was, was the padawan?” Aayla said, trying hard to keep her emotions in check.

“No, he was clearly a Master as well. What Sly Moore was is what we do not understand. That means the real padawan is out there somewhere. Perhaps able to act on his own, but certainly enough to perpetuate the Sith. That padawan is who must be found. Before, hopefully, he can start reacting to the loss of his Master. The death of a Senator, especially coupled with so many of our own dying, is not something we will be able to hide for long,” Dooku explained.

“So you want the Shadows to search for this real padawan,” Quinlan mused. “While the Order looks into Palpatine and Moore?”

“Indeed. We will be going through everything the pair have touched; everyone they might have influenced. Bank accounts, anything they owned, planets they visited frequently, Palpatine’s estate on Naboo and here in the Senate district. All of it,” Plo agreed.

“I see.” Quinlan nodded, looking over at Aayla. “But we can wait a few days, surely?”

“You need to wait, and let Aayla recover,” Dooku agreed, shrugging. “It isn’t perfect, but this is not a perfect universe we live in. Nor do I want the pair of you to take this mission on your own. Even as deficient as her lightsaber style was, Sly Moore’s ability with the Force was a match for too many of the padawans she faced. A true apprentice, a Sith specializing in combat? No, that would be far worse.”

Aayla and her Master nodded, and after a few more minutes of back and forth with Qui-Gon and Plo, they were dismissed to get some rest. This left the three acting members of the Council sitting there for a moment.

Then Dooku said the words they were all, in varying degrees of reluctance, thinking. “I was right all along, if not for the reasons I feared. The Order has become too complacent.

Without The Shift, would we have ever discovered Palpatine was a Sith? I know I would not have. The man and I interacted several times while I met with various Senators and committees in the past two years. I had no idea. He was just an up-and-coming Senator. That was all. How much worse would it be if he had time to create a larger power base, to influence the Senate and through it the Republic?”

“Agreed. Whatever caused The Shift, this was a happy by-product. We cannot fall back into complacency. And we must further discover how the Force itself has changed,” Plo agreed.

“And we must remove ourselves further from Senate control,” Qui-Gon stated firmly, if somewhat reluctantly. That reluctance, though came from his dislike of politics rather than anything else, and indeed, like his Master, he had several thoughts in this direction before this. “The padawans missed it beyond that one Yim’rii/Khaleesh mission, but stepping back, a lot of the missions we’ve been sent on have sent us in with faulty or just wrong information. We need to start being more independent.”

Plo hesitated, taking a glance at Doku’s rigid profile, knowing he had a axe to grind on that score, but eventually nodded. “There is evidence the Senate has been manipulating the information, yes. If we have become simple voices for those in power, that is not justice. If we have become complacent, believing everything the Senate tells us, that is blindness. I will not be a party to being simply a force for the Senate and it’s special interests.”

“In that case, I suggest we start working on a plan. Four of them, really. One for the Order as a whole, outlining how we can become more independent. A second to learn more about how the Force has changed, and how our interacting with it, our training, needs to change as well. A third to deal with the Senate. And fourth...” A thin smile appeared on Dooku’s face as he continued. “A plan to convince Master Yoda and the others of the necessity for it. Which is going to be an interesting experience to be sure.”

End Chapter