

I am not Disney, nor a British lady.

This has been edited by myself with Grammarly and by **M.B.**, a Patty on follower of mine that got it back to me (in two installments) within four days. Despite this, I don't doubt there will be mistakes within, I can only hope that they do not detract from your enjoyment of the chapter.

Edited 10/1: Thanks must be heaped upon **M.B.**! He pointed out that I had sent him a version with several {} in it of the last scene, which I use to denote names and suchlike which need to be filled in after I finish writing the rest of the segment. I had accidentally used the version I had on my computer rather than one I had saved to my memory stick. This has now been corrected by my merging the version he looked at and the one I had finished the work on. I am soooo sorry for any confusion there.

I also have to warn anyone who pointed this out in their reviews. Up until the past hour I have not been able to see them. Fanfic was having one of its habitual issues once more...

Chapter 16: Never Interrupt Your Enemy When They Are Making A Mistake.

As the *Tyrant's Bane* left Coruscant, Dominus began the next phase of the Great Plan from the Confederacy side: ramping up the attacks being launched across the Republic, but allowing them to be bogged down here and there, while more of the Confederacy fleet was reorganized to emphasize further attacks into Galactic Defense League space. However, the earlier setbacks the Confederacy had run into began to cause trouble. His admirals proved reluctant to go through with many of his attacks, instead opting to launch spoiling raids into systems in the Republic and GDL, getting a feel for their enemies while husbanding their forces for larger-scale attacks against core targets.

This, of course, was just good sense, but it wasn't what the Sith wanted. The Great Plan needed the Confederacy to start making mistakes, if not quite the mistakes Sidious wished. And Dominus wanted **obedience**. With the Force and the Veil's aid, he could have dominated any one or two of them, but seven Admirals had objected, and that was a large enough number of the Confederacy's total Theatre Commanders that it had forced Dominus to do the one thing he hated more than practically anything else beyond being under Sidious's command: he had to talk to them, convince them of the rightness of the plan, to see them through more wholeheartedly.

"Gentlemen, I understand you have objections to the new thrust of our overall strategic planning. And I am here to address those concerns," Dominus began the meeting, keeping his voice affable but stern, like a grandfather angry but resigned to give into the foibles of his children. It was a tool he'd used several times to good effect.

"Yes, my Lord," one of the admirals admitted. "We have the Republic on the ropes. They are divided, their fleets lack coordination, lack training in a war of this scale. But they are logistically and strategically still horribly powerful, and we need to keep up the momentum."

"We need to smash more of the Ord fleets, take the Republic's best, most well-trained and experienced fleets out of the battle now," emphasized another admiral, thumping his hand down on something out of the receiver's range for emphasis, the sound carrying through if not the sight of the action.

"I agree," Dominus said calmly, and as he knew, that took the wind out of their sails. "However, that does not mean we need to run directly into further attacks on Ord systems and other hardpoints. The Republic might be scrambling on the strategic and organizational level, but they are prepared on the tactical level now. Correct?" The admirals all nodded, and he smiled. "In that case, does it make any sense for us to attack where they expect us to? No, it does not. Instead, we will attack other places, pull those fleets out from behind their fixed defenses, and defeat them there."

He waved his hand airily as if the campaign against the Republic was already decided as he started to repeat things they all should have learned from their latest intelligence overview, the more to put them at ease. "As you said, the Republic as a whole is still scrambling, and their organization is a joke at that level. Yes, they have this secret army, but from our spies' reports, most of that army is indeed an **army** rather than a **Navy**. There is a limit after all to how many ships even the Republic could build in secret, unlike cloning facilities apparently."

A wry twist of his lips caused the admirals to scowl, understanding that the clones were going to be a major issue going forward, even if there was a rumor that the Jedi Order had demanded that they cease creation of any more going forward. Considering that one of the Jedi had set that army in motion, though, none of these admirals were going to believe their protestations of innocence.

Dominus leaned forward, his face turning grave and serious. "However, the GDL is already up and running. Even if we can't make heads or tails out of their strategic philosophy, the attacks into the GDL have suffered badly, and we are no closer to hurting them in turn. Where are their nodal forces? Where are their fleets? They are playing the same game as we are, keeping their strategic assets for the most part either behind massive defenses or simply hidden. Therefore, at the moment, the GDL represents more of a danger."

The admirals all leaned back in their chairs as one, a synchronicity that amused Dominus, as he knew it had not been planned. "I can't disagree," said one of the admirals who was a Theatre Commander in one of the Outer Rim segments of the GDL. "Yet despite my own losses, we have to remember, that's only in the short term. I don't think that the GDL has enough resources to really be a threat in the long run. In contrast, we can't pull off more of our forces from the Republic without losing our momentum there."

"Our momentum has already been badly blunted by the fact that the Jedi at the very least knew we were coming in many places," added another admiral, this one a Sluissi.

"We don't want that clone army to get off the ground," one of the others said with a nod, a human from Obredaan, a mining world that was the only source of cortosis armor in the Confederacy, something that made it somewhat important to Dominus personally.

Dominus held back his anger with difficulty, knowing that he was getting this push back because even as a Jedi, Dominus had never been known as a warrior or involved in any of the small-time wars that sprouted up in his lifetime. If he had, these people would be following his directives without question. *Well, that, and the first round of attacks and the victories our forces won, but with the losses against the GDL they believe that there is room for debate.*

"We don't have a target yet for that army," Dominus said aloud before he began to reach out through the Force. Although he was not the Master of the Veil, he was a Sith and could thus ride the Veil further than Dominus would have otherwise been able to reach and with the images in front of him, finding the minds he wanted to influence was somewhat easy. "But I am concerned that while we are trying to hammer the giant, the prepared warrior is going to cut us off at the knees. And we do have targets in the GDL. Those targets will do for now, until we discover where these clones are being made."

Then Dominus seemed to relent even as he reached into their minds and began to twist their thoughts to following his orders. "However, you are correct. We cannot turn our entire war effort onto the GDL, even though part of me wishes we could. Crush them quickly and move on. The giant must be kept reeling."

He pointed at three of the admirals who had been the most vocal about pushing the Republic hard. "Admiral Marduk, Admiral Trench, and Admiral Ningo. You three will continue to push the Republic. We will also launch an entirely different campaign, under the command of your newest colleague." With a few gestures, a new screen opened up to show a new face to Dominus and all the admirals in the meeting.

The face that appeared there was a horror. It was that of a cyborg, his face more an amalgam of steel than flesh, bar some barely visible skin around the eyes. But those yellow-colored eyes were still alive and cold. So cold and very dangerous. "This is Grievous," Dominus said, chuckling quietly at the shock of the admirals, which made it all the easier for them to him to start molding their minds, to change their opinions on his plans and start the process of turning them into his puppets, like so many of the Confederacy leadership already was. "He will be in charge of the campaign against the Jaso Sector, once we are in a position to launch it, which I predict we will be in a few months."

That caused many of the admirals to sit up and take notice. The Jaso sector had broken off from the Commerce Guild several years ago, following the peace made between the human settlers and the native Vratix on Thyferra. None of the rest of the planets in the sector, many of

which were home to medical labs and hospitals rated among the best in the galaxy, had been willing to be part of the separatist movement. The had caused a lot of consternation and more than a little anger when the sale of bacta had become, instead of just another extremely precious commodity under the command of the Commerce Guild, a Republic government prerogative.

The idea of taking the war to such a group should have appealed to many of the admirals, seeing them as traitors. But it should also have raised alarm bells given how important Bacta was to both sides of the conflict, if not quite as much for the Confederacy as the Republic. The other planets in the Jaso sector didn't do anything but produce doctors and medical gear either. Such an assault was, well, it should never have even been contemplated since it took the war to another level than the previous battles had. It would harm the civilians across the entire Republic far more than they had done so far. It would paint the Confederacy as true barbarians, as beings willing to harm everyone and everything to get their way.

But of all the admirals there, only Trench was able to muster up even a lukewarm objection. "Do you think that attacking Thyferra is wise?" the representative of the Harch, a spider-like species, asked. "The war isn't even a month old. Surely we should be able to wait on such an extreme move until we see if the Republic will even have the heart to stay in the fight?"

"We will not strike at it just yet. We will instead feint at several other nearby sectors," Dominus soothed before his expression hardened. "Yet if the Republic does start fighting back, getting its act together on the organizational level, then I will want this operation in place. And it will be a complete scorched earth campaign."

All of the admirals gaped in shock, but they were already slowly losing any kind of empathy or feeling beyond that which Dominus would allow them under his mental touch. But he had to be careful. These men were too important to turn into puppets entirely. No, they had to keep enough of their mental faculties to be effective in their current positions. When he spoke, his voice was calm yet somehow carried far more menace than it ever had before. "Yes, destroying the Bacta supply of the galaxy is a tremendous blow. However, it is far more of a blow to our enemies than us. After all, most of our forces are droids."

"I, it will turn everyone against us further than they already are," Admiral Ningo said feebly, the old Sullustan's ears drooping noticeably.

At that point, Dominus knew he had them. He spent several more minutes seemingly listening to many of their particular concerns, all the while finishing his work on their minds. They would serve, they would continue to be as good at leading their disparate fleets as they had been. But now they were his. Every time he gave an order, they would obey. Every time they obeyed, their minds would be flooded by pleasure. They would slaughter planets in seconds, massacre civilians and smile while doing it in Dominus's name.

Near the end, Dominus turned his attention to the task that Sidious had given him barely two hours previously. *And this is a task that I will do gladly, although of course not with a mere eight Lucre hulks. No, I will do it with a full combat fleet. A fleet that will then move on to decimate every Agri-corps-run world out there. Sidious will see. I have not forgotten our real enemies, and I will do more real damage to the Jedi than he ever has with all his schemes.*

"Admiral Travari, Admiral Lucianus, did you obey my orders and split off some forces for a private excursion?"

"Yes, my Lord," they both said as one.

Their obedience filled Dominus with joy. "Good. Who did you put in command?"

"Rear Admiral Loremy. He is a Neimoidian, his flagship the Heartless," Lucianus, a Weequay, replied.

"Good. I will contact Loremy directly to give him his orders. Thank you for this discussion admirals, I think we can all agree that we have talked enough right now. I will allow you to return to your commands. The war waits for no one, after all." With that, Dominus cut the connection to all of the admirals except for Grievous. "Your new fleet will be fully assembled within two months. You know your orders, correct?"

"Yes," the cyborg hissed. "Destroy the Republic. One step at a time."

"Exactly," Dominus replied, and signed off with Grievous in turn. Darth Dominus then leaned back, sighing in the darkness of his meditation room aboard his ship, already anticipating the feel of Potter's demise when it occurred. *With Grievous and my plan to hit Thyferra, I will severely discommode both the Republic as a whole and Sidious, since the planet was not supposed to be attacked until later in the war. The Republic will suffer, their despair and fear will grow, and the Veil will gain strength. But it remains to be seen who truly will control it in the end,* Dominus thought, happy thoughts about the Republic turning against Sidious, ousting him from power. *And then, a few whispers to the Jedi, and, well, who knows what might happen.*

With another sigh, Dominus used the Force to connect to the ship's Hypercom once more. *But before that, to work. The Tyrant's Bane, and isn't that a most arrogant name, will not destroy itself after all.*

OOOOOOO

The nearest Agri-corps world from Coruscant was but a single short jump away. It wasn't actually a planet, rather a single moon over a gas giant called Rulan. The moon, Rulan 7, was known for producing varieties of rice. Nothing major, but a constant source of income for the

Order on a small scale. This was added to several dozen spices that could be harvested from the forests covering many of the planet's large, snow-capped mountains.

Aayla and Harry, with Ahsoka accompanying them at Harry's instruction, joined master Yoda in the VIP shuttle as it, and the four larger bulk shuttles the Tyrant's Bane had all made for the planet. Each of them was directed to a different hemisphere. Their orders would be to evacuate every Agri-corps member within and move on. "On this planet alone, one thousand, two hundred and nineteen members there are," Yoda said, causing Ahsoka to blink in shock.

"Really? I didn't think the Agri-corps was that large! Wait, but then why are so many Jedi wasted on just, just producing rice and stuff?" Ahsoka asked, though she trailed off at the end, looking away from the others.

"You didn't read the briefing I gave you, did you?" Harry asked with a chuckle, causing Ahsoka to pout at him. "Don't worry about it, that was just in case you were interested in what we were doing here. If you're not, then it won't really matter. As for your question, the truth is that the Agri-corps is mostly, as is known, made up of younglings and padawans who could not... make the cut."

Yoda nodded, sighing sadly. "Connection to the Force, the members of the Agri-corps have. Strength, few do. One Master, four at most, you will find on an Agri-corps planet. Hrrhrhm, forty younglings below, strength enough to become Jedi they have. But, discipline, drive, lack these they do."

Ahsoka slowly nodded. It took a lot of drive and willpower to keep on with the training as a Jedi, as well as a strong connection to the Force. In ages past, before she was found and brought into the Order, a padawan could also be assigned to the Agri-corps for a time if no master was able to form a padawan bond with them. She knew that Master Kenobi spent time among the Agri-corps. But the vast majority of them were indeed washed out due to a lack of a strong enough connection to the Force. There would be very few people below them who could even build their lightsaber, let alone use it. They might only have enough Force ability to, say, detect danger or a lie, but nowhere near enough to reach out and manipulate the Force in turn or use Force Precognition.

"You have a question, Ahsoka. Ask it," Harry said while Aayla piloted them down to land. As she did, both lovers became aware of the sense of an old friend waiting for them and smiled in anticipation.

"Erm, well, it's just, why do so many of them stay within the Order? I mean, if they don't have much in the way of the Force, couldn't they just go home if they're young enough, or um, just try to make their way in the universe without the Order? Surely the Order would give them some kind of stipend or something to get started with."

"Seed money would probably be a better term, and the answer is no, the Order wouldn't," Harry grumbled, looking over at Yoda.

"Force users, weak or strong, fall into the Dark they can. Very dangerous they would be," Yoda replied almost by rote, as if this was an argument they'd already had a few times. Then he seemed to sigh. "Most, consider leaving the Order they do not. Stay within the Order all do, because their only home, it is."

Ahsoka frowned, wondering about that, but decided that in the end, it didn't really matter. The Order's practices weren't something she could do anything about after all.

Soon enough, the shuttle landed, and Yoda led the way out.

Outside, Harry and Aayla smiled at the Chironian Jedi, waiting for them. He was a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, with his four hooves planted firmly on the ground as he waited for them, wearing a Jedi robe specially made for his centauroid form. A lightsaber with a slightly larger than average hilt rested on his waist. He had a wide smile on his face as he bowed deeply to Yoda, then trotted forwards to his two friends. "Long time no see you two. And I understand that Mak and Kass are with you as well?"

"Wulo, I see that training with Master Yoda has treated you well," Harry smiled in reply, clapping his hands in front of them, bowing over them in the Jedi manner of greeting a friend. "As for Mak and Kass, they are up in the Tyrant's Bane, making certain that the temple is ready for all the newcomers we're going to be transporting in.

The centaur smiled back, then let out an 'oof' as Aayla, disdaining such formal kriff, moved past Harry and hugged him tightly. "It's good to see you again, Wulo!" Then her arm snaked out and dragged Harry into the hug as well. Not that Harry needed much encouragement.

Shaking his head at this, Yoda simply waited for the friends to get reacquainted, engaging Ahsoka in a conversation about the various teachers she had learned under during her time as a youngling.

Eventually, the hug ended, and Wulo began to explain what he had been up to since Master Yoda had decided that he was ready for his Trials on the heels of Zule, Alecto, Aayla and Harry becoming Knights. "I've been in charge of readying the Agri-corps for the move, and I like to think I've done a good job. I've also sent on more than a dozen padawan-aged people who wanted to give Jedi training another try and have started to have them work on their handwriting in preparation for, well, you know. A few hundred don't want to be involved in anything but their work here, but I have the names of several hundred scattered across the corps that will want to do whatever they can for the war effort, and that means more than just, well, you know."

Harry nodded firmly, understanding the term that Wulo was being very careful not to use: runes. "The Bane and Master Gallia on Waypoint can certainly use them." Waypoint was the name of the station that served as the entrance to the Ruusan Sector and was the only place where ships could be fitted for space expansion arrays and other such things beyond the Bane itself. By this point, forty-seven freighters from Corellia, mostly YT 1200 medium-scale freighters, had been expanded and were now moving throughout the GDL, captained by Green Jedi and each protected by a squadron of Arrowhead fighters out of Serenno as most transports were at this point. With the Force-sensitives of the Agri-corps, they could speed up that work tremendously.

"We've also prepared the planets for our leaving. The Hypercom and communications towers are rigged to blow, the farms are locked down as much as possible, everyone has packed their personal effects and so forth. Rulan and every other planet will be ready for evacuation, although the speed of it will depend on how many of those shuttles you have."

Yoda chuckled, shaking his gimer stick at the young Knights, before pointing at his former Padawan. "Amusing it is, how one can disappear. Wulo, my Padawan he was many years. And yet, knew of him hardly anyone did. Yet, know all of the Clan Saa techniques he does, teach them to those willing to learn, he could. An ideal leader he made for this project."

Harry nodded, idly wondering how the rest of the Republic was going to react when they learned that the Agri-worlds which had been run by the Jedi no longer had any Jedi on them. "Good. In that case, I think I will leave that in your capable hands, Wulo."

"Certainly," the Chironian nodded firmly, his montrals glinting in the sunlight as he did. "But what will you be doing in the meantime?"

Harry chuckled, as did Aayla and Yoda. Harry then gestured to Ahsoka, who had been bouncing lightly on her feet to one side, waiting for the conversation to turn interesting or for her Master to notice her again. "I was just assigned a padawan, I think it's time I put her through her paces."

"They gave you a padawan?" Wulo quipped, shaking his head as he nodded to the young Togrutan. "You have my deepest sympathies."

"We said the same thing!" Kass and Mak laughed.

"Yes, yes, pity the poor padawan, never take a single thought for the poor overworked Jedi/Count/Commander of the Fleets," Harry mock-grumbled, letting his friends laugh at him just a bit more before turning firmly to Ahsoka. "Come on, Ahsoka, let's let these laughing fools to their jobs. I promised you I'd put you through your paces, and I mean to do just that."

Nodding her head eagerly, Ahsoka followed her Master away from the large landing pad out into the small set of huts and storage areas that lined it. From there, they moved up into

the mountains for a time, talking quietly about what Ahsoka knew about nature, being in the field and other things. Since she had come aboard the Bane, Ahsoka had been kept busy simply saying hello to so many people, so this was the first time that Ahsoka and her Master had been alone. At first, she was almost nervous when that fact hit her, but Harry's gentle questions broke Ahsoka out of her apprehension, and soon she was chattering away at him as they moved through the forest up deeper into the mountains.

It was only when Harry stopped and said, "This will do," that Ahsoka realized that she had been talking so much about herself, she hadn't even asked any of the hundreds of questions she had for Harry.

She was about to start correcting that when Harry moved into the clearing ahead of them moving to sit perched on top of a rock, his legs crossed under him as he looked back at Ahsoka. "Now, we will begin."

That caused some of Ahsoka's anxiety to come back. She honestly had no idea what to expect about becoming a padawan, especially to one who was so obviously – and unrepentantly – unorthodox as Harry.

Harry felt her trepidation and raised one eyebrow. Realizing what that meant, Ahsoka gathered herself and slowly regained control of her emotions, becoming calm through the Force.

"That's better," Harry nodded. "I realize that we haven't even been together 24 hours yet, so some trepidation is acceptable, broadcasting them that loudly isn't. But don't worry, I don't bite. Right now, this is your time to shine."

Ahsoka blinked at that, and Harry's smile turned lopsided. "I want to see what you know. You've already proven that when called upon, you can regain control of your emotions quickly enough. I want to see how fast you can sink into a meditation, what Force techniques you know, how quickly you can use them, just like I said back on Coruscant." Harry waited a moment until Ahsoka nodded. "Good. Then let us start with some simple meditation. I want you to reach out to the Force."

With a faint sigh, Ahsoka sank into the lotus position across from Harry, stapling her fingers as Harry did, and closing her eyes. She had always found it difficult to meditate on the Force in general, and this time was no different. And as time went on, the anxiety of not doing so worked against her until she began to broadcast her annoyance and rising shame around her.

That cycle continued, until Harry's voice penetrated into her consciousness, a wry chuckle on his lips. "Calmly, Ahsoka, I'm not trying to judge you or look down on you. We've all been there. And I am not so wedded to the idea of emotional distance as many a Jedi are. We've talked about that already."

Ruefully Ahsoka nodded, and then slowly began to meditate as Harry started to help her, talking about how Master Fay had told him how to reach out for the Force, if that term was even applicable for how Fay touched the Force. It was difficult, very difficult, but eventually, Ahsoka reached out for the Force towards her new Master along their barely created link.

However, a slight tap on her forehead brought Ahsoka out of it, and she spluttered, staring up at Harry, who had somehow crossed the intervening distance and was now standing above her. "Well done for now. But right now, I think it's time to turn our attention to other things.

"Yes, master!" Ahsoka cheered, smiling up at him widely.

Harry winced then smiled again, crouching down in front of her. This close, Ahsoka couldn't have looked away from those emerald eyes even if she tried to. The impact of them was something else. "I told you when we're not in public, you can just call me Harry, okay? Being called Master is going to take some getting used to."

"Yes, Master," Ahsoka said cheekily, grinning up at him, and Harry laughed, stepping back, at which point he held out a hand to her. She scoffed and then bounded to her feet, only to twitch as she felt one of her legs had fallen asleep without her realizing it. "Gah, leg's asleep!"

"I was afraid of that," Harry shook his head, grabbing her elbow and holding Ahsoka still while she regained control of her body. "Frequently when you're too deep into a meditation session, you forget some of your body's functions like that. I did the same thing when I was younger."

When Ahsoka's leg had brought back to life, Harry moved away from her, once more sitting down on the rock he had been sitting on before. "All right, now. Let us start with the Clan Saa techniques, then move on to the other Force techniques you can use."

It turned out that Ahsoka was actually quite good with the Stun technique. Harry put her through the paces on it, both speed, the width of the red bolt of energy, and power, all of which were quite good, although the last did tire Ahsoka out a bit. Harry had waited to test her on that aspect last for just that purpose.

Her Force Shield was good, but it was evident that it hadn't been tested as much as Harry would've hoped. He tested it against a lightsaber strike, and it faltered within seconds. "We'll work on that, don't worry. And don't be so frustrated," he soothed, striding forward again and patting Ahsoka on the head as he saw her face fall.

Her color change charm was excellent. She was able to change stone, grass, and herself, or in other words, a non-living object, a biological one, and her own physical form. When she

finished, Ahsoka beamed proudly at him, giving Harry the victory sign. Her entire body was now dark purple, including her montrals, which, according to Shaak Ti, was extremely difficult to do.

"That is well done, even if I think that purple isn't your color. Your original orange was much more fetching," Harry teased, gaining a scoff from Ahsoka.

"Now then, since we've covered most of the physical skills you've been taught so far, do you have any techniques you've created on your own?" Harry asked, then smiled his small, but warm smile once more as Ahsoka hesitated. Attempting to create your own Force technique was technically frowned upon, but Harry knew that Master Saa, Master Yaddle and Master Yoda, at the very least, were willing to help someone along if they felt that they could create a new, personal technique that they weren't explicitly taught. He didn't say anything, just smiled at her, and Ahsoka eventually nodded.

Flushing a bit in embarrassment, Ahsoka moved a bit away from Harry and held out her hand, her face scrunched up in concentration, creating a light. It wasn't Force Light, it was simply a light creating technique, but it showed immense concentration and ability. "The next, well, it's something that no one who isn't of my race would be able to do. In fact, it's just sort of enhancement of what's already there?" Ahsoka muttered, fingering her montrals.

Harry blinked. "Something to do with your montrals? They use a kind of echolocation, don't they? They give you a good idea of everything around you? I remember Master Ti explaining that at one point."

At the name of Master Ti, Ahsoka flushed, looking away. There was a flash of several emotions Harry couldn't quite get a proper impression of since Ahsoka was clamping down on her emotions much better now. "Oh, um, you know Master Ti?"

"I do," Harry replied, allowing his smile to widen slightly. "Shaak Ti has been working closely with myself and the others in the GDL for some time now. She's currently stationed on Rendili, helping the local defense fleet. The system's under siege, but the besiegers aren't strong enough yet to break through just yet, and the siege isn't going so well for their supply lines."

Ahsoka's eyes widened at that, and that time the emotion came through quite clear. *Awe and respect, as well as some jealousy?* Placing that to the side, Harry asked, "What does this technique do?"

"It enhances the echolocation of my montrals. Erm, the montrals emit low-key bits of sound normally, which are bounced back to me. But um, I figured out a way to use the Force to erm, create a sort of sound-based attack. It um, it's enough to severely disorient a human, the sound just sort of smacks them in the brain," Ahsoka said, looking sheepish then added hurriedly, "Master Jocasta was working with me on it, she has all the paperwork and everything."

"Amazing!" Harry enthused, which seemed to take Ahsoka aback and made her a little bashful, looking away and starting to bounce on her toes a bit. "I think we can wait on that one for now, but I would enjoy seeing such a Force technique in action. It might not work against a helmet opponent or a droid, but few Force-users wear helmets, and fewer still think of protecting their ears when they go into battle.

Harry then cocked his head to one side, watching as she began to bounce on her toes a bit. *"She's got a lot of energy. We're going to have to do something to burn that off regularly, I think"*, he sent telepathically to Aayla, who had been watching what was going on around Harry while helping to guide the newcomers on the Bane to the temple within the farming zone.

She laughingly agreed, but Harry had to at least ask before they could move on to the more physical side of things. Somehow he could sense that Ahsoka had a final technique she was being cagey about showing. "Do you have any other skills you wish to show me?"

After a few seconds spent looking away shiftily, Ahsoka finally nodded and moved away from Harry a bit before closing her eyes, pressing her hands together and as her knuckles began to whiten, she concentrated on the Force, directing it into her own body. Harry could feel her molding the Force into her body, then watched as she grew a few inches. He continued to watch as his new Padawan began to seemingly grow up in front of his eyes, adding another inch to her height, an inch to her shoulders, and more than a few to her bust as well.

The only things that Ahsoka couldn't change were her montrals, which remained the same size, but everything else, even her face, shifted to age significantly in a few seconds. Then as Harry watched, her skin color started to shift in color too, slowly darkening to match that of Master Ti's skin tone rather than the orange color that Ahsoka had begun with.

Harry had heard of a skill like this from his mother. Very rarely, a magic-user back on Earth had been born with the ability to change his or her body entirely, shifting from one face to the next as easily as other people could change their clothing. Apparently, his mother had actually babysat for one such metamorph at one point and found it ludicrously fun to watch the little girl shift from one face to another.

"And how did you discover this technique?" Harry asked, walking around Ahsoka now, staring at her from all angles as the transformation completed. Now she stood almost as tall as Aayla, with an equal bust, and seemingly of the same age as well. Her lekku had lengthened to match, as had her horns. If Harry was meeting her for the first time, he could well have been fooled to think Ahsoka really was the same apparent age as his lover.

Along their link, Harry could also feel Aayla's surprise and concern at what they were seeing. *"After all, why is she so keen to take that form, Harry?"* she sent, and Harry sent a mental nod back, before concentrating on Ahsoka's words.

"It kind of grew over time," Ahsoka admitted. "I was practicing with the Color Change technique, changing my skin color, and then I wondered if it was possible to change anything else. After days of trying and meditating on it, I finally was able to do something like that to, er... my..." She stumbled to a halt, hastily correcting whatever she was about to say. "I changed my sight a few times, then the length of my lekku, and it grew from there."

"I see. And this wouldn't have had anything to do with wanting to grow up faster now, would it?" Harry asked, chuckling a little at that. Internally he asked, *"What is it with girls wanting to grow up faster?"*

"I don't think it has anything to do with growing up, Harry. I think it has something to do with wanting to be sexier, prettier I mean. Boys don't seem to have that problem," Aayla answered mentally.

Harry chuckled internally, rolling his eyes at her. *"As if you've ever been anything less than exotically beautiful. As for boys, Well, we do always want to be taller, but older looking I don't think comes into it. You're right about that, at least. At least not as young as girls seem to start wanting to be prettier."*

Sending Harry happy thoughts at the compliment, Aayla pondered another reason as to why Ahsoka had not been taken on as a Padawan before this. Her emotional control wasn't good enough for a padawan her age, and it appeared as if the teachers at the academy had not done their normal 'semi-good' job of indoctrinating Ahsoka into thinking herself as Jedi first and a girl tenth, or never.

She wondered idly if she should perhaps look into exactly what changes to the curricula had been made since the decision to allow what Shaak said was called 'physical outlets' had been made. If a few teachers were still teaching their learners to simply ignore their bodies, or teaching them about such changes clinically, while others were doing so more like Master Ti had with Aayla, that dichotomy would no doubt have sown a lot of confusion.

Ahsoka had flinched at Harry's question, looking away hurriedly. But Harry crossed the few feet between them, tapping her chin lightly and turning her face back to look into her eyes. "Look at me, padawan," he said gently.

When she did so, Harry went on, his voice still gentle. "Growing up happens in your own time. Do not be jealous of those who are older than you simply by a twist of the Force. If Aayla or Master Ti were your age, they would look no different than you do now. Do not be in a hurry to grow up." She flushed and looked away, and Harry allowed it this time, stepping back slightly. "I told you back when we left Coruscant. I will not tell you that emotions are wrong. I will not ask you to conform beyond a certain amount of control. But I will demand that you know yourself, and understand that jealousy is stupid," he said sharply.

She blinked at his harsher tone, looking back at him in shock, and Harry crossed his arms, shaking his head. "Do you think you're the only one who has dealt with jealousy? Everyone deals with it at one point or another. Aayla went through the same thing, at one point, and it wasn't easy for her or anyone from Clan Saa at the time in the Order, dealing with a lot of the rest of the Jedi being against them and how emotional and imaginative they were. Trust me, in that area, you have it easy."

For the first time, Harry opened the tenuous bond between them, allowing his sincerity and the truth of what he was saying to wash over Ahsoka through the Force. Her eyes widened at that, but she drank in the emotions quickly, and her face shifted into one of surprise. "Really? I mean Master Aayla is so..."

"And Master Shaak is so..." Harry mocked while internally rolling his eyes, while Aayla blushed slightly, turning away from the confused expression of one of the Agri-corps workers who had just asked her a question. Aayla knew she was good-looking, but to be held in such admiration by a youngling that she had only met a day ago was something new. "Trust me, Aayla had the same issue. You will grow up in your own time. You will become your own woman. Do not attempt to force yourself to become more like someone else rather than yourself."

Ahsoka slowly nodded as her body began to shift back words into her normal form. Though she did look down at her skin thoughtfully. "I don't know about the skin, though. Orange is, well..."

"Your skin color, and thus something to be proud of," Harry interrupted her firmly. "A bit of pride in yourself is not so wrong, Ahsoka, so long as it does not become vanity. You will speak on this matter more with Aayla and a few of the older Green Jedi. They will help you with your personal image issues. To my mind, Ahsoka, you are a perfect physical example of a sixteen-year-old Togrutan Padawan girl. While that might be a mouthful, you do not need to change yourself, not physically or emotionally, not to conform, not to be pretty. Am I understood?"

Ahsoka shifted, tugging at her short lek for a moment, then nodded, almost feeling her normal aggressive bluster shifting into something more solid, true confidence in herself, thanks to Harry's words. A light came back into her eyes for the first time since she had been practicing the standard Force techniques. For a while now, Ahsoka had been dealing with warring emotions, shame at being different, at being passed over, at her messed up view of her own body, all of it warring with pride at how well she could use the Force, how good she was with a lightsaber, the best of her Clan, and a sliver of arrogance at how she had created her own techniques.

Then Ahsoka looked at Harry, cocking her head to one side interrogatively. "Well, Master, that's the lot for me. But while I've shown you everything I can do, aren't you going to show me something too?"

Harry laughed, approving of the fact that Ahsoka had such spirits to her, able to bounce back from a somewhat emotional downturn there and tease him in turn. "Well, I suppose I could walk you through a few different ways to add to that technique. For instance, have you ever tried to change your gender?"

At Ahsoka's wide-eyed look, Harry guffawed, shaking his head. "I will take that as a no. But in that case, there is room for improvement, isn't there? How about entirely changing your race?"

"I can't get my montrals to disappear or something like that," Ahsoka muttered, scowling somewhat at what she thought her new Master poking fun at her. "I've tried."

"Then that is something we will work on. However, perhaps we will find it is impossible. After all, from what I know of that technique, you are more normally born with it, you do not develop Metamorph, that is the name of that skill, over time. So perhaps, doing so means your abilities with it will be more limited. But even so, discovering it for yourself is an amazing achievement, and an excellent tool for investigative work."

Ahsoka nodded, happy at the praise but still wanting to know what her new Master was going to teach her. Sensing this through their link, Harry chuckled, then without any preamble, gestured lazily to one side. A blast of wind thrust out from his hand like a localized hurricane, tearing the ground up in an arc from his hand moving outward in a cone shape.

"... I didn't even feel much of a buildup in the Force!" Ahsoka breathed, staring at the destruction. "How?"

"Use of and creation of elements is one thing I will be teaching you. As for another, I wonder, have you heard about something like this?" A stick soared through the air out of the forest towards them, smacking into Harry's hand. He held it up, concentrating for a brief second. Then Harry was holding a thin spear, its tip sharp enough to actually look like it was glistening.

Ahsoka just stared. "That is amazing! How did, that time I felt the Force surging, but..."

"This is a continuation of the Clan Saa techniques. You need to have built up your ability to imagine things and then sort of superimposing that image on reality via the Force. It takes most Jedi quite a long time to get this. And quite a bit of power as well. After all, what you are basically telling the universe is no, 'what you think is wrong, this is what you really are'. Which takes quite a bit of Force, pun intended."

Ahsoka groaned at the pun, shaking her head. "Master, I think that joke hurt my head more than the time I fell out of a tree headfirst."

"Yes, well, you'll have to put up with my bad jokes occasionally." With that, Harry moved away and into the area of the field he'd cleared with his earlier blast of air. His lightsaber floated off of his belt into his hand as he turned, bringing it up in front of his face in a salute before activating it, then slashing the humming blade of plasma to the side and then back again, his smirk once more on his lips as he stared at Ahsoka's excited expression. "Now for the part that you've been looking forward to, Lightsaber training."

Aayla smiled widely as she hurriedly moved to stand across from him at the required ten feet, almost wiggling in delight. Meditation was bleurgh. New techniques were really cool, especially something like what Master Harry had just shown her. But lightsaber training, that was what she really enjoyed. Almost as soon as that thought hit, however, she scowled, almost glaring at her Master. "Stop that!"

"Stop what?" Harry parroted back, his smirk widening slightly. *My word, is this what Master Fay or Master Dooku felt when they were putting me through my paces? Perhaps I was right all those years ago when I felt that to be a good Master, you had to be a bit of a sadist. I just didn't know that it came included with the job.*

Aboard the Bane in the temple area, Aayla had to excuse herself for a moment before exploding in laughter behind a tree.

"Stop, stop being so amused at me! It's throwing me off!" Ahsoka grumbled.

Harry now chuckled aloud, his smirk turning into a genuine smile. "Padawan, to laugh is part of life. I would suggest you get used to it." He then sobered slightly, shaking his head. "Padawan, Ahsoka, this universe is going through a dark time. Even a padawan like you should have learned about the Veil of the Dark Side, how it is occluding the vision of the Jedi, to say nothing about current events and the war. But just because it is so dark does not mean that we should forget joy, that we should forget happiness. If we do that, in a small way, the Sith will have won without a single shot fired. And I do not believe in giving the enemy even small victories."

He watched Ahsoka nod, and his smile turned sardonic. "Which probably means that I'm going to be laughing at you quite a bit."

Ahsoka looked at him crossly. "I wouldn't have pegged you as a sadist, Master."

Hearing her parrot back his earlier thoughts to him made Harry laughed, which seemed to spur Ahsoka into action. She activated her lightsaber, the green of the blade thrumming in her hand, then launched herself forward. But Harry was on his guard and brought his own white-bladed lightsaber up to block it, watching as Ahsoka used the rebound to flip herself through the air to land nearby, then launched herself forward again, only to roll past where Harry was standing instead, coming up with her lightsaber in her other hand, stabbing backward.

"Neat trick," Harry said, even as he twisted around, blocking the blow without moving, then going on the attack, using the momentum of that block and shifting into a powerful rising strike.

Ahsoka dodged rather than meet the strike, bringing her lightsaber around, only to find Harry's lightsaber interposing itself easily, blocking her again, and forcing her back once more. This went on for a few passes, then Harry realized why Ahsoka was having trouble. "Expand your view of the Force," he ordered, even as their lightsabers flashed and smashed into one another. "You are using your Force Precognition to dictate the best way to attack, not to predict my responses. Expand your senses, search the next few seconds for my actions. With our padawan bond, you should have an easier time of it. Or else," his smirk widened, having already gotten a handle on what would motivate Ahsoka, "our ability to fight together in the future will be next to impossible."

Grumbling, Ahsoka disengaged, cracking her neck to either side as she closed her eyes, concentrating on her connection to the Force.

Harry was almost tempted to go on the attack just then. After all, no opponent would allow her such a moment. But he didn't. This was a learning experience, and that particular lesson could be drilled into Ahsoka's head later. Right now, he just wanted to see everything she could do, and it had been obvious that his Djem So-infused style had startled her somewhat. That wasn't unusual when someone with Ataru ran into the more aggressive, powerful style for the first time in the hands of a person who had mastered and made the style his own.

Eventually, Ahsoka was able to once more center herself in the Force and crouched down, her lightsaber out to one side, the tip of it barely hovering over the ground. "You might regret that Master," she quipped, her predatory teeth showing for a moment in a fierce grin. Then she was crossing the intervening distance, flashing forward in a Force Step before leaping upward and lashing out down with her lightsaber.

Harry blocked it, then sidestepped as she landed behind him, her lightsaber flaring out once more as she finally began to push him for the first time in the fight. The two of them began an intricate dance, Harry moving this way and that while staying on the ground, allowing Ahsoka to dictate the pace, as she began to utilize Ataru to the best of her ability. *Good choice of style at least and Ahsoka's rebound ability is excellent.* He watched as she balanced for a brief second on a tree branch to one side then bounced off to kick off a tree to his other side, stabbing forward.

Decent balance, too, though I will have to test that further.

The rebound was the ability to use a blocked lightsaber blow to flow into your next attack. Balance could be aided by the Force, but it helped to have a good starting point. And Ahsoka had both good balance and an extreme level of flexibility, which she showed by bending

over backward followed by a series of somersaults before doing a split to dodge under one of Harry's strikes, her own sword thrusting, causing him to leap upwards as well.

As the duel went on, Ahsoka became better at reading Harry's movements and attacks, which Harry only launched sporadically. She was very good for her age, Harry decided. Her Ataru was also good. Harry wouldn't be able to teach her anything about that specific style, he mused and Aayla, once more looking through his eyes, agreed that she would take over that aspect of the training.

Saying this aloud was almost enough to throw Ahsoka off-balance, and she blinked even as their lightsabers crossed, having not timed the attack so well that she could use it to flip herself away. "Wait, what? Why would Master Secura be involved?"

"You're ambidextrous correct? That trick with passing your lightsaber from one hand to another like that was good, but also a sign of other things. She also uses Jar'Kai and Ataru. What style do you think I use, Padawan?"

"I thought at first it was Soresu," Aayla admitted, disengaging slightly, then coming in on the attack. "But that isn't quite accurate, is it Master?"

"No, it isn't, although I did start on the defensive. I use an eclectic style, which is what you will find all Jedi Masters utilize who are worthy of being called expert duelists. Each style is more of a guideline for your combat style than anything else. If all you're doing is parroting the movements and forms that someone else has laid down, you are not making that style your own, you are not mastering it!" With that, Harry batted her lightsaber aside, adding far more strength to the riposte than he had previously.

Ahsoka was able to still twirl away, but she found Harry somersaulting beside her, his lightsaber flashing out quickly. She barely deflected his next strike, then was being pushed back hard, being forced to meet his lightsaber blows instead of using them herself, each coming in harder and faster.

"Expand your senses through the Force, predict the strikes and will your body to be there. To quote Master Yoda, in lightsaber combat, there really is only do, or do not. If you only try in a real fight, you will die." Despite the harshness of the words, Harry's voice was calm, even as he pushed Ahsoka so hard she started to sweat despite her training. "Start using Force techniques, too, if you can."

"Right, I'll get right on that Master, as soon as I figure out how to do that and not get hit at the same time!" Ahsoka yelled, completely thrown off by the shift in Harry's stance. She had gotten too wedded to the idea that Harry was defensive-minded whatever she had said a moment ago, and his sudden aggression was well beyond what she had been able to foresee through the Force.

For several minutes Ahsoka could barely keep Harry's lightsaber from cutting into her body, and Harry realized she wasn't going to learn like this. She attempted to reach out to trip or push Harry off-balance, but only once did she create a Force Shield.

Ahsoka's follow-on attempt at a stunning bolt was deflected, and her shield was shattered, but that was enough, Harry decided. *Her Force Precognition needs a bit of work, but I think more situational awareness training would be a better place to begin. That way, she can follow the movement of more than one enemy through the Force.*

A second later, Ahsoka felt the Force grab at her leg. She stumbled, her lightsaber flailing instead of striking, and something smacked into her wrist, a rock from the ground being lifted into her wrist, deadening it, and forcing her hand to loosen around her lightsaber. Harry caught it and deactivated it, flipping it around to hand the shoto-style lightsaber hilt back to her. "Well done for a first attempt," he commented, his breathing even as if they hadn't just exercised for more than forty minutes straight.

Her eyes wide, Ahsoka slowly reached forward and took her lightsaber back. Then after a moment's consideration, she placed it back on her waist. "I sense that we are done with lightsaber training Master," she snarked, now looking at him quizzically, while wiping some sweat off her face.

"You would be correct. I have an idea of how to take your training forward. As I said, your lightsaber training, I'm going to have to turn over almost entirely to Aayla. We'll spar together obviously, but all I can offer you there is experience. Situational awareness training, Force Precognition training, you have a great basis in both, but there is a lot of work that needs to be done there. Now, for meditation training."

Ahsoka groaned but followed Harry obligingly out of the clearing and further out away from the civilization of the landing pad. She was about to ask where they were going, but Harry continued speaking before she could. "Your meditation training will come in two parts. First, will be to meditate on reaching out to the Force as I am certain you have always been taught. Master Fay, however, taught me a different style than most Jedi use, and we will see which variety you are most comfortable with."

"I understand, Master. And the second aspect?" she asked, as she ran alongside Harry towards the distant forest.

"The second half of your meditation will be about yourself. As I said, I won't tell you emotions are wrong, but I will teach you better control of them. And I will **not** allow any self-delusions any longer. Furthermore, concentrating on your mind, organizing it in point of fact, is the first part of defending it."

"You mentioned that before, Master. If I learn to defend myself mentally, do you think, that is, can defenses like that somehow, sieve out the Dark Side from the rest of the Force?"

"That I don't know about, but the ability to keep your thoughts to yourself is a must. Aayla and I dealt with an entire mental assault at one point, and protecting your mind can also protect you from being caught by Sith mind tricks. Possibly up to and including whatever kind of disgusting draining attack they have come up with." Harry shook his head with an air of grim ruefulness. "That isn't exactly something we would be able to test, after all. And, for you, Ahsoka, there might be a secondary need to defend yourself."

"Secondary need?"

Harry stopped at that point, gesturing for her to sit down on a downed tree trunk as he moved on to another one, reaching out with the Force and gently lifting it up slightly. Reaching underneath, he pulled out what he had sensed a moment ago, several mushrooms of a faint light tan color, which he sniffed at experimentally. One of the things the moon was known for, after all, was mushrooms, and Harry could count on one hand the number of times he'd been able to cook with such legumes.

Turning back to Ahsoka, he let the large trunk settle back to the Earth, looking at her thoughtfully. "Tell me. Have you sensed anything between Aayla and me?"

"Of course I have! Your bond is kind of obvious when I'm close to either one of you," Ahsoka exclaimed with an eye-roll. "I think it's kind of cool looking to see, like this band of ever-changing color in the Force."

"Correct, so far as it goes. However, I asked you if you felt anything, any impression of words or emotions between us?"

Ahsoka quickly shook her head. She knew what Harry was talking about, but she couldn't sense anything like that from Aayla and only could do so from Harry when he was projecting a bit.

Seeing that, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, we do not know what our bond, the one between Aayla and I, will do to the padawan bond that is forming between you and me." He looked over at Ahsoka, cocking an eyebrow inquiringly.

Ahsoka's eyes widened, and after a second's thought, Ahsoka found herself blushing as she realized what Harry was implying. "...So mental defenses, right?"

"Exactly." Harry looked at Ahsoka quizzically, waiting for her to say something, but when it became obvious she wasn't about to his brow furrowed. "You're not going to ask about how our connection came about?"

Ahsoka shook her head. "No, Master. I think you already shared about as much as you would be willing to tell me with the rest of the galaxy in your senatorial debut. I saw a recording

of it the day before Master Yoda said I was assigned to you. Anything more personal isn't any of my business."

At that, Harry smiled, shaking his head. "Well spoken. Now, first we will begin with meditation. We have come here into the forest because I wish you to feel out the Force, and then concentrate down onto the Living Force of the forest all around us to find, hmm... let us say the tree behind you."

When Ahsoka looked a little confused, Harry smiled. "Don't worry, when we get to that point, I'll guide you through it. For now, I want you to consider this as a metaphor, or an image designed as a metaphor, rather. Consider the Unifying Force every color under the rainbow, including black, all mixed together. And some of those threads, let's call them, are aspects of the Living Force, the Force contained in living things, including you and I."

"I thought you were talking about the philosophy with the same names for a moment," Ahsoka mumbled, shaking her head. "I've heard that before, the whole 'live in the now, let the Force guide your steps now', rather than looking for deeper instruction and into the future thing. But this is something new."

"It is. Although the difference between the Living Force and the Unifying Force is probably why those two philosophies were named such. Now, come here, and let us begin. Harry gestured at a spot in front of him on the ground of the forest, and with a sigh, Ahsoka sat across from him, putting her legs together in the Indian position as Harry had.

Harry closed his eyes, and Ahsoka did the same as his voice became a deep sonorous mumble. "Close your eyes and concentrate on sending your mind out into the Force. Feel the Force within you, within and without, touch the unifying Force, feel the tug on your senses, merge into the Force, yet remain separate, distinct."

Once Harry was satisfied that Ahsoka could reach out to the Force, he began to ask her questions, questions about specific things in the forest. From there, he walked her through how to connect to the trees, to the animals within, trying to find a specific animal at the same time. This was hard. Working on such a scale was something Ahsoka had never been able to try on Coruscant. And the Force of the forest was very different then what a Jedi would find on Coruscant. They were just as crowded, but here, there were hardly any emotions that Ahsoka could feel out as coming from the animal minds within, no thoughts to crowd into her senses.

Because of this, Ahsoka did not do very well on this experiment, and couldn't find even a single animal inside the forest, let alone the tree Harry had hoped for. But Harry felt half of her problem was that, after about ten minutes, she began to feel antsy. So after forty minutes of meditation training, Harry switched gears. The two of them worked through various physical exercises for a while, helping to use up some of her excess energy.

Harry exercised right beside her, showing his own work ethic and the fact that he would never ask Ahsoka to do anything he wasn't willing to do himself. He didn't 'show off' by finishing quicker or anything like that, simply keeping pace with Ahsoka. It worked too. Harry could feel Ahsoka's respect for him rise, and there was no sense of annoyance or jealousy either. Rather, there was gratitude, especially after a few exercises she had trouble with. Harry was both gentle and patient and then showed her how Ahsoka could do the exercise better.

Balancing training, speed training, practicing Force Jumps, and then physical strength training followed by using the Force to lift up various objects. This went on for an hour, then Harry had her eat an energy bar and a drink followed by more physical exercises for another thirty minutes before Harry began to push Ahsoka through her paces on her metamorphic ability, which was the only thing he couldn't do with her. He had Ahsoka change one aspect of her body, say her height, one way, and another portion of her body another, making her lekku shrink, at the same time. They nearly had an argument when Harry asked Ahsoka if she could make her body look fat, and Harry had laughingly decided to leave that idea for later.

After that, he had her do what was known as the fire burning meditation. In that meditation, the individual imagined a fire and slowly burned off his or her excessive thoughts, leaving only the aspect currently connected to the Force as a whole. This would then allow the Force user to fill their mind with whatever the Force could tell him or her.

After that came more physical exercises: leaping up to various branches while Harry tossed little pinecones at her, or Ahsoka maintained a Force Shield around herself or a boulder on the ground as he attacked it with his own Force thrown boulder.

By the time Harry received a report from Aayla that the evacuation of the planet was complete, and that they should return to the Bane, Ahsoka was more exhausted mentally and physically than she ever had before. Indeed, she collapsed into Harry's arms after one last exercise, groaning aloud as her consciousness started to fade.

Chuckling, Harry carried her easily over to the same downed tree, the trunk that he had found mushrooms under before. "You did good little one, very good indeed." Ahsoka mumbled something, but greedily sucked on the water bottle Harry tipped into her mouth, then slumped against the trunk as Harry gently laid her down.

Leaving her there for a moment, Harry turned away and closed his eyes, reaching out for the Force of the forest, letting it guide his steps for a few minutes. Nearby he found still more mushrooms and began to pick them, wondering what he could make with them. Putting them in a pouch, he returned to Ahsoka and found her fast asleep.

"Now, if I was Master Dooku, I'd splash you with some water and force you to run back to the landing pad. Master Fay, on the other hand..." Harry chuckled, then, using the Force, lifted Ahsoka up into the air and, setting her to hover behind him, headed back.

Ahsoka woke up to an odd smell in the air and blinked, sitting up before groaning. "Ooh, and I thought I was in shape, jeez!" she groaned, grabbing at her stomach, then her hips, then her knees, uncertain which hurt more.

"You are in shape, my Padawan. But there is always room for improvement, and we were exercising your Force powers at the same time. That means you were not moving as efficiently or as coordinated as you should. Don't worry, though, you'll get there eventually."

Smiling brightly at the possessive tone in that, Ahsoka looked up to find Harry, only to realize then that they weren't in the forest anymore. Instead, she, Harry, Master Secura, and a few other Jedi, most of whom Ahsoka had already been introduced to, including the Chironian she had been introduced to that morning, were in a small, extremely neat little sitting room. The Chironian was on his own personal sofa, while Master Secura sat at the foot of a sofa Ahsoka had been laid out on. The other Jedi were scattered around, watching Harry cook in the kitchen, separated from the rest of the sitting room by a low bar. Yoda sat there on a bar stool, his gimer stick resting sidelong on his knees as he sat in a meditative pose.

Normally, Ahsoka would have been asking for introductions or been embarrassed to have been asleep in such august company as the Grandmaster, let alone the other Jedi. But sitting on the bar was a plate of food, some kind of sandwich. At that sight, Ahsoka's stomach gurgled in delight and demand, and Ahsoka reached up to wipe away a bit of drool. "W, what is that, Master?"

"Braised bacon and mushroom sandwiches," Harry said. The bacon in question was actually just large slabs of pork, braised along with various other spices. But the mushrooms were sweet and tender, juicy enough so that there wasn't a need for any kind of sauce, although Harry had provided a dipping sauce just in case.

Hearing his Padawan's stomach gurgling once more, Harry smiled faintly, gesturing with a hand and sending a sandwich onto a plate. Aayla moved over and grabbed it before handing it over to Ahsoka. "Harry worked you over quite hard, didn't he? Don't worry, that was just to see how much you could take. Tonight I'll give you a light massage and help any sore muscles or bruises you've developed. Tomorrow you should be right as rain, and the exercises won't be so hard either."

Nodding in thanks for the gorgeous older Twi'lek's words and the fact she didn't have to stand up just yet, Ahsoka took the plate, then held the sandwich, which was more of a wrap than an actual sandwich, and dipped it into the sauce, ignoring Harry's muttered shout of 'Philistine' for not trying it without sauce the first time, then bit in. The taste hit her a second later, and she gobbled it down greedily, giving him a thumbs up. Ahsoka was used to good food, filling food but simple fair with the Order. Their bread, for instance, was always amazingly tasty. But this was still fantastic, like something she would find in a high-class restaurant.

Harry chuckled at that and then began to ply Ahsoka with questions. How did Ahsoka discover she was ambidextrous, how did she figure out that trick with reversing her grip on the lightsaber, and why? How much daily meditation did Ahsoka do, what kind of mental imagery did Ahsoka normally use, both for that and for her emotional control. Did Ahsoka like the fire exercise, or was she finding it hard?

That conversation continued for a time before Harry was satisfied. The other Jedi eventually also began their own conversations, while Harry explained about runes, although he wouldn't start training Ahsoka in them until she could defend her mind from intrusion. "Knowing such a thing is possible is already dangerous. But I get the impression you're not the kind to be left behind when I leave the ship, so we will have to live with that."

"Too right!" Ahsoka mumbled around her fourth sandwich. "You're my Master, Master Harry, and I am not a little girl who needs to be kept safe! I'm your Padawan, and that bond goes both ways!"

After Ahsoka finished eating, Harry led the way to the room that would now be Ahsoka's. Despite the size of the Bane's interior, the room was small, almost utilitarian, bar the bed, which looked very soft and comfortable. There was her own bathroom, though, and a place for her toiletries, a small series of alcoves and a few other things for her cloak, lightsaber and clothing.

The bed seemed to grab Ahsoka's attention, and Aayla chuckled, putting an arm around the younger girl's waist. "Come on, shower, then massage before sleep. As for you, Harry..." Aayla said, her voice sobering. "You need to say your farewells to Mak and Kass. They are leaving us here."

Harry to sobered at the reminder that two of his friends would be leaving, but they were Jedi, and such departures were part and parcel of the job. "*I just wish I knew more about what they were being compelled to do, to search out for,*" he sent to Aayla even as he patted Ahsoka on the head and turned to leave the two girls alone.

Aayla replied with a feeling of rueful agreement before turning her attention on Ahsoka.

While Aayla was busy with Ahsoka, Harry returned to the small sitting room which he and the Tyrant's Bane's command group used as a gathering center. Kass and Mak were still there, speaking quietly to Master Yoda, describing the vision they were going to start chasing. Yoda listened intently but shook his head. "Hrhrhrhm, vague this vision is. Know, you do not, where you will go. Dangerous this mission is. Impact it will have, uncertain it is."

"We know Master Yoda, but we feel compelled to take it regardless. This, this black spot, this black mark on the galaxy, it is, they are somehow... important. I cannot say it clearer. And the Force is compelling us to leave now, to leave while the shadows you and Harry cast in

our enemies' minds can still cover our actions," the Zabrak Jedi replied, tugging at her long black hair rhythmically, a move she had developed since having her padawan braid cut.

"I agree with her Master. And these black marks, I think they are something from the Sith, something they have..." Mak paused, scratching at his chin, and rolling his eyes at his lover's hiss of disapproval when she noticed he had not shaved that morning. "I hesitate to use the word created, but it feels something like that, physical things perhaps? How I don't know, but that was my impression."

"Hrhrhrhm, impressions, better than most Jedi can get, looking that far ahead. The Veil, suffocating us all it has been. Only the most learned, able to swim its waters." Yoda looked at the returned Harry then back to the other Jedi couple, shaking his head at the fact that he was in the presence of such. After nearly a thousand years of not allowing such attachments, to be in the presence of four who had embraced their emotions to such an extent should have thrown him off, but instead, it simply amused him. *Anticipated, I should have, that humans would be in the center of this. Always so driven by biological imperatives, they are.*

Shaking his head in wry amusement at that thought about the most prolific and diverse of the Republic's thousand-plus races, Yoda pointed his gimer stick at them all. "Yet, a good segue, this is to the reason why I am here. Test, we will, this use of Force Constructs to aid in meditating on the Force." He smiled wryly, jabbing his gimer stick into Harry's side hard enough to draw a yelp as Harry moved past him to shift the sofa against the wall. "And after, teach you something I will. Battle Meditation, it is called. Useful, it will be if master it, you can. Still much to learn you have. Know and recognize this fact, you must to grow."

"So long as training in it won't take up all my time, Master Yoda," Harry warned, rubbing at his side. "I have too many other demands on my time to devote to a new Force technique, no matter how useful. Including training my brand spanking new Padawan," he ended with a drawl, mock-glaring at Yoda. "I have an idea now as to why you assigned her to me, but even so, I can't deny it's going to take up a lot of my time."

Yoda smiled faintly. "Talented, Ahsoka Tano is. Too emotional, too flighty, she also is for most Masters to handle. Told you, Master Koon did. Break her, most Masters would.

In contrast, mold Tano you will, draw out her potential, you shall." He then poked Harry again, much more gently. "A good teacher you proved before. One-on-one, undoubtedly better, you will be. Doubt yourself, you should not, but be prepared to learn as much as teach, you should be."

When Aayla joined them, they all took seats around in a circle, with Aayla and Harry across from one another, Wulo between Harry and Kass, and Yoda between Aayla and Mak, who sat beside Harry. "I have to warn you again, Master, this won't last for long. And while I am fully willing to try and teach you how to create the Force Light Constructs, it is an extremely

power-intensive technique at the best of times, and you need to have the emotions to call on as well."

"Memories help immensely," Aayla added, interjecting her own thoughts on that technique since Harry was trying to explain in a manner that Yoda would understand rather than what they had figured out working on the skill with Master Fay. "A happy memory, a loving memory, lots of them piled onto one another. The more infused with good emotions the memory is, the better to decrease the power necessary."

"Heard this all before I have. Used to disappointment, you too will be, when more than nine-hundred you are," Yoda harumphed, before closing his eyes, reaching out to the Force so easily and quickly that all bar Wulo stared in surprise.

Shaking his head, Harry looked across at Aayla. Their bond flared as both of them reached for certain memories. Memories of love, of affection, of desire and, above all, simple joy in one another. And inside those memories were memories of their times with Padme, the love they shared with her, of their friends, their Masters, his mother, the fierce desire to protect them all. Then Aayla and Harry raised their hands, breathing out as one, "Force Guardian."

From their hands, two large Force Light Constructs appeared in the center of the meditation circle, filling the circle so much that had he wanted to, Yoda could have reached out and touched one. But he didn't, merely letting the feelings wash over him, remembering a time almost two decades back now when he had boarded an embattled training frigate and seen this Construct for but a brief second before the mind which had called it into being collapsed under the strain. *So many things, changed they have since that distant day. Yet fitting it is that we come back to this at the start of a new wave of change.*

He felt Aayla's hand grip his own and smiled slightly while reaching out with one of his own tiny, ancient hands to Mak. Old those hands were, and most thought Yoda's body was physically frail. But Yoda knew that the physical was the least important signifier of true strength, and with his already existing connection to the Force, reached out and pushed. The light of the Constructs flared out in every direction, and the Veil receded, like oil suddenly being pushed off the surface of an ocean to reveal the water underneath. With that, possibilities of the future began to fill the minds of the Jedi in the circle. And yet again, everyone there saw something different.

Mak and Kass saw the same things they had before. Black marks, like black holes only not, for these marks were made on the backdrop of the Force rather than the physical galaxy alone. The two lovers felt them, felt the Dark Side in them, and somehow knew that they would feel them if they got close enough. Beyond that, the Force could only tell them to be very wary of being discovered on their journey, which had to occur **now**. These black marks were very important somehow to the Sith. And they had to be excised, like a cancerous cell from the

galaxy. And again, at the end of the road, the two lovers saw themselves, with Kass holding a half-human, half-Zabrak baby in her arms in a jungle somewhere.

Perhaps because this was the first time Wulo had used this technique, his visions weren't nearly as pointed as those of his four friends. He saw dozens of images of places, a few planets, a few scenes of his being a teacher, something that made him smile. Another image of his walking between Master Lily and a group of younglings as the Force Ghost explained something. And a last, of his standing on the bridge of a capital ship, directing a fleet into action.

That last one was rather odd, Wulo reflected. He wasn't an admiral or even all that good a warrior in general. His mastery of Soresu and Shien was purposeful since his body wasn't nearly mobile enough for a more offensive style. But he figured the truth of that vision would reveal itself in time.

The same could be said for Yoda, as he too saw vision after vision, but unlike Wulo, he had more than nine centuries of experience in discerning the Force, and it's messages. Fleets moving under his command, arguments in the future that had to be won, the threat there, in the shadows as well as right in his face, a certain sign that their concern that C'baoth was not the Sith Lord was correct. Battles, large and small, and planets, images he could use to discover the planets in question, his mind making a picture-perfect image of each planet in turn, one of which was drowned in the Dark Side to the extent that it made Yoda's ears droop even in vision form.

Death, lots of death in the form of the war and the Jedi lives it would consume passed through Yoda's head, followed by an image of a person, a blue-skinned humanoid who was somehow important to the future. Finally, as the Force Constructs began to fade, he saw the danger, the Sith Lord and Yoda himself facing one another on the bridge leading to the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. And at the last, a brighter future won through the actions of Yoda and his fellow Jedi.

As the two who had created the Constructs, Harry and Aayla could not reach out as far as the other four. However, they too saw images, new ones for them, but far fewer in number than for Yoda and Wulo, and easier to discern. One, the first, was the three of them, Harry, Aayla and Padme, in the throes of passion. Nice but not exactly informative. Worse was a vision of a shadow moving towards Harry, with Aayla, Padme, Zule, and Ahsoka of all people getting in its way. Then came an image of Harry, Aayla and Ahsoka fighting through a city somewhere, as, above them, Vulture fighters divebombed them. Another had Harry standing with Master Windu with Anakin and Padme, as Aayla led the *Tyrant's Bane* into battle, a feeling of deep sadness and betrayal flooding out from the image, along with danger from an unforeseen source.

Then they were at the head of a joint army somewhere, troops garbed in white and in tan following their commands, before a sudden feeling of danger washed over them from

nowhere, and the scene changed. Then, a vision of Coruscant, rocked by war, the ecumenopolis shattered in various areas, the Senate district burning. A fleet, huge, strong, massive closing on Corellia. Another fleet, even more dangerous to the galaxy, moving to attack another planet. And finally a battle, a battle against something more shadow than man, followed by two cloaked individuals facing off against Harry and Aayla. After that, the images became too blurred for either lover to make out, the future after that moment too far away for them to be able to discern from this point, too many factors to consider.

When the Force Construct blinked out of existence, the Veil of the Dark Side flooded in once more, and it caused all six Jedi to gasp, shuddering as they came back to themselves, staring around at their fellows as hands fell from where they had all been conjoined. For a moment, they all, even Yoda, were too stunned from the series of images they had seen to speak.

Then Kass looked across at her man and asked plaintively, "Why a jungle? Why the heck would we settle down in a jungle of all things? Why couldn't it have been a city somewhere?" Kass did not like jungles, or even nature all that much. She was very much a city woman, for all that she was a Jedi and disdained creature comforts. She just preferred to be surrounded by the minds of sentients rather than the feeling of nature.

Mak shrugged ignorance, as their friends, and even Yoda, chuckled at that before the blonde man turned to Master Yoda. "Well, Master, what do you think?"

"Believe your vision, I do. My blessing to your mission I give. Import of it, I cannot tell, but tremendous it will be." Yoda smirked suddenly, a very odd expression on his aged face. "Many a tyrant, brought low they have been through the actions of common men, rather than the powerful. Know this, the Sith will soon, I think. More important, your actions will be in the secret war than any we take."

Kass and Mak both bowed from the waist at that, as Aayla, Harry and Wulo added their own words of encouragement.

Yoda then turned his attention to other things. "Learn this technique, I must attempt. Important it could be if use it all the High Council can. But enough already, I have seen." He moved to his feet, feeling weaker than ever physically but mentally alive, like an overcharged bolt of lightning had gone through him, moving over to a chair, hopping into it and grumbling about how soft it was for a few seconds before glaring at the youngsters. "Go. Leave me, you will. Visions, I have. Interpretation, hrhrhrhm, must be worked on now."

Chuckling at the older Grandmaster's moment of irascibility, Aayla led the way to the doorway. *"I suppose that after having such a vision based on so many emotions, the old man has to push back a bit?"*

Harry agreed with that sentiment but then turned his attention to Mak and Kass, who had already turned toward their own quarters here in the crew area of the Bane. The five friends spoke for a time as they moved from room to hanger bay, making certain the two leaving were ready for their journey. They were, and eventually, despite their best efforts, there was nothing more to say.

Aayla flung her arms around both of her friends, pulling them into a hug as Harry and Wulo joined in without prompting. "May the Force be with you," Wulo rumbled for them all. "And may we meet again in brighter times."

"If you need help, remember you can always contact us through the GDL. The word will get to us soon enough if you don't think you'll be able to reach out to us any other way," Harry admonished.

The hug slowly broke apart, and, after a final handclasp, Mak and Kass turned toward their Falcons. Moments later, the hanger bay doors opened, and the two Falcons left, flashing out into the dark beyond.

For a long moment, Harry and Aayla stood there, the Twi'lek mumbling along with their connection about how the Force had been unable to give them a vision of ever meeting their friends again and lamenting that fact. Harry agreed with that but soon turned away, wrapping an arm around Wulo's broad shoulders. "Come on, we'll show you to your quarters. Then we'll get the Bane moving again. This is, after all, only the first planet on our list."

"So, what did you think about my young padawan?" Harry asked mentally later that evening as he and Aayla made to lay down, setting aside, at last, the topic of their departing friends which had consumed them since they had shown Wulo to his quarters. There was scant little they could do now for them though. Kass and Mak had their own journey to complete, and Harry trusted them both enough to know they would see it through if anyone could.

"I think that Ahsoka's been passed over because of how emotional she is, and because of her learning style, maybe? You've battered down her jealousy and annoyance at that, which is a good start. And if I had objected to anything that you put her through today, I would've already said something," Aayla gently reproved, knowing that Harry was a bit worried about how hard he'd pushed Ahsoka today.

And what did you notice about the padawan bond? Harry asked, acknowledging both her words and the feeling behind them. Since it had been Aayla's Force Empathy which had formed the foundation of their own bond, Harry trusted her ability to understand what was going on between him and Ahsoka better than he did himself.

"You were right to be concerned, I think. Although what we can do about it is the question, Harry," Aayla answered, looking faintly amused. *"I can see the bond between you*

forming quickly, and I think you'll have to start pushing the mental defense angle much harder than you did today, and much more quickly too."

With the equivalent of a mental wave of her hand, Aayla and Harry's mental avatars appeared in their mental plane, where Aayla showed Harry to where their mental connection began, the outer shell as it were of the Dark Side of Ryloth, and her own stone space fortress. These conceptual creations were tied together firmly, protected around them by a large shield of energy, several layers of it. No one was getting into either of their minds without them allowing it.

But beyond that, there was something else now. A sort of cloud of flashing lights, like a dense nebula in miniature. It hovered outside, the lights not organized at all, but simply near Harry and Aayla's conjoined mental landscape.

Of course, this wasn't actually what Ahsoka's mind looked like. Rather, it was how Harry and Aayla perceived its presence in the Force from their own minds. Nevertheless, how close it was to the outer edge of their defenses did signify the forming bond between Harry and Ahsoka.

At the sight, Harry's mental avatar flowed out of their minds and into the Force beyond. Reaching out a hand, Harry passed it through the nebula before pulling back his hand quickly as the lights started to congregate there. Returning to his mental landscape where Aayla had waited, Harry nodded. "Yep, that's her all right. So mental defenses then."

Aayla nodded firmly, and the two set out to enlarge their passive mental defenses, the shield thickening as they worked.

OOOOOOO

Anakin and Mace had left Coruscant abruptly because Anakin had a Force Vision, an extremely clear one for once. So clear in point of fact, that Master Windu had felt obligated to help his Padawan make certain that the vision did not come to pass. Because in that vision, Anakin had seen his mother, Shmi, being gunned down in a battle.

Truthfully, Mace was not certain how well his young Padawan would react if Shmi died in such a manner. For all that he had made a lot of headway in many areas, Anakin's anger was still far too likely to boil to the surface when slavery was involved, or someone he was close to was in danger.

Emotional entanglements like that were part of the reason why for so long, the Jedi Order had taken children gifted with the Force from their families as soon as they were found. Mace himself had been taken from his parents before he could walk, although Mace was something of a special case as all people of Korun could use the Force to a certain extent, and he was simply given to the Order because his parents had died in the forest. Worse would be

that with this Force Vision, Anakin had been allowed to prevent Shmi's death in the first place. Failing to save her would be worse than not knowing she was in danger in the first place. Mace knew all that, and moreover, knew that any attempt to try to stop Anakin from saving his mother would cause resentment. So he decided to move with the will of the Force.

Luckily, due to her work with the free slave movement, Shmi Skywalker's whereabouts were almost always known by the Order. The Chain Breakers had moved to an outer rim world, had recently come to light as using slave - the local government called it indentured - labor in their industrial complexes. Anakin's mother and her people had gone there with the intent of training and equipping the local slaves to fight back against the oppressive government, overthrow it, and put in a new one.

That kind of strong-arm tactic wasn't one that the Jedi Order could be involved in unless the government was violating Republic law, and even then only if they were doing so flagrantly. And unfortunately, Republic policy was to leave the issue of slaves up to disparate sectors or worlds. And in this case, 'indentured servitude' was allowed. That hadn't stopped the Order from helping to fund the expedition, however off the books that funding had to be.

Mace and Anakin came out of hyperspace in their Sprites, moving towards Tothis. This planet didn't have much in the way of spaceborne defenses, a few old CloakShape starfighters here and there, a few sensor platforms, and five large, almost Lucrehulk sized, transport vessels. The transport vessels were reading as belonging to Outer Expanse Enterprises and from what Master Windu's sensors had to say, they weren't visibly armed. But still, he warned his Padawan not to take that for granted. "They wouldn't be the first corporate-owned ships we've run into that disdained such rules after all," he ended wryly.

"Roger that Master," came Anakin's response, but hearing the younger man's tone, Master Windu sighed. It was quite obvious that his young Padawan was not concentrating on the here and now, rather what they would find below.

However, such was Anakin's skill with piloting that when the attack came from one of the large ships, he instantly evaded. Quad laser fire began to try and bracket them before they reached orbit, as a voice shrilled out over the radar at the Two Jedi. "Attention, Jedi! You are not welcome here. This planet is under Corporate control and does not recognize your authority to interfere in its affairs! Leave, or you will be shot down!"

"Well, I think that was a definitive response." Mace shook his head, peeling off and heading towards the ship, dodging incoming quad laser fire. "Anakin, can you get a read on where on this planet your mother might be?"

Anakin followed him in, his movements rapid and quick, as he fired up from every angle around Mace's starfighter towards the enemy starfighters. Linked laser blasts flashed out all around Mace to take out the CloakShape fighters that had just boiled out of the other ship in orbit.

Mace let him to it, knowing that Anakin was more than good enough to guard his back whatever the environment. Instead, Mace stayed focused on getting in close so he could target the ship's engines with his Sprite's weapons. The Sprite was decently armed for its size, but these ships were large, and while their shields seemed weak, their armor might not be, so he wanted his blow to count.

Four CloakShape starfighters exploded in as many seconds, with Anakin using only one concussion missiles on the last, his souped-up laser cannons drilling through the others at weak points in their shields. These CloakShape fighters were obviously not very well-maintained, he reflected, before reaching out with the Force trying to find Shmi. But as well as Anakin knew her, Shmi was not a Force Sensitive, and thus did not stick out from the masses below at this range enough to narrow down where she could be beyond which city.

"Only vaguely Master, I think I found her in one of the cities, but beyond that, and a lot of emotions down there, I can't make out much," he confessed. Those emotions were apathy, hate, concern, and growing fear, which served to spurn him on even faster.

Mace didn't reply, having flown underneath the ship and into a dead zone, proving as always that ships which had been retrofitted never were as good as ships that had been designed for combat. He launched his concussion missiles instantly, firing into the shields simultaneously in a steady fusillade of laser bolts. One concussion missile finished taking down the shield, and the other one crashed in, proving that the ships didn't have the armor that Mace had been where worried about. The large ship's engines exploded, taking with it more than half of its bulk, the other half exploding in turn, turning the ship into a fireball as Mace twisted and turned around one hundred and eighty degrees in space, coming back along the same pathway he had followed towards the ship.

In so doing, he took several CloakShapes under fire that been moving up behind Anakin from on high, destroying two, and sending the other one into a wildly evasive maneuver. This ended as Anakin flew through the fireball of the exploding ship, having used the Force to feel out a safe route through the debris with bare centimeters to spare at its shields flared into nonexistence from the released gases of the explosion. Coming out of the other side with no actual damage to his ship, Anakin twisted up in a longer turn, coming back towards the other starfighter. Two paired blasts of lasers took its shields down, and a third got the ship.

"Attention, local space defense ships, I am Master Windu of the Jedi Order," Mace announced into his pickup. You are a planet of the Republic, and as such, are signatories to the Republic's rules and regulations. Even if we had not been here for Jedi Order business, you would still have no right to fire upon us instantly as you did. As such, you will stand down. Do I make myself clear?"

"Wow, Master, I love how you can threaten someone and still make it sound so official. I especially like the fact that you didn't tell them something like 'and you have already seen the

folly of your actions'," Anakin snorted, a fierce grin on his face. He always felt more alive after a fight, especially a dogfight, although this one was small and kind of disappointing.

"It is a talent, Padawan," Mace replied, smirking slightly then becoming serious. "Go, Anakin. Your mother is down there. You have enough of a sense to guide you. I will deal with the remaining locals and join you in a moment."

Anakin breathed in deeply then told his ship towards the atmosphere, whispering out, "Thank you, Master!"

An instant later, Anakin's Aethersprite smashed into the atmosphere, pointing downwards at a slightly steeper angle than it should have. The starfighter quickly started to heat up, so much so that Anakin saw a few of his sensors start to flash in warning. But as he had predicted, his shields were soon back online, diffusing the heat that had previously been hitting his starfighter, and he continued his dive down towards the city where Shmi was.

Anakin barely took in the view as he did so, and in reality, it wasn't exactly a good view anyway. Industrial complexes were built around a strip mine, the strip mine being a deep jagged hole in the ground. The buildings were massive, almost two-hundred stories tall, but most of them were just blocky segments, industrial complexes built one on top of another.

Staring at them, Anakin frowned, making a note to ask Shmi when they met what they were making here. Those kinds of huge factories had to be building something equally massive, didn't they? Or something small in **large** numbers. But this planet wasn't known as a major provider of anything, or at least Anakin didn't think so.

As he moved through the skyscraper-like factories, Anakin was also searching out with the Force for Shmi, but not having any more luck than he had before. The emotions of the people around her were roiling with far too many emotions, and there were far too many minds in a small place getting in the way of him finding one specific mind. It was only as he descended to around the 14th story that he began to finally pick out where Shmi was.

And as soon as he did, Anakin knew that she was also in trouble. The worry and concern and growing fear that he felt rise through Shmi acted on Anakin as if someone had just injected a surge of caffeine into his brain.

Twisting the joystick around, Anakin dove and dipped to one side, coming around two buildings so fast his passage shattered windows, then diving through an opening in one, ostensibly for some kind of shuttle to carry something up to orbit. There was another opening on the other side a few stories down, which Anakin also through flew through, not even noting how he had been forced to fly around several large machines housed within the building.

Outside between factory buildings, Anakin found himself hovering over a firefight. A group of sixty-plus black-suited and armored individuals had taken up a position overlooking

the main street along a walkway and were firing down into a mass of what Anakin took to be workers, many of whom were armed but who couldn't fire back given the angle and the walkway's wall protecting the attackers above them. Ahead of them, an entrance to another building had seemingly closed in their faces, while behind the Chain Breakers another group of people, who looked more like thugs and ruffians than anything else, had just rounded the corner of one of the buildings.

Snarling, Anakin sent a concussion missile down into the group of black armor troopers, the concussion missile exploding and killing the majority of them while shattering the walkway, dumping the few who lived down into the street below. He then twisted around, taking the ruffians under fire with his lasers. But instead of retreating as they should have, they had already begun to fire into the crowd from behind. Where there was no cover and very few people between them and Shmi.

Anakin gasped as Shmi was hit, screaming out, **"No!"**

High above, Master Windu winced as a reverberation through the Force hit him. Fear, despair, grief, shock, and now, rising anger and hatred blasted out from his Padawan in even larger amounts than when he had found the slave children those months back. "Oh, no!" He breathed out before cutting his conversation with a few of the local off as he twisted his starfighter down towards the ground, like his Padawan before him relying on his starfighters shields to protect him as he went right down.

He arrived on the scene to see his Padawan using his starfighter to gun down hundreds of fleeing thugs, screaming in anger, before nearly ramming his ship into the ground and leaping out in a Force assisted jump to land in the middle of several more. Master Windu, mindful that they might need to leave this planet very quickly, set his own starfighter down more gently. He had barely exited his ship when another flash of raw anger hit him. Breathing deeply, Master Windu prayed to the Force that his Padawan would not lose it entirely, racing forward.

There he found Anakin slicing into what must have been some of the survivors from an earlier moment in the battle among the police force of the planet. They looked more like shock troops than police in Mace's eyes, but that didn't matter at all to lightsaber wielded by a Jedi like Anakin. He barreled through their fire before hacking them to pieces.

Then as Mace raced toward him, Anakin twisted around, coming back towards what Master Windu took to be the survivors of the Chain Breakers and their armed local compatriots. "And you!" Anakin howled, "What were you doing! Why didn't you save her!?"

"We, we didn't even know those other thugs were going to be here at all! We had our hands full with the troopers! We couldn't watch behind as well," stammered one of them, who Mace realized was captain Maddox, one of Shmi's chief men.

The man found himself flung through the Force by Anakin, slamming into a wall as Anakin advanced on the others, his lightsaber blazing in one hand. "You should have! Because of you people and your incompetence, my mother is dead!"

"That is enough, Anakin!" Mace barked sharply, getting between them.

Anakin's anger recoiled, and for a moment, Mace hoped he would control himself. But that feeling faded as Anakin attacked, his green lightsaber crashing into Mace's upraised purple lightsaber, shouting out in anger with each blow he assaulted Mace with. "And you! We should've been here sooner!? We should have..."

That was as far as he got before Mace, Vaapad singing through him, quickly overwhelmed Anakin's abilities with the lightsaber, so lost in fury was Anakin he wasn't even reaching out to the Force, merely boiling with it instead of directing it. Trapping Anakin's saber to one side and wheeling in, Mace landed a blow that slammed into Anakin's chin, jarring him back. "Control yourself, Anakin! Do not give in to your anger, do not blame those who are blameless! Do you think your mother would want you to blame her compatriots for her death, or those who actually did the deed?"

The combination of the blow and Master Windu's words finally got through to Anakin, and he stumbled backward, his lightsaber turning off in his hand, as he dropped it to the now almost silent battlefield with a clamor. Without a word, he turned, racing over to where Shmi had collapsed.

He had felt her life fade as she had been hit by three of the blaster bolts but still cradled her like a child, as he began to rock in place, holding his mother's head against his chest.

Seeing this, and grimly certain that this had pushed Anakin's self-control back several years, Mace moved over, placing a comforting hand on his padawan's shoulder. With his other hand, he used the Force to twitch Anakin's lightsaber up to him, placing it on Mace's belt for a moment. Given the earlier outburst, and the barely contained grief and rage that he could still sense within his Padawan, he in no way wanted him to have a weapon in his hand right now.

He looked around, then noticed Maddox was on his feet again and beckoned him forward with a finger. The man had already begun to organize his fellows, keeping a wary eye on Anakin as he did, completely unnerved by the man's earlier outburst. He came forward hesitantly, nodding at Master Windu. "Master Windu, thank you for..."

"Save it," Master Windu said, interrupting him gruffly as he felt Anakin's anger almost surging to the surface. He clamped down hard on Anakin's shoulder and looked at the other man, gesturing to one side of the street. "Them, those thugs, where did they come from? Are they just paid thugs that the local government uses to break up any attempt by the workers to organize themselves, or was there something more involved here?"

"I, I don't know. We'd been starting to gather sympathizers and troops among the locals, arming them and everything else. We were very close to having enough to maybe take the fight to them here in Acoria." Acoria was likely the name of the city, Mace mused. "We've been getting pushback, of course, but we had defeated several groups of police like this one."

Maddox gestured in the other direction to the black-clad group of bodies. "The corporation has never used such toughs before. Indeed, the local government is death on anyone going around armed beyond their police bully boys. They call them Black Clads. So I have no idea where they came from. But if not for someone breaking our lockout code on that door, we could have gotten away clean."

Maddox paused as Anakin glared up at him, his eyes red-rimmed through holding back tears. After a moment, another man came up behind him, a Twi'lek male, who gestured around the corner of one of the buildings nearby. Nodding, Maddox looked at the two Jedi as he explained. "A few of my men just said that they had a prisoner. If you want..."

Anakin slowly stood up, looking down at Shmi's body, then up at the man. "Take care of her," he stated simply, his voice leeching of all emotion. "She will be buried with as much dignity as we can manage, is that understood?"

The other man nodded, looking mildly affronted. As if they would do anything else for the woman who had started their movement. "Of course," he answered, holding back any hot retort he might've felt, especially after being tossed around by the Jedi's strange powers a moment ago.

"Anakin," Mace warned, moving to stand in front of his Padawan, staring at him. "Find your center. Find your inner peace."

"I don't have any of that to spare right now, Master," Anakin retorted coldly. "Get out of my way."

Mace just stared back, not moving at all, and eventually, it was Anakin who looked away, before he began to breathe in almost angrily, but Master Windu whispered, "Your center Anakin, find your center. The Jedi serve justice. Your mother deserves **justice**. Not vengeance."

A hiss like that of a snake came from Anakin's mouth as he released a breath and with it much of his tension. He stood there for several moments, just breathing in deeply and out in long exhalations as his entire body quivered with repressed anger, slowly disappearing. He finally looked at his Master and nodded, and after searching the younger man's eyes for a few moments, Master Windu nodded as well. That looked as if it was the best he was going to get to. Not very good, but not horrible. *He won't kill anyone in cold blood, at least. Not yet. Force damn it.*

He allowed his Padawan to go before him, walking behind him, towards the supposed prisoner.

The man in question was a Shistavanen who snarled and growled at his captors, all of whom backed away slightly, but kept their rifles trained on him. There were several of them all around him, as it was obvious that the man might well otherwise have gotten away, killing a few of them in the bargain.

This ended as Anakin strode between the others, grabbing the man in a Force Grip around the waist. He's stumbled and then stared as Anakin and Mace walked towards him. The sight of their lightsabers caused his ears to flatten on his skull, and the snarl on his lips disappeared, as he watched the two of them warily, almost crouching down. The flight instinct was now fully in effect, Mace thought, with a certain remote sense of grim humor.

"You will answer our questions, or you will be turned over to the locals for their own sense of justice. Since you are just involved in an attempt to kill the local freedom movement, I rather doubt they are in any mood to be merciful," Mace spoke aloud before Anakin could say anything.

The Wolfman snarled but said nothing for a few seconds looking from one Jedi to another. Whatever he saw in Anakin's face, despite Anakin's threadbare self-control, made him quail further. "G, Guarantee my freedom, I will tell you what you want to know."

"Tell us what we want to know, and I won't use my lightsaber to hack you into pieces and watch you die an agonizing death," Anakin countered. Mace looked at him sharply at that but did not gainsay him as he did not sense anything from Anakin that indicated he was close to losing it once more.

"You are Jedi, you would not do this."

"One of the dead from your attack on these people was my mother," Anakin snarled, using the Force to pull the Wolfman towards him until he was a bare six inches away from him, staring up at the taller being, ignoring its rancid breath, as his eyes bored into the Wolfman's. "You would be astonished at what I am and am not willing to do right now."

"...This planet, the corporation who owns it. They are owned in turn by the Hutts. This planet supplies the Hutts with much of their proton torpedoes and concussion missiles, and even much of their blaster packs are made here. When word reached them of the Chain Breakers coming here, to free the indentured servants."

"Slaves," Anakin interrupted, his fingers twitching. "They were slaves. Something that someone of your species should be against, I would've thought."

The Wolfman snarled, regaining some of his confidence as he replied. "My people are not slaves! If the week cannot defend themselves, they have no rights to their so-called liberty."

"So the Hutts knew Shmi was coming here," Mace said, his voice a dagger slicing through Anakin's rising anger, redirecting it. "And this planet supplies much of that material, you said? Then I think we need to get in touch with the Republic and have a Republic force here soon, and then we will begin investigating this corporation. If one such planet they own is sending material to the Hutts, others might be doing the same."

The Wolfman, however, wasn't listening to him. He wasn't even looking at Anakin any longer. With his enhanced senses, he had begun to hear something in the distance and had turned away entirely, scowling.

Anakin and Mace also turned in that direction as soon as a second later, both frowning as they felt rising fear and trepidation among the rest of the populace of the city. A second later, sirens began to blare throughout Acoria, although several of those closest to the fighting had been deactivated at some point or another.

Anakin turned to one of the locals who had been armed by the Chain Breakers. "What does that alarm mean?" he asked.

The emancipated worker, a Muun, shook his head, staring in the same direction as the others were now. "That's the air raid alarm, Master Jedi. When you hit the atmosphere it was on for a brief moment but then cut off. What it's doing on now, I have no idea."

Anakin frowned, looking over at his Master. "I had convinced the locals to cooperate with us, hence why that alarm stopped. What it is doing back on, I too do not..."

Above them, starfighters began to appear, too far high up for anyone to make out precisely what they look like. However, reaching out with the Force, both Jedi could not discern any natural intelligence among them, and Anakin winced, concern beginning to overwhelm anger. "If those aren't droid fighters, I will eat my robe."

"I didn't know you needed more fiber in your diet," Master Windu said dryly, also staring above him. "I think we should all get undercover now."

Moments later, this proved to be a very forward-thinking policy, as dozens, then more than a hundred droid starfighters began to move through the upper works of Acoria. Soon they began to descend.

Using the Force, Master Windu was able to basically push his starfighter into one of the buildings nearby, whose entrance had remained open during the battle.

Anakin wasn't so lucky. He had to hop back up to his starfighter and had issues with starting it. This almost got him caught before Anakin was able to do the same, using the repulsors to float up to the second story where he had initially come out from the building over the firefight, reentering it and dropping down through the machinery to land on the third story of the building, the first floor which he felt would take the Sprite's weight.

For a few moments, Anakin thought he had been spotted as a few of the droid fighters began to hover over the area. Then, he realized that the rest of the freedom fighters had left most of their dead and that of their enemies behind. Only Shmi's body had been taken away by Maddox and a few of the other Chain Breakers.

Mace joined them there, climbing up the staircase from below, looking around him in interest. "A concussion missile factory below, and a proton torpedo factory on this floor. They probably were not making very many in comparison to the more major distributors in the Core Worlds, but then again, the Hutts probably didn't need all that many."

Just then, the droid fighters outside all began to blare out the same message. "Attention, attention, citizens of planet Tothis. You are now under the management of the Confederacy of Independent Systems. You will submit. You will go about your duties, you will no longer rebel. Attention..."

Anakin sighed, leaning against the side of his starfighter as he looked over at his Master, confusion and a new level of uncertainty as to what they should do, finishing the job of dispelling his anger for the moment. "What should we do, Master?"

"That will depend on what they have in orbit. If it is a single Lucrehulk or a smaller ship, perhaps the Confederacy have not brought all that many troops, and we will be able to create a local resistance to overthrow them. If it is more, however..." Mace shook his head. "One thing as a soldier, you have to get used to is something that, as a Jedi, you would find anathema. Some battles are not worth the price. This one has already cost you dearly, and if they just have enough troops to flood the streets, the Confederacy troops would eventually overwhelm us."

Soon a few of the freedom fighters joined the two Jedi, one of them talking into a radio to someone else while the others started to explain the organization that they had already begun here. Unfortunately, their movement had only been on Tothis for two weeks. That wasn't enough time to really get the word out about them among the locals. It had been enough to cause the government of the planet conniptions, but they weren't at the point where they could control a planetwide insurrection. "We might be able to stir Acoria up against its oppressors, but he can't guarantee that other cities across Tothis would follow us," the man finished with a sigh.

"We'll keep trying, though," one of the other locals growled. "I am not going back to work in those damn factories, not for the Corporation, not for the Hutts, not for the Confederacy."

"Not unless they start paying us what our work is worth instead of holding our indentured status over our heads and stop cutting so many corners in terms of how safe they are," cut in one of the others hurriedly.

Soon it became apparent that the Confederacy had brought too many troops to the game. They started to land what amounted to an army spread out across Tothis, in division-sized portions to maintain order. Furthermore, a Confederacy Commodore began to broadcast over the local TV and radio.

"The ills of the Republic have ended on this planet! We are relaying new contracts for every worker here and are willing to provide transportation eventually once our grip on this planet is secure to other Confederacy worlds. There will be no more indentured servitude here, there will be no more slavery here. But you will be asked to keep working in the factories. This planet is needed to support our war efforts, and that need must be met. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, and everyone must sacrifice for victory."

Grimacing as he heard that, Anakin looked over at Master Windu, his face dyspeptic of hearing such talk from a group that included the Trade Federation. *And come to think of it, didn't the Commerce Guild also help shoot down the latest anti-slavery bill a few years back?* "What do you think of that, Master?"

"I think that is going to sway a lot of the less combative members of the planet's population away from open revolt," answered one of the freedom fighters instead of Master Windu. "Hells, I would wager that a lot of even the most diehards are going to be swayed by that. Getting paid, being fed full meals, if you can get those things, you're just a worker, not a slave."

"Which means that most of this planet's infrastructure is going to be turned on the Republic?" Mace stated rather than asked.

"A minuscule addition to the concussion missiles and proton torpedo production, but yes, that isn't a good thing, I suppose," Maddox sighed. "And how many ships do they have in orbit?" he asked one of the locals, the one who had been on the radio since he had joined them.

"Six Munificent class ships, and four troop transports."

"Too many for us to fight then," Anakin scowled, then his eyes narrowed. "At least in an open engagement." He looked over to the casket that the locals had prepared for Shmi, his scowl deepening. "I want to stand and fight, Master. I think we could make a difference here."

"I do not believe we can," Master Windu said with a shake of his head. "not with the Chain Breakers having been on-planet for so short a time."

"Still, we are stuck here, so we might as well make the best of it. If the separatists are here for this planet's industry, I think we need to remove it, don't you?" Anakin asked guilelessly.

"I think we need to escape before someone tells them there are two Jedi here," Master Windu said with a shake of his head. "The moment they know that we will be forced to fight for our lives, and with air superiority, even with the Force that is a battle we cannot win."

To one side, Maddox scowled but nodded. At this point, his own people would have to cut and run. They weren't Jedi, so they might actually be allowed to go free so long as they moved quickly. The Confederacy, after all, hadn't outlawed the Chain Breakers. Indeed, some of the money the group used had come from Separatist parties.

"Leave that to me, Master. I'll create a diversion, and we'll be able to get off-planet quickly enough."

"You'll create an explosion," Mace retorted, looking at his Padawan wryly. "I know you."

"Master, you wound me," Anakin said beatifically, a ghost of his normal humor resurfacing before drowning in grief as he saw the coffin containing Shmi.

Near midnight, Acoria was rocked by a series of explosions, as several of the concussion missile and torpedo factories exploded. Conflagrations rose up through the factory buildings, showing that, as the workers had said, they hadn't exactly been made to safety standards. Droids and locals both went to work immediately to help contain the fires, but the fires still spread, and more factories exploded.

Out of one particular fireball near the edge of the city, two Aethersprites flew. They raced on for several hours, hugging the ground until they were well away from Acoria and the ships in orbit over the capital city.

Then they broke for space, exiting the upper atmosphere just as the Confederacy ships began to cotton on that something had streaked out of the initial series of explosions and launched Vulture Fighters to swamp the orbit of Tothis. The Vultures that could get in position to stop the two Jedi were not up to that job, and they blew through them without stopping.

"You see, Master? Explosions do work all the time."

"You are a master of the application of explosions, Anakin, I will admit," Mace drawled, shaking his head then went on hesitantly. "We, we will discuss your mother when we return to Coruscant. You will have to go through a long period of meditation and mental training before I agree to take on another mission. You understand why do you not?"

"Yes, Master," Anakin answered, guilt and remembered hate warring in his tone. "I know I need to work on my control even more after this."

On top of those emotions there was something new in Anakin's voice that had not been there before, a sense that he was just saying the words rather than believing it. Mace decided to put that down to Shmi's death being still too prominent in Anakin's mind, but even so, his concern for his Padawan redoubled, and he made a promise to himself that Anakin would not be leaving the temple anytime soon. Not until his anger had been completely dealt with. They would have to miss out on the first few months of the war, maybe even a whole year. *But I will not allow Anakin to fall to the Dark Side. I will not!*

OOOOOOO

Within a week of leaving Coruscant behind, two more Agri-corps-run worlds were evacuated of the Force Sensitives stationed there. At each stop, loading the Force Sensitives took most of a day, the locals not having their own space-going shuttlecraft. One planet took three days, however, as it was only controlled by the Jedi Order, not entirely populated by the Jedi: a colony of humans and others had made their home on the planet, wanting to go back to the soil, live simple lives away from the Republic and its high technology.

Of course, this didn't mean they were entirely cut off from the rest of the galaxy. And even with Wulo's previous work, when it came time for the Jedi to leave, many of the locals found themselves no longer willing to go along with things. Convincing them to not call home for a few weeks about the sudden change in leadership proved impossible, and Wulo was forced to destroy the planet's Hypercom rather than leave it in the hands of the other inhabitants of the planet. That didn't win them any friends among the populace, but the planet did have the parts necessary to repair the Hypercom in time. Eventually.

Wulo and Yoda, however, were the ones dealing with that aspect. Beyond giving a few speeches to assembled Jedi and crowds of former younglings who had washed out, Harry had about as little to do with the nearly four thousand newcomers to the ship as he could. Not because he wasn't interested or didn't want to get involved with them, but because Harry had far too many other demands on his time.

In general, those demands came under four headings. First, was working with Aayla and the Green Jedi that had already learned about runes to finalize a few projects around the Tyrant's Bane the ship. This was interesting and fascinating, and necessary, as it made the ship even more dangerous than it already was. Thankfully it didn't take their time up as much as the rest of what they were up to. Harry and Aayla had to sign off on the runic arrays and agree that this Green Jedi or that was up to teaching runes to the newcomers, but that was generally it.

In contrast, the next thing taking up their time was a time consumer: checking in on the war.

In this, Harry surprised many of his admirals and feature commanders by not attempting to micromanage. When one of them, the Green Jedi Master Ify Po, a Drall, actually commented on this, during a Hypercom-held meeting, Harry simply shrugged his shoulders. "Even with the Force, I'm not going to be operating on real-time data of any battlefield we could mention, let alone the overall campaigns going on. Why would I try to make your lives miserable, and my own life miserable by taking that kind of pressure on myself?"

Thus Harry had arrived at the same decision that Dominus had, albeit from an entirely different perspective. The Sith who had been Jorus C'baoth wanted to be in charge of everything but knew that in so doing, he would not be able to do anything to the same level of competency as was needed. Harry didn't want to be in charge of anything and knew that attempting to do so would be counterproductive at best.

However, that did not mean that Harry wasn't doing anything beyond taking part in meetings. For one thing, Harry and Aayla pushed hard for Bel Iblis and his Admirals to integrate the new planets, systems and sectors that had wanted to join the GDL since they had spoken in front of the Senate into their overall command structure. They both met via Hypercom with those local leaders, doing their part to help convince them that their senators had been correct, that the GDL was a viable alternative to the centrist platform of more centralized government or the separatist public platform of dividing the Republic entirely.

In this manner, several more brought their local defense forces, which were of a decent size and industrial capacity, which was a major help, into the GDL. In return, the GDL provided them with the building materials for the Golan Defense Platforms, and the plans for the Arrowhead fighters and even the Archer missile frigates. That design was now being built in many different systems, although more of them were still coming out of Serenno than anywhere else. Or that was the plan for the Colonies Sector that had joined anyway.

For the Inner Rim sector, which didn't have much in the way of industry – not enough industry to be known for producing anything but more than enough to look after most of its own need – but did have manpower, the deal was different. More in the way of defenses for one. Several expansion-enhanced transport ships loaded with planetary shield generators from Corellia had already been sent into the Sector in question. In return, the local governments began a massive recruitment campaign to get their young people into a GDL uniform.

By this point, Harry was an old hat at conversations like these, organizing things like this while the military side was ably handled by Master Yaddle and several of Bel Iblis' aides. Yaddle would talk with each local admiral or the equivalent, give her impression to the aides, and then the newcomers would be given new ranks, and their fleets – most of which were more flotilla-sized in terms of firepower and ship size– were slotted into the GDL's order of battle. Any hyperspace capable capital ships were broken off from their existing fleets, sent to serve with larger groups of ships from members of the GDL which had already proven trustworthy.

Starfighters were retained in the home system or sector, but most such were quite horrible designs or cobbled together homegrown varieties that wouldn't stand up in a real battle. The capital ships were similar, if normally somewhat better designed. But few were worth their weight in a battle line, really.

They had a system for everything involving these conversions by this point. Even incorporating the local intelligence apparatus, which Yaddle and a Corellian lady named Sena Leikvold Midanyl who had come with Bel Iblis, handled.

However, system or no, one conversation during this time definitely stood out to Harry and Aayla as being important. At the time, they were talking to Lord Protector Donovan McNair, of the Sertar Sector, an Outer Rim Sector of around thirty worlds and twenty or so systems. Harry had thought the term Lord Protector a bit too arrogant but found the man himself a hard-bitten diplomat and politician, who was not given to putting on airs. He was a hard worker who was always looking for ways to bring in more money and material to his hardscrabble frontier sector.

The only system in the whole sector worth anything was Ord Dalet, one of the Ordinance System Depot Worlds kept up and maintained by the Republic. But even there, like most such systems beyond the Colonies region, their fleets had been downsized tremendously in the centuries of peace. Now the planet was home to a large cache of weapons and ordinance that the sector didn't have the ships to use. So Harry and he had agreed to bring in a full fleet that would use the system as their real home, moving the material out over time while emplacing a starfighter factory and training center, along with several planetary shield generators for Dalet and the few other planets with the energy grids to run them.

He was also very aware that the Outer Rim worlds, even those who joined the GDL, were mostly type one or type two worlds and thus targets of opportunity for the Confederacy. They were so small they couldn't defend themselves, or just big enough to be important enough to bring in a real attack. While he accepted the idea of the GDL's strategic plan, he didn't want to see any of his planets sacrificed on that altar.

So near the end of the discussion, Donovan asked what was being done to go on the offensive.

"At the moment, scant little," Harry admitted. "We're still building up our truths troop strength and will be for months if we don't see a severe reversal. More particularly, we're building up our capital ship strength. We just can't match the Republic or even the Confederacy in that area. Furthermore, even if we had the strength, we lack targets. Perhaps if we had a target, I would still authorize a strike, something that could hurt the Confederacy and make them devote more of their fleets to defense, but we just don't."

"We could start hitting their homeworlds, the homeworlds of the members of the Confederacy," Aayla added, this being an argument they'd had with Garm before hostilities

even broke out. "But while those would be sentimental targets, we're not certain how important those planets are to their war effort. But we would prefer to hold off until we can target something really important."

"So, it is intelligence that we are lacking," Donovan mused. "I mean, only time and effort can help us with the numbers problem. But intelligence, that is something that we can do something about, in a way."

"Not really. Again, it's a matter of time. We have a crackerjack counterespionage agency, which is why we've been able to surprise the Confederacy with our defenses so often. But we don't have an actual espionage force of our own, not a good one, and not a large one in comparison to the size of the Confederacy." Harry admitted. "At this point, we're better served just using our hit and run tactics and making life miserable for any fleet that attempts to take a GDL planet."

"Ah, I didn't mean you or the GDL. I was talking about myself because I might have a suggestion on that score if you would be willing to hear it." When Harry indicated he would at least hear the man out, the Lord Protector went on. "Recently, a pair of information brokers have come to my attention. They are ostensibly criminals, but they don't seem to like the Confederacy and helped us stomp out a spy ring here on my planet, as well as one of the local crime lords who was willing to work with the Confederacy and who had been instigating riots in their favor. The two of them, a man and woman pair, seem to have access to a far larger organization, something akin to the defunct Black Sun perhaps, or something similar at any rate. If word is sent to them that we would pay for information along those lines, they might be able to help us."

"What do they look like?" Aayla asked before Harry could.

The feeling of her sudden, laser-like attention on that point startled Harry, and he looked at her in confusion as he asked mentally, *"Aayla, what do you sense?"*

"Something about the way he said 'a man and woman' Harry, it rang a bell in my mind. Now shush."

Rolling his eyes mentally, Harry tuned back into Lord Protector, who had just finished the description of the woman, who didn't match anyone Harry knew. Donovan described the man next and that description: black-haired, shaggy, almost dirty hair down to his shoulders, with the mark that Harry recognized as that of a Kiffar on his face. Minus the rest, which could be a disguise, of course, he matched Quinlan Vos, Aayla's former Master.

The mental conversation at that point became fast and furious for a moment, with Harry wondering what the two were up to that they had become known information brokers, while Aayla believed that was merely a cover for them to be able to pass on information to Harry and Aayla, who were, despite at the moment being on a side mission, a quite visible pair. *"This way,*

they don't have to leave off their investigation of the criminal elements and their interactions with the Sith to contact us, Harry," she said excitedly. "We need to follow this up."

"Not we," Harry said, before sending a feeling of calmness through their shared link. *"You and I are **visible**, you just said it yourself. We also have other things we need to be doing. Completing this mission for one, and then moving on to more later on."* He waited to feel Aayla's reluctant agreement with those statements before moving on. *"But I agree we do need to contact them."*

"Would you be willing to be our middleman with them?" Harry asked aloud after several moments of seeming cogitation. "We could easily transfer the credits or whatever they want in recompense for their services?"

"Certainly, but I do not think we should transfer information along the Hypercom until we are certain that doing so will not be intercepted. If you wish to go on the offensive, any hint of your chosen target getting out would not be a good thing," Donovan replied, stating a simple fact.

"True. We will send a courier to you, a fellow Jedi. He will have GDL access passwords, and before the meeting, we can work out some measure of a personal password between you and the two of us just in case. Will that suffice?"

"It would indeed, so long as those fleets of yours get here in time. With the Sluissi Sector so close, and with Malo IV having already turned them away, the Confederacy might be looking to regain some of their swagger, as it were. And my joining you will put a target on my peoples' collective back the moment it is known."

"Count on it," Harry said with a nod that was as good as a promise. The first bit of aid, the Golan defense fortresses, would be delivered within a week, along with the training cadre for them, and for the Arrowhead fighters. Next would come the actual fleet and the means to create a starfighter factory. The planetary shield generators would probably take a little longer, as they were now pushing against the limit of how many even Corellia, with all of its industry, could make quickly.

After that, the Lord Protector had signed off, leaving Harry and Aayla to look at one another. "This could be important," Aayla said aloud thoughtfully. "Very important."

Harry nodded firmly. "If it is Master Vos, he certainly wouldn't have revealed himself to anyone, let alone someone in a position of power like the Lord Protector unless he wanted to. No, I think that he and Master Vosa have found something. Confederacy or Sith-related, that will be the question."

With that, the two of them headed off to report the conversation to Master Yoda, along with the firmly worded suggestion that he didn't mention it to anyone else, especially via

Hypercom. Even with the Republic slowly beginning to clamp down on errant signals and creating a firm basis for encryption, and the Jedi Order's own encryption being very advanced, there was still the chance of it being intercepted, and the Sith had proven to be able to read their messages before this too often. Even messages sent from the *Tyrant's Bane*.

The second area that ate up Harry's time was training with Ahsoka, of course. As he had feared, Ahsoka was a kinesthetic learner, so much so that anything purely mental was almost impossible for her without an extreme amount of effort.

But Harry dealt with this easily. First, he exhausted her physically, doing every exercise they could together on the ship, working right alongside the young Togrutan until she collapsed. Then, after a short meal, they were back to work but on the mental side of things. Here, besides the exhaustion that helped Ahsoka concentrate, Harry used the carrot of new techniques and visualization exercises, which could help her learn the new techniques he had shown off on the Agri-moon.

Within four days of this regimen, Ahsoka was already showing a distinct level of talent in reining in her emotions through the Force. At the same time, she had already discovered what element she was most in tune with: fire. This surprised Harry somewhat. "I would have thought given your high level of mobility and your general level of energy, you would be a natural for wind or water. On the other hand," he said, patting Ahsoka on the head as she stared down at a little flame that she had cupped in her hands, "this means that you and I are going to extremely dangerous when we start fighting side-by-side."

Ahsoka blinked up at him, losing the flame, but Harry didn't care so much as she asked the most pertinent question just then. "Why, Master?"

"Wind and fire, my young Padawan. Wind and fire." Harry smiled beatifically.

At that, Ahsoka's eyes widened, and she grinned, nodding her head rapidly.

At times like this, Harry reflected as he continued to pat Ahsoka's head, feeling the contrast between Ahsoka's orange skin and the tiny buds of her montrals, when Ahsoka most reminded him of a young puppy. She was eager to please and equally eager to charge off at every new smell or sound. *And equally starved for positive reinforcement, or at least the right type of positive reinforcement.*

Suddenly Ahsoka's eyes narrowed, and she smacked Harry's hand away, crossing her arms as she glared up at him. "I felt that Master, what did you just imagine me as?"

"A young puppy actually," Harry laughed, wondering if he had broadcasted the image in his head just a little too strongly, while elsewhere on the ship, Aayla had nearly collapsed mid-exercise with Wulo, giggling helplessly. On the other hand, Ahsoka took this very poorly if the Force Push she hit Harry with was any indication.

However, that moment did turn out to be a prelude to something more serious. Because as Harry and Ahsoka began to teach one another about what it meant to be Master and Padawan, the Padawan bond had deepened. But Harry already had one incredibly deep and profound bond with Aayla. The impact of these two bonds interacting was still not one either Harry or Aayla understood, even as they tried to keep an eye on it.

The next night, this issue came to a head. Harry and Aayla had retired early to their room for a little impromptu date, which had ended as such events should between two people who have been in a relationship as long and as deeply as they had.

Harry was currently laying out on the bed, with Aayla riding him, leaning over him to kiss him while Harry's hips moved rhythmically as they thrust off the bed, slowing occasionally, then twisting a little, to add a little feeling. One of his hands was on Aayla's back, while the other was playing with her lekku, as Aayla ground her hips down into his, her nails racking and occasionally tweaking Harry's chest and ears. Harry had sensitive ears, and his neck was another zone, which Aayla took advantage of as she broke off from their kiss to run her tongue up and down the side of his neck before biting at Harry's ear with her sharp teeth. All the while, their mental bond was aflame with their passions, doubling and redoubling the feelings.

They were pushing to Aayla's fourth conclusion of the night, and Harry's second, when they were interrupted by a frantic, almost manic, pounding on their door.

Both of them blinked, slowly pulling away from one another mentally to turn in that direction, confusion and consternation growing within them as they wondered what was going on. After all, the ship was in hyperspace, and there were no uncharted dangers nearby, not in the Colonies region of space.

Their concerns were swiftly redirected to more personal concerns by a plaintive voice shouting through the door. "Master, whatever you think you're doing, stop, please! By the Force, I'm feeling it too!"

Eyes widening, Aayla hopped to her feet as Harry rolled to one side underneath her, conjuring up a robe for Aayla and tossing it to her as he grabbed up his own.

Opening the door, Aayla found Ahsoka standing on the other side, gasping for air, despite the fact that her own room was right beside theirs. Seeing Ahsoka standing there, her orange face was flushed lighter in color, Togrutan skin became lighter when they became flushed, and her nipples were as hard as tiny rocks under her shift, and the way she was moving her legs to her worked served as a splash of ice-cold water to Harry and Aayla's remaining ardor. *"Get a shower, Harry. I'll handle this for now and get her calmed down. Damn it, how did this happen?!"*

Quickly throwing an arm around Ahsoka's shoulder Aayla took her back to her room, making certain that she didn't touch any...sensitive... zones, including the Togrutan's own lekku. "I am so sorry, Ahsoka! You shouldn't have had to feel all that."

"Tell me when you want me to come in love," Harry sent as he hopped out of the fastest shower in existence. *"I don't think my being there right now would be a good idea. I'll go get some treats for her instead."*

For her part, Ahsoka was still reeling from the sensations that had hammered into her for the past hour even as she leaned into Aayla's comforting shoulder. This wasn't the first time that Ahsoka had felt sexually aroused. Indeed, she'd even experimented a time or two with a few boys among the other younglings, since such things were now semi-allowed, so long as it didn't get past a certain point emotionally speaking. But those incidents hadn't gone past heavy petting, had not prepared her for the mental impact of suddenly feeling both sides of what Aayla and Harry were doing to one another.

It was as if her body had suddenly not been just her own, as if she was being controlled as well as assaulted by these new sensations. It had taken her a few minutes to realize what was going on, and then a bit longer to push through the euphoria to try and stop it.

For a time, Ahsoka just leaned against Aayla's shoulder, shuddering as her body's arousal started to fade now that her mind was no longer being inundated by Aayla and Harry's emotions and feelings. Aayla soothed her with whispered apologies and pats on her back until the girl's body had mostly returned to normal. Then she called Harry in, and a moment later the emerald-eyed man appeared in Ahsoka's doorway carrying a large bowl of chocolate cookie dough ice cream of all things.

Ahsoka blinked, staring at it, then hesitantly taking it as Harry knelt down in front of her. "Ahsoka, I have to apologize. Aayla and I were admittedly a little concerned about how our bond would impact the growing connection between you and me. But before this, we had felt that at best, you would only be able to feel my emotions when we were in the same room together as you did yesterday. We had strengthened the defenses around our mental plane from outside intrusion, but evidently, that was not enough to stop the two bonds from interacting as they obviously have. That is on us," Harry admitted.

"Maybe I really am trying to be too many things at once? Governmental Chairmen, War Leader, politician, teacher of one whole group, student to Master Yoda, captain of the Bane and then being Master to Ahsoka, as well as lover to you," he counted off to Aayla through their mental link.

"Ahsoka, could you hear that?" Aayla said, not replying to Harry's self-flagellation.

Pushing herself away from Aayla, Ahsoka stared between them, then slowly shook her head. "I don't think so, I mean there was nothing there, to my senses," Ahsoka said, shaking her head.

"Eat your ice cream," Aayla ordered. "You'll feel better." She then looked at Harry interrogatively. "And where is mine?"

Although Harry could tell that she wasn't actually annoyed, indeed, Aayla was still somewhat off-balance by this new revelation from Ahsoka, he bowed his head quickly and left the room.

The moment the door shut behind him, Aayla turned to Ahsoka. "Now, while he is gone, can you sense anything from me? "

Thinking, Ahsoka slowly, very hesitantly reached out through the Force, then shook her head in relief. "No, nothing from you. Were you projecting just now, or not?"

"I wasn't projecting that now. But Harry and I routinely do project emotions down our link, especially when we are..." Aayla surprised herself by blushing a little, looking at the younger girl and patting her head slightly. "Um, you know. I am sorry about that."

"It, it didn't feel bad at first," Ahsoka confessed. "It just felt weird, like my body wasn't my own, and I was, well..."

"You were getting it from both of us," Aayla scowled. "Yes, I can see where that would feel odd. And I have to add my specific apologies to Harry's. I didn't think that your connection with him would become so deep so quickly, especially since I know that Harry hasn't done anything overmuch to create it."

Normally, the Master in the Padawan-Master bond would have to do something, to reach out with the Force to try and connect his mind to that of the Padawan, creating that connection deliberately. They wouldn't keep such a connection going, but once connected like that, there would be a preexisting link, acting as a road through a forest. Things would just travel along it more easily than otherwise and much faster.

Here, however, Harry hadn't tried to do any such thing, and Ahsoka certainly couldn't do so consciously. Rather, it seemed to be the Force itself that was forging their connection.

Ahsoka nodded. "I'd wondered about that, but I figured well it was happening so naturally, I figured that Master's only had to do that when there wasn't that instant connection," Ahsoka replied, staring down at her ice cream which she had not eaten, trying to dispel the sensations and emotions she had felt from her mind.

"Eat it, or else going to have to feed it to you," Aayla teased.

At that, Ahsoka scowled but began to eat the ice cream, then ate it more rapidly, shaking her head in amazement. "Food! Of everything that I've seen since I have come aboard the ship, the food is the most prosaic, but profound. I mean, I've never tried a lot of the food we've eaten since I came aboard, I mean, most of it is simple stuff obviously, but it's so tasty! And this? Ice cream? Pure decadence! I don't think Jedi are supposed to have decadent things."

"I actually agree with that to a certain extent. But food is so transitory, here and gone again, so long as you don't obsess about it, that I think it can be allowed for. Gem, jewels, expensive clothing, the trappings of power, are a different story," Aayla answered.

Harry opened the door at that point at Aayla's prompting. He handed a chocolate mint cherry ice cream to Aayla, then sat across from Ahsoka on the floor of her room, bowing his head again. "Continuing my apology from before Ahsoka, I am deeply sorry about this. You are my Padawan, and what we allowed you to feel, that is a line both personal and professional that shouldn't have been crossed."

Ahsoka thought about it for a moment, then slowly said, "You mean how you are my Master, the one in charge of me. But you didn't **make** me feel those things, our bond did."

"Yes, but Harry and I were worried about this, and we didn't do enough about it, apparently," Aayla snorted. "Enhancing our Mental defenses to the point where we have trouble with Master Yoda's training yet still not stopping this from occurring is rather annoying irony."

This was the truth, actually. Master Yoda had not been happy about their progress with the Battle Meditation technique. Combined, Harry and Aayla should have been able to learn it quickly. But instead, the defenses they had set in place had cut them off from all but the strongest Force impression beyond their immediate vicinity. They'd had to try and experiment with their newly revamped defenses before trying to learn the technique.

"Regardless, we will correct it, don't worry. This won't happen again."

If Ahsoka had been a human, she would've bitten her lip. But Ahsoka was a Togrutan, and all of their teeth were pointed, showing their pure predator ancestry. Instead, she reached up to one of her lekku, gently pulling on the tip of it, and looking away. "Well, while I'd be very happy to not have that happen again, can I... that is the female Masters always..."

"You want to learn more about the physical side of things I should suppose?" Aayla guessed with a chuckle, putting an arm around the younger girl again, who once more leaned into it, the last of her tension slowly draining out of her. "We can do that, you and I. Harry will not be part of the discussion."

"Even up here?" Ahsoka asked cheekily, freeing an arm to poke Aayla's forehead as much of her normal attitude returned to her.

"We can just not talk to one another that way, you know," Harry interjected, his face pained. "And that's one conversation I will cheerfully delegate to Aayla."

Then he became serious once more, reaching out a hand to hesitantly pat Ahsoka on the knee, before thinking better of it. But Ahsoka grabbed his hand in both of hers and squeezed, knowing why he had pulled back. "I don't blame you, Master. You didn't know this would happen, not so quickly. And I know you wouldn't ...that is..." she blushed and floundered but did not release his hands. "You wouldn't force me to feel those emotions, those feelings."

"Never!" Harry promised instantly. "I would never abuse my position in that manner, nor would I ever wish you to have gone through that feeling." His lips then quirked wryly. "Mind you, some of the training exercises I'm going to be putting you through could be seen as abuse, but I will explain the reason why behind them all beforehand, and we will never do anything you are uncomfortable with."

"Tomorrow, after you've had a good night's sleep, Harry and I will walk you through creating mental defenses. You're not quite there yet in terms of your meditation or image training, but I think it would take both sides to, well, keep you out from moments like that," Aayla added. "And no offense Ahsoka, but I don't think we could stop making love to one another for as long as you are with us."

Ahsoka giggled at that as she leaned against fully against Aayla, wrapping her own arms around the older woman's waist. "I can guess why," she said snarkily, and Harry knew she was back to normal.

He stood up, bowing to both of them, as he declared, "In that case, I will leave you for the night, ladies. And again, I am sorry, Ahsoka. This will not happen again."

Ahsoka nodded, accepting his apology for what it was once more. Leaving, Harry initially thought of perhaps requesting help from Master Yoda, but while Yoda had indeed mastered the technique that Lily had called mental defenses, Yoda didn't really understand the whole male-female connection. It was simply something his species just didn't have. Furthermore, Ahsoka was Harry's Padawan. This was a problem between the three of them, and it would be solved in-house.

By the time Ahsoka had fallen asleep, and Aayla joined Harry in their mental plane, he already had found what he was searching for, and her mental avatar popped into being next to him, staring at what Harry's mind seemed to perceive as a hole drilled into the outer shielding of their conjoined minds. The shield itself was still there, but there was a jagged hole in it, the sides of which looked as if they had been worn away by sand or something.

"...that, we didn't create that, unconsciously, did we?" Aayla asked worriedly. "When did this appear?"

"We didn't create it, but the defenses show that this area of them has been worn away. It might be only how we perceive things, but it looks like it has been worn away by sand almost. An energy shield worn away by sand," Harry answered slowly, examining the edges of the hole and trying not to reach out to the millions of shiny stars in the nebula that was Ahsoka.

At that, Harry looked over at Aayla, who also touched the worn edges of the hole, frowning as she did. *"The bond between you, it's been created by the Force itself, though I don't know how our defenses eroded so quickly while we were making love. Regardless, I don't think a hardline stopping this is going to work. We're going to have to try to do something else."*

"Hmm, a softer kind of defense then? Create another layer of defense, but instead of imagining it as a shield, we create something like a layer of rubber?" Harry asked, somewhat querulous. This was so new that both of them were kind of floundering in the dark. Neither of their own padawan bonds to Master Vos and Master Fay had interfered with their own melding after all.

Aayla shrugged, looking at the thing thoughtfully. *"Yes, that could work, but we need to also start directing the bond, Harry. That way, it won't interfere in our conjoined mindscape willy-nilly. Remember, Ahsoka wasn't just getting impressions from you, Harry, but from me as well, which just added to her confusion. An airlock say, allowing her into the outskirts of our mind, a segment behind the shields that we create as a separate section with our Occlumency, will let Ahsoka get a read on your emotions when you're right in front of her, but should suffice to keep her out of our private moments."*

Harry frowned for a moment, then nodded. "Agreed. That, and working with Ahsoka on her own mental defenses should keep something like this night from happening again."

With that, the two of them got to work, imagining into being a giant circular dome of stone over the hole in their defenses. The second layer of shielding was then pulled backward, and the area between the two 'energy-state' shields filled with rubber. A small hatch was next, set into the original hole circular in nature and made of metal.

Harry then put his hands against it, concentrating. For only the second time, he consciously reached down the created pathway between himself and Ahsoka. Aayla watched from one side, cocking her head thoughtfully as the outer door they had just created opened at that. The circular dome soon filled up with things, images of Ahsoka and Harry training, talking and laughing. This was followed by the two of them creating an inner airlock heading deeper into their mental plane, which would remain closed unless one of them and Ahsoka reached out and opened it from both sides.

Harry then pulled his hand back, and the doorways both closed one after another. *"We'll need to test that when Ahsoka is awake, but I think our work, at least, is done."*

Thankfully, this bit of mental rearrangement did work, and the next day Ahsoka couldn't even make out Harry's emotions at all when he was standing right in front of them. Not through their link anyway, no more than she would have any other Jedi who wasn't projecting.

For the next few days, Harry noticed Ahsoka occasionally twitching, looking away from his eyes, or pushing up against his hand a little more when he patted her head after she accomplished an exercise well. Harry asked Aayla for her opinion about whether or not this would create some kind of tension between them, Ahsoka having felt and done both everything that the two of them had done to one another the night before. But Aayla replied in the negative. "She'll get over it, Harry, when the memories of your training her into the ground start to overcome the memory of you drilling me into the mattress."

"As I recall, you were in the driver's seat at that moment," Harry retorted with a faint blush to his cheeks, and Aayla giggled wildly, before leaning in for a kiss, which quickly turned ardent. They kept on making out for several moments, then looked at the doorway, where a young Togrutan was not knocking. At that, both of them breathed a sigh of relief.

That drama did not impact the third way that Harry had split his time. This was working with Master Yoda, Wulo, and Aayla to learn Battle Meditation. This was somewhat like Force Precognition, but it was far grander in scale. Force Precognition allowed a single Jedi to predict his movement and those of his enemies all around him, as well as his allies, seamlessly allowing Jedi to work together, especially Master and Padawan pairs.

Battle Meditation took that to an extreme and added still more abilities. Instead of a single personal battle, a Jedi could see an entire battlefield, perhaps even an entire campaign on a planet or in space. The Jedi could predict the enemy's movements, from the generals on down, move their troops into positions where they could do the most good. On top of that, a master in the technique could keep up morale among the troops, strengthen their combat-effectiveness, making them fight together like a well-oiled machine while at the same time weakening those bonds among the enemy's troops. Against droids that last wasn't as applicable, but the rest of the technique allowed for an insane impact.

Ahsoka observed them from one side as Yoda put Harry, Aayla, and through them the rest of the ship's crew through their paces, using the *Tyrant's Bane's* main computer to run them through various combat scenarios, with Yoda on the opposing side, not using the Force, just making good strategic and tactical decisions.

It had taken them six days to get to the point where they could even use Battle Meditation at all, on a battle of this scale, but Yoda knew this was not the end. "Strong you both are, in the Force. Multiply one another's strengths you do. Do better, you must. Reach out further, join your unit together better."

And your Force Constructs, another tool they are, to peel back the Veil, Yoda thought, his ears flicking in a moment of annoyance. Thus far, Yoda's own experiments in that direction had

floundered. Harry and Aayla were still the only ones who could create solid Force Light Constructs, although Harry and Aayla both felt Zule had been close before she had decided to stay back on Coruscant. Yoda could create Force Light after years of practice but had yet to do anything but tire himself out trying to form it into a physical structure.

Eventually, Yoda won the battle that Ahsoka was watching, although it was a near-run thing for most of it. It only started to turn against the two lovers when Yoda had cut off Aayla and Harry's forces from their supply chain. At that point, He'd slowly ground them under with his superior numbers in air power.

Shaking their heads, Aayla and Harry leaned back in their chairs as one, with Aayla slumping to one side, nuzzling her head Harry's shoulder. Seeing that, Ahsoka smirked, shaking her head. Since that night, where she had been so affected by their connection, she had gone through a variety of emotions, a true roller coaster. Now, however, she simply took pleasure in their delight in one another. It was just fun to see, frankly. That and Aayla had become something of a second Master since Ahsoka had come aboard. Indeed, today Aayla and Ahsoka were going to start training Ahsoka in the first few exercises of Jar'Kai.

"That was hard," Aayla said, causing Ahsoka to stop her daydreams of lightsabers flashing and crashing together, to look at her two Masters together. "That was really hard!"

"I think that we have alighted on the solution, though, splitting the technique into two parts. You're reaching out to other people, and me into the Force to discern our enemy's actions." Harry shook his head ruefully. "That is still a little strange to me. It's not like how Master Fay taught it all. Battle Meditation is like grabbing at the future with both hands and straining that vision of the future you have for what you want to have occur and then working toward it."

Ahsoka snorted. "You see, that right there is why I don't really enjoy meditations and the whole looking into the future thing, Master. I try to visualize things like that, and it fails since the image itself is so hard to grasp!"

Laughing, Aayla got up from her seat, moving over to the younger girl who had been almost bouncing on her toes as she spoke. "You'll get there eventually, don't worry. For now, I think I am going to put you through a few physical exercises to get rid of that energy I see you have."

"I'll be down in a bit," Harry said, stretching his shoulders and looking at Master Yoda. "One more strategy lesson, Master?"

Yoda nodded agreeably and waited until the two females had left before piercing Harry with a stare. "Had a problem you did, you and young Ahsoka. Solved, it has been?"

"Why am I not surprised you figured something was going on there, Master Yoda? Yes, I think we solved it well enough for now. We should have anticipated it more, but hindsight is always perfect, my Master always said," Harry replied with a wry snort.

"Your bond, unique it is in the Jedi annals. Closest possible, a twin link perhaps, but even that, not so close it is. Knew it would interfere with the bond we did. Thought the other way it would go," Yoda admitted. "Aayla and your bond to your Masters, not as strong as they could have been."

Harry blinked at that, and Yoda waved a hand airily. "About the force bond itself, I am talking. The emotional connection you built over time, a different thing entirely. But solved it, you have?"

"We have." Harry nodded. "I can't say that I was pleased by how it affected Ahsoka until she internalized what had occurred, but she certainly hasn't been able to feel anything that has happened between Aayla and me since we took a new approach to the bond. And if we hadn't done that, we'd still be having problems with Battle Meditation."

"Noticed that I did. More progress you have made in the past few days. Good." Yoda chortled then. "Hrhrhrhm would have said you would have to stop your physical relationship entirely until Ahsoka had developed mental defenses of her own."

"That would've been grossly annoying," Harry admitted. "But if we had noticed any change in the, well we put up what amounts to a mental airlock, we would have done so. Anything else would've been a case of malfeasance at best, gross manipulation of the Padawan bond at worst."

Yoda nodded firmly, then pointed at Harry. "See that nothing like that happens again, you must. Other than that, doing a great job with Ahsoka, you have been. Noticed it already, I have, a natural teacher you have once more proven. More centered, less flighty Tano is." Yoda then chuckled. "Even if still full of energy, she is."

"She is a bit like a jackrabbit, isn't she?" Harry said, "although I prefer the term puppy."

Yoda chuckled at that, while down below, Ahsoka frowned, causing Aayla to look at her in question. "I think Harry just said something that mocked me or something. Do you ever get that impression?" Aayla just looked at her, and Ahsoka began to giggle. "Sorry, forgot."

Shrugging her shoulders, Aayla hefted her twin lightsabers in her hands, bringing them into a defensive position, crossing her arms, one over the other, with both lightsabers out to either side. "Now, watch my arm movements, the movements of my legs, and then the blades. One forms into another, into the next. You must remember where both blades are at all times."

Later that same day, while Ahsoka was working once more on her mental exercises, Harry was on the bridge of the Tyrant's Bane as they came out of hyperspace at the last of the Agri-corps-run worlds. "Wulo, you're up. Master Yoda?"

The two Jedi moved forward, activating the intercom. Yoda first spoke, giving the local Jedi several passcodes, then Wulo began to speak his own passcodes, as the Tyrant's Bane settled into orbit over the agricultural planet. It was an odd one because it didn't produce anything in massive quantities. Instead, this planet produced grapes, wine and lemons. The vineyards were huge but completely un-automated. The humidity of the planet was such that droids that could handle that kind of dexterous work broke down within a few days. The planet only had one real spaceport and only a few scattered small orbital warehouses rather than full space stations.

Again, it came down to the shuttles of the Tyrant's Bane. Thankfully, most of those shuttles were cargo haulers and able to take up more than eighty force-sensitive at once. They were very slow in the atmosphere, though, which slowed down the loading process in turn.

But once more, Wulo handled most of that, leaving Harry to meet and greet some of the Jedi and the more important leaders among the washed-out younglings and padawans. He was joined in this by the most senior Green Jedi. Between them, Wulo's original spadework, and Master Yoda, they found several diamonds in the rough among them, young and old Force Sensitives who had at last created the internal drive needed to become a Jedi to accompany their power.

Others, more than two thousand, were willing to join the GDL's counter-espionage agency, which was called Specter, once they had their memories modified of the Bane in the future. None of them were powerful in the Force. Despite the number of younglings washed out for not having the mental discipline or drive to complete their training, the vast majority were washed out due to the power requirements. But these two thousand plus still could sense duplicity in the Force, could still sense danger to themselves even if they could not use Force Precognition. That was enough, although Harry felt that in the end, the rest, the majority of whom would go to work on expansion arrays at Waypoint, would do more for the war effort.

Returning to the bridge, Harry had just sat down to see how the evacuation was going when an alarm began to blare at one of the sensor stations. Moving over, Harry looked over the shoulder of the Verpine stationed there and saw that a series of large hyperspace footprints had just appeared near the outskirts of the solar system. It quickly became apparent that a fleet had just emerged from hyperspace and was spreading out rapidly, consisting of four-ship divisions. Each of them was coming in towards the planet and the Bane from as many directions as possible. Soon they would be coming at the Tyrant's Bane from too many directions for the ship to escape.

Frowning, Harry looked at them, and then down at the last two shuttles, which were still being loaded as the Confederacy arrived. "Get me a read on that fleet, please."

Twenty-four ships. Twelve of similar make and size, large, extremely large. I would estimate Lucrehulk in size. Twelve smaller and faster. I would estimate they are Munificent class," The bug-like Verpine answered crisply. "Spreading out like that to come at us from different angles, they want to pin us against the planet."

"Be rather like pinning a tiger with a toothbrush, that," Aayla said, frowning as she stepped to one side of where Harry was already sitting down in the captain's seat, having felt his sudden intensity through their link. Behind her, Ahsoka had also raced onto the bridge, looking out of breath as she looked around the bridge, trying to decide where to sit.

The bridge of the Tyrant's Bane had been somewhat redesigned over the years, but it retained the original circular floorplan that it had as a Trade Federation ship. Beyond that, many of the stations had been expanded, especially the weapons stations and the communication station. That station was now separated into normal communications and then ECM/ECCM, which would have previously been handled entirely by the ship's droids. The change to the weapons stations was simply because of how many weapons the ship had, all of which had to report into the bridge.

The center of the bridge was separated into a smaller circle, a dip in the floor, and behind it, a raised observation area, with other spare chairs set around the bridge. The actual observation area only had two seats, with open space available for group meditation. The captain's seat, a hover chair, normally sat in the circle facing a series of holograms and a single, central holo-sphere showing the system the Tyrant's Bane was currently sailing in.

"Aren't we going to try to get away?" Ahsoka asked, having realized the ship was still in orbit as the enemy fleet moved into the system towards them from several angles. At the same time, they launched Vultures, swarms of them spreading out across the system to further cut off the Tyrant's Bane from any angle of retreat.

Behind the captain's seat directly in front of the tactical holosphere, Yoda leaned back in his observer's chair, thinking for a moment, connecting with the Force. But Harry already had his answer and spoke before the aged Grand Master could. "No. Whatever their numbers are like, losing twelve Lucrehulks and fourteen Munificents is going to set them back. Besides, we still have our one shuttle heading up towards us now. We can't leave just yet."

"Master, I know you know more about navigation than that," Ahsoka reproved. "We still have a lot of time before they're in weapons range. And even if this ship isn't as tough as a normal Lucrehulk, we should be able to take the punishment those starfighters can dish out and get away. The gravity well of this system isn't that deep."

"We could get away quite easily. But you are operating under a misapprehension." Harry waited a moment before Ahsoka dutifully asked what that was before going on, his emerald eyes twinkling at her. "The Tyrant's Bane is not weaker than a normal Lucrehulk. The true extent of its strength is one of our greatest secrets. And I am wondering if, now that they

are coming to us if it is not time to test some of the rest of our secrets." Turning his chair around, Harry addressed the aged Grand Master. "Master Yoda? What do you think?"

Harry was not asking permission, Yoda realized, but instead merely asking for Yoda's opinion. That was fine with him. Yoda much preferred to be in an advisory role rather than a leadership one when at all possible. And with Harry and Aayla, he knew that they already had a strong leadership structure in place. But it wasn't just the current battle Harry was thinking about. Rather it was a question of the future that Harry wanted his opinion on. Was this the proper time to show the strength of the Tyrant's Bane? Could they then keep it a secret to be revealed once more later on?"

For one portion of that answer, Yoda turned to Aayla. "Hypercom jamming equipment, do we have?"

She just nodded, and then Yoda looked at Harry. "Secrets of this ship, many there are. One of them, able to stop those ships leaving, it could?"

Harry nodded. "I wouldn't even suggest this if that wasn't the case Master Yoda."

Ahsoka was now baffled. "What the heck are you talking about? What can stop a ship from entering hyperspace other than a..." she paused, her eyes widening. "A gravitational weapon of some kind, right? Some kind of gravity trap? But, no? Even if you could create one artificially, wouldn't the power reserves for that be..." She paused as Harry looked at her, one fond eyebrow rising, and she could almost hear him telling her to work it through herself with that little gesture. After a second, she calmed down, and then as the answer dawned, she laughed. "I haven't kept the fact that the ship is so much larger in mind, have I? It isn't just the gardens or that first hangar bay, is it?"

"Nope," Aayla caroled, before her smile turned slightly vicious, an expression that Ahsoka returned with interest, her sharp teeth gleaming. "We could take those ships. We could take twice as many ships, maybe more."

"If keep the secret of this ship we can, then yes. Agree with you I do, Count Potter," Master Yoda intoned formally, causing Harry to twitch at the use of his military and political title rather than his Jedi title.

Although it did make sense, considering that this ship was part of the GDL. And this was a decision that would have long term ramifications if one of those ships jumped out before the gravity projector could be brought online, or, heaven forbid, it failed under combat stresses. And even if everything went well, a whole fleet disappearing would be noticed. The Sith would learn something, regardless of any cover-up story. This was a gamble they were taking, Harry knew.

But Harry didn't spend any time thinking about that, instead turning to his bridge crew. Five Jedi, two Verpine, four of the men from Serenno who had basically immigrated to the ship with their families. All of them were looking at him expectantly, even eagerly in the case of the men from Serenno. He nodded back at them. "Keep the shields at their current level, for now. I'll trust you, Sass Kkal, to keep it at the level of a normal Lucrehulk right up until we spring our trap."

Spines stiffened throughout the bridge, and Harry turned back to the holosphere. "Battle stations. I repeat, battle stations. Launch Vultures, defensive formation. Helm, we will wait in orbit until the last shuttle is aboard, then take us down on this heading."

Harry ran his finger through the holosphere, creating a red line leading down and around the planet from their current position. It would put them on a straight line between two of the groups that only had one Lucrehulk and three Munificent, but it would also allow for the two divisions of four Lucrehulks coming in from above and below the plane of the elliptic to change course to intercept via micro-jumps. It would seem as if it was the best of many bad options and would make sense to whoever was commanding the Confederacy fleet.

As the navigator, the Green Jedi Casahk, replied in the affirmative, Harry looked over at Yoda. "Just to make certain, can you sense any Force users over there?" When Yoda shook his head, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Blocking a Sith trying to send out a message through the Force would have been beyond their capabilities.

"Well, not unless we were close enough to use Force Light, Harry. A Sith would be cut off from the Force, unable to do anything under that event," Aayla reminded her paramour.

"True, but on this scale, that doesn't really matter," Harry rejoined, before twisting his chair around to look at the internal communications station. "Get Captains Harrington and Rafael on the line."

The internal communications officer instantly had both captains ready and waiting, and Harry looked at their images in his pickup, seeing them already sitting in their own captain's chairs. Umbre Rafael and Alexis Harrington were the captains of the Archer frigates that the Lucrehulk carried within it. Both of them were leaning forward, predatory looks in their eyes as they looked at Harry. They were eager to take their ships, the *Sniper* and the *Longshot* on a real combat mission. Up to this point, their ships had been hidden in the *Bane*, and they were eager to show their stuff. In particular, the numerous runic arrays their ships had, which made them so different from the other Archer frigates that had been seen in the war.

"Captains, I realize you are both eager, but you will have to wait until the initial starfighter battle is fully engaged before launching. Once you have launched, you have my full permission to use everything in your arsenal under your own discretion. For my part, I think it is a perfect opportunity to use Operation Undertow."

"Agreed," the two Archer captains said as one, nodding their heads firmly. Then Harrington asked, "how many decoy drones will you use to cover our exit?"

Thinking, Harry said slowly, "One each, I think. They won't expect them, and I will be launching you before the capital ships are in visual range. So I think that the sheer surprise of them, and how effective they are will allow us to get away with only one each."

Rafael nodded, although Harrington looked a little dubious. Then again, Rafael had come up through ECM and communications, while Harrington's captaincy had been a combat-based promotion. That wasn't to say she wasn't qualified. Indeed, Harry thought that she was the better leader of the two. But Rafael knew the decoy drones' capabilities far better than she did, having been involved in their creation.

Flack, chaff, and other things to mess with ship sensors were not unusual in space battles. Indeed, drones to try and disguise a ship's sensors from concussion missile or proton torpedo fire of your enemy was not unusual either. What was unusual was to find a single drone able to radiate the full spectrum of a capital ship beyond the size of a patrol boat. Larger ships from frigates on normally simply radiated too much energy for even a series of drones to spoof an enemy capital ship's sensors.

And before the Lucrehulks and their insane amount of inborne starfighters came along, the idea of simply staying off and launching large starfighter strikes at an enemy fleet had not been part of anyone's combat doctrine. Starfighters would close with the capital ships, destroying their fellows before taking on enemy capital ships wherever they could.

Harry's think tank, led by the fussy Wade, had successfully created a drone about the size of a starfighter the could radiate as much as a destroyer, let alone a frigate like the Archers. At long-range, the drones would fool anyone. Indeed, they might even fool droids more than they could a human because droids and robots were more likely to believe their scanning equipment, especially since they were linked entirely into it, then their own visual receptors for at least a little bit.

And a little bit is all the Archers will need! Aayla enthused. It had been her who had worked on the arrays for those two ships, and she was almost eager to see them in action to a point unbecoming of a Jedi.

At the same time that Harry had been talking, the Vultures had begun to roll off their supports, exiting the ship in squadrons and spreading out around the Bane. Simultaneously elsewhere on the ship, power runs began to throb, and weapons started to come online, ready to shout their presence for the first time to the universe.

OOOOOOO

Aboard his flagship, the Neimoidian, Admiral Loremy sneered as the divisions of his fleet moved, heading towards the now fleeing Tyrant's Bane. No one in the Trade Federation had been happy that the Jedi Order had basically flouted the fact that they had confiscated one of the Trade Federation's ships, for all that it was touted as a humanitarian ship. He had been ecstatic to be given the order to destroy the vessel, for that, and because he believed the Jedi Order was a throwback to a darker, more superstitious time in the Republic's history.

He was even leery that the leader of the Confederacy was a former Jedi. But the fact he had been able to draw so many of his brothers into open insurrection against the rest of the Order was simply more proof that no Jedi was really as incorruptible as their so-called duty to the Force, whatever it was, said they should be.

Now he watched as more proof of that was shown, as the sheer number of Vultures pouring out of the Tyrant's Bane proved once and for all that the ship had not been fully retrofitted into a humanitarian vessel. His bridge crew, those few living people – all Neimoidians like himself - he had on the ship alongside himself, all nodded, understanding the point. "Still, if they believe that a single Lucrehulk's amount of Vultures can stand against ours, they'll have another thing coming."

A moment later, he scowled, nodding his head in a show of minuscule respect for his opponent. That opponent had not wasted his Vultures hurling them towards the incoming starfighters. Instead, the Lucrehulk turned away from the nearest swarm, three wings worth of Vultures, and was now trying to escape the system through what looked to be the weakest segment of the surrounding swarm, where a single wing had remained rather than trying to close with the planet where the Tyrant's Bane had been in orbit, between two of the surrounding capital ship divisions. It couldn't escape before those two brought it to battle, but even so, it was better than standing still.

"Of course, if it does that, we are in a position to do a micro-jump towards them," he mused. *But then again, the Jedi had not faced a true war before, and this Potter speaks well, but I have never heard of any conflict beyond lightsaber duels with ostensibly dark Jedi that he has been involved in.* Loremy sneered. "This will be a waste of my talents," he moaned to himself, "but I suppose that dead Jedi are dead Jedi, and beheading the GDL is a worthwhile strategic goal."

As his own division waited until they could micro-jump to mousetrap the Tyrant's Bane, the Vultures began to duel, and suddenly some new information appeared on his holo-screen, causing Loremy to frown. "I wonder how they did that?"

OOOOOOO

The 'that' in question, was in point of fact how the Vultures aboard the Tyrant's Bane had been modified. Not all of them, of course. By the time Harry and the others had perfected their space expansion technique for concussion missile magazines, they had built up

a massive surplus of Vultures and just didn't have the manpower at that point to start going over every Vulture in turn to add the arrays.

Ironically they had that manpower now, but not the time.

For this battle, one out of every squadron of Vultures had quite a bit more concussion missiles than the others. A lot more. About sixty concussion missiles all told when a normal Vulture could only carry six.

Aayla explained this to Ahsoka while one of the Verpine among the bridge crew shook his head, an expression that his species had in common with humanity. "That is not the only problem that we faced, of course. The other problem was the logic circuits of the droids involved. Building the droid brains is the most time-consuming aspect of building Vultures, and the programming was worse. Their logic circuits would just not compute the fact that they had more concussion missile capacity than the size of the Vulture would indicate."

"Yeah, I've had a few brain freeze moments since I came aboard, so I can definitely see that as a problem," Ahsoka replied to the Verpine, giving him a smile that carefully hid her teeth. After all, many aliens believed that bearing your teeth was a sign of aggression, and she didn't want to take chances, never having met Verpine before.

The Verpine nodded firmly and was about to go into a long spiel about how they had eventually solved the problem, but Harry's calm voice interrupted. "If you don't mind K'cta, we are about to enter combat. You can tell my Padawan how you personally helped solve that issue later. You may be in charge of teaching her some programming anyway."

"Master! Why would I need to learn coding!?" Ahsoka almost whined, but she didn't. Whining was beneath a Jedi, even a Padawan. The fact that it was not beneath a sixteen-year-old girl with more energy than was good for her being told that she would have to do more book learning was beside the point.

Harry spared her a smirk, then concentrated on the battle unfolding outside. He had held their Vultures, four of the five Vulture type starfighter wings, that a normal Lucrehulk could carry, in a defensive formation. This created a globe around the Lucrehulk just outside of its own weapons range.

When the incoming wing of Vultures hit that globe, it shifted, starfighters directly facing the initial wedge of that wing falling back into the *Tyrant's Bane's* weapons range while the rest of the globe shifted around the ship below and above, coming in at the wing from all sides. In this initial engagement, Harry knew they had numerical superiority, and he intended to use that ruthlessly.

Explosions began to flare in space around the Lucrehulk as the dogfight expanded quickly, but with the numerical advantage on their side. The Jedi lost about four and a half

squadrons worth of starfighters, before the wing, four hundred enemy starfighters had been dealt with. However, by that point, the next wave was on them. And this time, the numerical edge was on the enemies. More than two thousand Vulture came in from the two nearest capital ship divisions.

As they closed, Harry frowned for a moment as he considered the implications. He had known the Munificents had two squadrons of Vultures. But that number meant neither division was holding back any starfighters for defense. *Stupid of them, but perhaps not so stupid considering they have friends ready and waiting to jump us.*

These Vultures also had specific orders. Most of them tried to ignore the Bane's fighter screen to get close to the ship. Doing so cost them, but a few concussion missiles smashed into the ship's shields. The Lucrehulk responded with the same amount of firepower it had used a moment ago in the initial engagement.

Watching this from her chair, Ahsoka sighed. "I wish I was out there," she admitted. "That kind of dogfight is utterly insane."

"At this point, there's no need to have anyone living out there. This is just the start of this battle, a probing assault if you would. Later we will release the Falcons and the Arrowhead starfighters to join the Vultures. But I want them to come to us, Ahsoka. I want them in close, Vultures, Munificents and Lucrehulks all," Harry replied, his words a lake of calm whose waters reached out for Ahsoka through their bond, for the first time using it in such a manner.

Ahsoka found herself responding, calming herself down, placing her hands together in front of her, in a meditation pose as she closed her eyes, centering herself in the Force. A second later, all feelings of eagerness or anxiety were gone, leaving calm interest and the buddings of professionalism.

"Good," Harry said, turning away from the battle entirely to give her a grin, and a spurt of humor joined Ahsoka's other emotions. "Trust me, I know the feeling you're having right now, the eagerness to prove yourself, to fight the enemy, and there will come a time for such things. But now is not one of them, and even if it was, we are Jedi. We face moments like that with calm deliberation and control, not ego, and not the arrogant need to prove ourselves the superior to our opponents."

"Yes, Master," Ahsoka replied firmly, before turning her attention to the screen again.

"Keep watching," Ayla murmured from behind her, where she was stationed at the tactical screen, directing the Vultures squadron by squadron through a headset on her head, and her own personal tactical screen in front of her. She broke off for a moment to give orders to one of the starfighter squadrons which had been in danger of being swamped, and a moment later, they had pulled even further back into the defensive envelope of the Lucrehulk,

where their opponents began to take a drubbing, breaking off from attacking them, in turn, to try and close further with the Lucrehulk, only to be destroyed to a droid.

As that portion of the battle ebbed, Aayla turned her attention to the rest of the battle even as she murmured to Ahsoka. "Keep watching, keep learning, and you will understand that the Force is far more applicable than the universe has ever conceived of before."

Ahsoka could well believe it, so she nodded and continued to watch, commenting on certain portions of the ongoing dogfight outside. At the same time elsewhere on the ship, the Bane's crew had reported to battle stations, calmly informing their superiors on the bridge that this or that weapons battery were ready for action. As they did, the screen showing the Tyrant's Bane as a 3-D hologram to the side of the main holosphere started to change...

Harry, too waited, and waited, and then, as the battle outside seemed to reach a crescendo, whispered out, "Now. Second wave launch, decoy drones launch. Flak cannons, load chaff! Captains, you are good to go."

For a moment, the incoming enemy Vultures had been pushed back and away from the Lucrehulk, somewhat reeling away from its defensive fire, which was much heavier than they had anticipated. Indeed, on his bridge the Confederacy admiral was wondering if the foolish Jedi had simply replaced all of the offensive weaponry on the ship for defensive. It would make the Tyrant's Bane a monstrous trap for any starfighter attack, but next to useless against other capital ships.

At Harry's command, another wing of Vultures flew out from the ship. That meant that the ship had launched five Vulture wings, the full complement of a ship that was the size of the Tyrant's Bane, in the air. But on their heels came the Archer frigates and the decoy drones. Meanwhile, special cannons situated around the two hanger bay doors went off, exploding in mid-space with gas and metallic particles that disrupted enemy sensors.

With the chaff and those drones to cover them, the Archers launched without even being noticed by the vast majority of the droids around them. The long-range scanners on the enemy capital ships picked them up briefly before the chaff got in their way. But it was only briefly, as the two Jedi aboard the Longshot and Sniper activated yet another runic array that Harry, Aayla, and the other Jedi aboard the ship had perfected.

The idea had actually come from Kass, but Harry and Aayla had instantly seen that it could be very useful and ran with it for the Archers. Like the two Falcons his friends had left with, the Archers were equipped with full runic stealth arrays, which absorbed all the heat and other signals that the ship created, turning them into basically rocks in space, along with an illusion which seems to cover them in stars shifting as the ship in question moved. Even direct visual examination of the ships would find it incredibly difficult to spot them, as the two Archers dove down and away from the battle, breaking out and away from the dogfight.

Both drones designed to cover their escape died, having fooled at least four squadrons worth of Vultures to fire on them. But in turn, none of those droid starfighters had survived to report the fact that the ships underneath those shields had not been the targets they thought.

And as the Archers disappeared under stealth, racing down from the elliptic like submarines going for depth, the enemy sprang their own trap, the more distant divisions of the Confederacy fleet jumped to hyperspace, popping out all around the fleeing Tyrant's Bane. They weren't close, pinpoint accuracy on such a short jump was very hard, given the vagaries of the existing gravity of the system's sun, but they were more than close enough to launch their fighters, which the ships had taken aboard the moment the Bane's escape vector had been determined.

Now they closed, uncaring about the minor blip on their long-range scanners as they raced to engage the Bane. However, the closest divisions, which had been the closest to the Bane's line of retreat, would still be the first to engage it. These were made of three Munificent class ships, heavy cruisers in GDL parlance, and a Lucrehulk, which was a mix of carrier and battleship in anyone's books.

However, that wasn't the only problem facing the Confederacy fleet. Because from a small red outline on the holosphere, Harry could tell they were all within the range of the Tyrant's Bane's net. Seeing that, Harry smiled grimly and leaned back in his command chair. "K'ta, activate the gravitic trap."

Inside the ship, powerful turbines began to speed up to full power, and a star, or at least a star's gravity, was born within the massively modified ship, reaching out for the enemy fleet.

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Admiral Loremy jolted in his hoverchair as sirens wailed across his flag bridge, twisting around to stare at where the sound was were coming from, the navigation station. "What the hell is going on?! Why is that alarm sounding?"

"I don't know, sir! It's... we're... reading, we're reading like we, like... The man grabbed all of his self-control, having been startled out of his skin from watching a battle that he personally wouldn't have much to do with, to answer his admiral's angry question. "It is almost like someone just dropped a large planetary body into the center of the..." He paused, then said formally. "Sir, I think the enemy has activated a gravity well projector. We are trapped in the center of it and can't hyper out."

Loremy was still staring at him when the battle took yet another turn against him. Because instead of trying to continue to run, the Tyrant's Bane had just changed course and was racing straight towards one of the divisions trying to enclose it.

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"Now, my love?" Harry asked, looking over to Aayla mentally, even as his physical eyes remained glued to the primary screen.

Aayla didn't even reply via their mental connection. She replied through her actions. Behind the Twi'lek Jedi, Ahsoka suddenly gasped, as Aayla reached out to touch her mentally. Her and every other Jedi that was part of the ship's crew, linking all of them together into a gestalt, then reaching out further to the two Jedi assigned to the Archers, linking them in as well. Even Master Yoda found himself part of it, and he hummed in appreciation as they put into practice what he had been teaching them for the past few days.

But the Jedi were not the only parts of the crew. Aayla, using the Battle Meditation, reached out for those who did not have Force powers. Though they couldn't similarly communicate with the Jedi, the feeling of elan filled them. Teams began to work better, crewmen went about their duties faster. When the battle came, they would fight it like a crew that had served together through years of battles.

"Shields up to full power," intoned one of the men from Serenno, using two fingers to push a lever up from where it had been down at one end of a scale all the way to the top. The shield visible around the outline of the *Tyrant's Bane* doubled, then redoubled in strength. The one yellow line, which Ahsoka had here-to-fore thought was just an oddity of the ship's programming, now became three gleaming green lines. Three layers of shields all around the ship. Simultaneously, a screen to one side of Ahsoka lit up, showing the shield's strength, which caused her to gape.

"Time to show them why the ship is called the *Tyrant's Bane*," Harry said, his voice ringing with certainty and a sense of fierce pride as he transmitted via the ship's intercom. "The Force is with us one and all, and this ship, this crew, will tear down any tyrant we can. This is where we begin that work." He waited for the cheers from the Serennoans and, surprisingly, the Verpine to fall away before going on. "Navigator, close with the enemy division designated group Zeta."

The ship twisted around slightly at that order, and they began to close with one of the walls attempting to come towards them in turn. At the same time, more Vultures began to join the survivors of the two previous clashes outside, purely in a defensive formation for now, but that would change Ahsoka felt, as their numbers began to grow.

At the same time, she gaped at the image of the wire-frame Lucrehulk as it changed again.

Visible changes were being wrought on the outer hull of the ship. On two segments of the ship equidistant from the frontal open 'C' shape of the ship, hull plates pulled away and turrets, one above and one below, began to rise out from behind them, while more did the same at the front of the ship over the 'C' shaped opening. Other panels slid aside in numerous sections to reveal batteries of turbolasers and ion cannons. There were more iron cannons than

a normal Lucrehulk would contain, but fewer Turbolaser batteries. Most were heavy turbolasers instead of the regular variety, which meant that they couldn't shoot as many targets and would be useless against starfighters. They were pure capital ship killers.

But Ahsoka's surprise wasn't based around those. She had suspected something like that, having seen her Master preferred such a strategy. No, what surprised Ahsoka was the four turbolaser turrets set to the ship's top and bottom. "Those are as large as a planetary-based battery!"

"Correct. We thought about making turbolasers the size of the Munificent class's, but the barrels of those were a little too large, and we wouldn't have been able to put them on turrets without being obvious to any enemy scanners. The effort we've been going through to hide these little babies was more than enough. But it's about to prove itself in spades," Harry pronounced, smiling as he felt Ahsoka's shock and awe.

"Wait for it," Harry said, turning back to the holosphere, broadcasting that emotion through the Force to the Jedi who were in charge of the turbolaser cannons turrets as he spoke into the intercom. "Wait until they start to fire."

The Jedi manning those turrets didn't have to wait long. The four-ship division led by a single Lucrehulk was opening fire almost on the heels of Harry's words, their weapons flashing out to pummel into the shields of the Tyrant's Bane, slowing their own speed. The enemy believed that the Tyrant's Bane was trying to move past them to escape, using the gravity trap as a distraction.

But against all the thinking of the Confederacy admiral, nothing could be further from the truth. The gravity well was instead a signal of the ambush turning against the ambushers.

They put about as much fire as they could on target. This included the three Munificents with their massive spinal mounted heavy turbolaser cannons. Enough energy hit the Tyrant's Bane shield to cause the shields of a normal Lucrehulk to flicker. This did not happen to Harry's ship.

Before Harry could even voice the order to fire, Harry felt the confirmation of all the Jedi running the turbolaser turrets, causing his order to be rather redundant. But he still had to say it. "Fire."

From the Tyrant's Bane, eight blasts of planetary-sized turbolaser cannons shot out. Shorter-ranged than a normal planetary based system would be, they still retained all of the power of one, and the enemy was coming to them, rather than trying to get away. All of those bolts had been aimed at a single target, the Lucrehulk at the center of the division of ships the Bane was slowing with.

Harry watched calmly as the Tyrant's Bane's first blows landed, crashing into the enemy ship's shields. Even a Lucrehulk could not take the force of eight planetary sized turbolaser cannons without feeling it, and it's shield noticeably dimmed before popping back up.

But then, the rest of the Tyrant's Bane's weapons roared, turbolaser batteries began to target with what they could, while the frontal ion cannons arrayed around the entrance to the ship began to fire as well, splashing over their initial target, slowing the shields recharge rate dramatically. Then the turbolaser turrets spoke again, hitting not just the same ship, but a single quadrant of shielding under Harry's direction that was slower to recharge than the rest.

That quadrant of shielding fell, and the ion cannons roared in instantly, their yellowish energy hammering into the ship's actual hull. Electrical power scorched along the little enemy Lucrehulk's hull, burning out sensors, weapons turrets, and shield generators.

The enemy's shield began to falter on the ship not a minute into the battle, shocking both its captain and the other captains of the surrounding Munificents. Return fire continued to slam into the Tyrant's Bane, but the ship simply took it and replied with a roar, another flash of eight planetary-sized turbolaser blasts crashing into the ship, exploding segments of it. One segment of the front 'C' segment shattered, a massive bit of the superstructure of the vessel exploding away from the rest.

Then Harry turned his attention to another ship, as the Vultures flashed out and down towards the mauled capital ship.

At that, Ahsoka blinked, having lost track of the dogfight going all around the Tyrant's Bane up until that point, not having realized that Aayla had, while the Tyrant's Bane had been pummeling that one ship, pulled two wings of starfighters out of the dogfight, creating a wedge formation near the ship which now lashed forward through the dogfight, smashing enemy Vultures, indeed entire squadrons, out of their way. Many of those starfighters died against the linked defensive fire of the Munificents, and the Lucrehulk had not been defanged despite the tremendous damage it had taken. But enough closed to the capital ship to launch their concussion missiles into its horribly wounded, battered prey. The Lucrehulk's shields completely collapsed then, opening the central command sphere to enemy fire.

More shields fell, and then the Tyrant's Bane turned away, even as it's turrets continued to train on a second target, bringing more of its guns to bear on the Lucrehulk to finish the job.

OOOOOOO

Admiral Loremy stared in shock as the Grave Defender exploded, taking the fire of the Tyrant's Bane's secondary weaponry right into its now unshielded control sphere.

The next ship fared a little better. Its crew had time to get over the shock at the Tyrant's Bane's immense amount of firepower. As such, it's crew was ready and able to divert energy

from areas of the shielding that were not getting hammered under to the areas that were. But almost as soon as they did, the enemy switched targets, almost as if they were able to sense that action before it happened. The weakened segments of the shields started to fade, falling even as Loremy watched. A Munificent didn't have the shielding of a Lucrehulk, and it had next to no armor for its size.

When the second ship died, exploding under the Bane's fire, Loremy returned to his senses and began to roar commands. "Divisions C, A, D, E and F, full speed, emergency level speed! Close with the Tyrant's Bane! That ship has enough firepower to deal with division B if we can't get there in time! They might get away!"

Over at one of the other screens, the ship's sensor officer shook his head slightly, staring at his readouts. "T, that can't be right," he whispered, shaking his head as a shiver of fear went through him. Whatever was happening with his sensors, what he saw just could not be right.

At Loremy's command, all of the other divisions sped up, racing to engage the Tyrant's Bane from all sides, completely forgetting the two Archer class ships that one of his sensor officers had reported had been there momentarily. When that report reached him, Loremy dismissed them as having been destroyed upon trying to exit from the enemy Lucrehulk. Nor did it ever occur to him that perhaps he should have checked in with his sensor specialist. And the sensor specialist, unwilling to believe his eyes over what he knew was technologically possible, didn't speak up either.

OOOOOOO

By the time they closed with the Tyrant's Bane, three of the four ships of group Zeta had been destroyed, and the last was turned into a shattered hulk even as the other ships began to fire on the Tyrant's Bane. At the same time, more Vultures began to disgorge from their hangar bays, creating the largest dogfight that any of the people there had ever seen, larger indeed than many of the ones occurring elsewhere throughout the Republic and GDL space.

Aayla continued her work on that level, while Harry, now deep into their conjoined Battle Meditation, continued to fight the entire battle. As such, he was aware of that moment of shock when the enemy, the captains and the Admiral in charge over there, realized that their offensive fire was not doing **anything** to the Tyrant's Bane. *I think this is time for an educational moment.*

Addressing Ahsoka, Harry began to explain, having felt her confusion at the shields of the Bane. "Shield energy is as you know based on how much damage that it can take before falling, using units called SBD. For example, before we started to mess with them, the Falcon's shielding could only take about ten. The normal capital ship is somewhere in the three-thousand range. A planetary shield, depending on the planet's size, how many generators it has, and the power grid, can range from 20,000 upwards to 100,000. I believe Alderaan's shield strength is twice that and is rated as one of the strongest planetary shields in the Republic

simply because of how much energy they can reroute to it, from the planetary grid, and how many generators the shield has."

Ahsoka nodded along, staring at the Tyrant's Bane's wire diagram for a moment, thinking. "You have a planetary shield generator," she said at last. "And how many actual shield projectors do we have?"

"We took a page from the Mon Calamari book there," Ahsoka replied, taking a moment from her own works to turn to Ahsoka, a playful smirk on her lips. "How many do you think we have?"

"Upwards of Fifty," she replied instantly. Shield projectors were the output devices that created the shield that the generator powered. On a planet, they were normally either broken into six, to better space out the shield's energy, or were part of the actual shield generator, which was easier to make, but also created a single point of failure that the enemy could take advantage of.

"Good guess. We actually have sixty-two. A normal Lucrehulk, like those we're facing, have twenty-eight. A normal Lucrehulk's shields are strong, but they don't have the redundancy like Mon Calamari shields or ours."

Now that the remaining capital ship divisions were engaging the Tyrant's Bane, the ship's shields were starting to flicker here and there, when heavier than normal fire hit one portion. But the instant that happened, another shield would take its place. Then another under that.

"Redundancy, far more power than they anticipated, and a lot more offensive power too. We can win this, can't we?" Ahsoka whispered, finally believing that rather than just sensing the possibility through the Force.

Even though she had whispered it, Harry had heard it and nodded firmly, turning to look at her for a brief second. "Ahsoka, we're not just going to win this, we're going to destroy that fleet. We are going to break their morale, and we are going to make at least a few of those ships surrender rather than die where they stand."

"Ships don't stand, they sail," Ahsoka replied promptly, before going on. "But, I understand your point, Master."

But Harry had already turned his attention back to the battle, feeling out the right moment to give a new set of orders.

Now that the entire enemy fleet was surrounding them, every turbolaser and ion cannon battery was engaged. Harry directed their fire expertly, concentrating their fire as much as possible. More than one Munificent began to stagger, forcing the enemy ships to rotate to

bring undamaged shields into action. At the same time, the turrets, which could both swivel and raise themselves ninety degrees, continued to pummel two enemies at a time. The two divisions of Lucrehulks coming at them from behind and above and below and ahead were the largest threat the enemy had, smashing their shields down to let the ion cannons which could range on their target do their deadly work.

But with the number of targets all around them, their firepower had been spread out a little too much to continue getting quick kills like they had already scored. However, that was not the only arrow in Harry's quiver.

As an enemy Lucrehulk's shield began to falter in one quadrant, its captain began to rotate the ship to bring new shields to bear. However, as soon as he finished this maneuver, his tactical officer shouted, "incoming missiles!"

More than two hundred proton torpedoes flashed out of seemingly nowhere. The ships Vulture raced to intercept, but there were too many of the incoming capital grade missiles, and the captain attempted to rotate halfway so that he could try to put a fully powered segment of the shielding in the way of those missiles. He succeeded, and most of the incoming missiles hammered into that area of shielding. But enough went around them, crashing into the already battered shielding sections, blasting them apart and into nothingness. Shield projectors exploded, taking his ship's shields down permanently, and then, more arrived.

That ship, and its sister ship nearby, both died in explosions that tore at the firmament of space.

OOOOOOO

"Where did those missiles come from!?" Loremy practically shrieked, slamming one hand down. "Did you miss hyperspace footprint?" he asked, glaring at his sensor tech.

The man rapidly shook his head, going over the data quickly. "Um, no on the hyperspace footprint, sir, no way could we have missed a ship coming in."

"Sir, there was a report of two Archers attempting to escape from the Tyrant's Bane and being destroyed. But there was so much chaff and sensor ghosts near the Tyrant's Bane, perhaps they survived?" the tactical officer murmured.

"And how are they hiding from our sensors!?" the captain bellowed, his hoverchair moving so that he could glare at his sensor technician from a foot away.

The man recoiled, shaking his head wildly. "I don't know! I don't know. If they are within range to launch those missiles, even if they are using the Tyrant's Banes telemetry or a closer Vulture, we should be able to pick them up. But we're not. I swear, there's no sign of them!"

"Some kind of stealth field," the tactical officer murmured, frowning, then shivering as another Lucrehulk fell out of formation. Their ships were faring against the Tyrant's Bane, like so many frigates would against a normal Lucrehulk. "How are they powering those shields and weapons?" he asked himself, beginning to feel true fear, as the Admiral began to feel the same emotion.

"How are they doing anything we've seen since we arrived here?" the Admiral shot back, tamping down his own fear to try and keep control. "Focus fire as much as possible. Those shields have to have a breaking point!"

"Sir, perhaps we should retreat! If the ships break off, move in every direction, the Lucrehulk won't be able to keep us all within the gravity well it's projecting," his tactical officer said, whispering into his pickup on a secure channel so that only the captain could hear. "We've already learned enough here, break off, and then prepare a larger fleet in the future."

"Are you mad?! We still have sixteen ships in this fight! There is no way! No Jedi tricks can make a single Lucrehulk dangerous enough to overwhelm a fleet!"

OOOOOOO

Even as the enemy Admiral on the other side began to lose the bubble, Harry felt it through his Battle Meditation. Every strike from the turbolaser batteries was calculated, every ion blast from the frontal weapons was targeted and plotted to a nicety. The overall dogfight was still under their control, and thanks to the Jedi aboard them, Harry could even relay orders to the Sniper and the Longshot. Now, as the enemy's own coordination began to fray, their command and coordination began to take a toll.

Twice more, the Archers fired from stealth, their torpedo proton torpedoes flashing over three of the enemy Munificents. Their shields went down, and the four turbolaser turrets spoke again, blasting into each of them, snapping the spine of the first like dry kindling. The other two had timed their rotations perfectly as he had known they would, but still took a massive pummeling, their shields beginning to shiver noticeably all around the ships rather than in one sector.

A badly battered Lucrehulk found itself under attack from three squadrons of Vulture's, which closed in on it through its scant remaining fire, the defenders of the vessel realizing too late those Vultures were not their own ships, so badly damaged were their sensors.

The vultures, directed by Aayla, flew almost directly above its hull as they destroyed weapons blisters and the few remaining shield projectors it had. Those Vultures had already expended their concussion missiles, Harry knew, so lacked the power to destroy that ship. But they could destroy its engines, and they did so as the next ship, one of the Lucrehulks coming up from below the Tyrant's Bane, began to rotate in a desperate attempt to keep its rejuvenated shield segments between the Bane's fire and their own hull. But Lucrehulks were

not made for such maneuvers, and it still lost segments of shielding to the bolts ionic energy that got through before the rotation was finished.

Another ship, a Munificent coming up behind the *Tyrant's Bane*, started to turn away, but Harry had already anticipated that, having felt the fear of the captain escalate to an uncontrollable degree. One turbolaser turret from above and below shifted to target it explicitly, turning away from their previous targets for a few moments, to batter its shields down. Then the Longshot took it under fire even as it finished turning away. Its engines collapsed, a second after its shields did, and it started to tumble, before coming apart under the new few torpedoes that hammered into it.

The enemy was now down to fifteen effective combatants, with two other ships pounded badly but still technically combat-capable. Now those ships died from the unseen Archers, as a third, another Munificent shattered under the Bane's fire.

A second later, Harry suddenly felt the ECM officer's exultation. "You have something to share?" he asked, looking in his direction.

That worthy just nodded and sent him the information, and Harry smiled thinly, connecting to the Alpha batteries, the two turrets on the top of the ship. "Alpha batteries, new target," he said aloud, even though he didn't need to. "Helm, bring the ship upwards ninety degrees, rotating as we go. I want us locked on this heading, targeting this particular ship."

OOOOOOO

"Admiral! The Tyrant's Bane! It's course just shifted. They're coming straight for us!"

Admiral Loremy's already battered courage started to fail him at that point. "Reverse course! Keep us away from that hell vessel! Try to move us away from a direct line, don't let those frontal mounted ion cannons range on us along with those blasted turbolaser turrets!"

As his orders were being followed by equally frantic officers all around him, Loremy shook his head, staring at a ship whose abilities were just too impossible to believe. "How are they doing all this!?"

"SIR!" shouted his communications officer. "The Hypercom, it's being jammed, sir!"

At that, Loremy let out a near broken-sounding manic giggle. "Of course! Why wouldn't they have a Hyperwave jammer? What else could go wrong today!?"

OOOOOOO

"Arrowheads, Falcons, you are cleared to launch. I repeat, you are cleared to launch," Aayla ordered calmly as she felt Harry's orders a second before the data appeared on the main

screen. The dogfight, too, was turning against the enemy. Their lack of overall coordination had badly hampered them at first, the admiral on the other side being one of those who just believed in throwing huge numbers of Vultures against his enemy until they broke. Normally that would be a valid strategy, but not anymore.

The defensive coordination and the sheer number of Vultures that the Tyrant's Bane had fielded had blunted the Confederacy's numerical advantage after the first clash. And Vultures just kept on disgorging from the Tyrant's Bane.

Now the Vultures were joined by the manned Jedi starfighters, three squadrons worth of a type of starfighter that had yet to be seen in combat. With them came a full wing of Arrowhead starfighters, dedicated small ship and starfighter killers. They plowed into the ongoing dogfight like a knife through butter, drawing still more of the Vultures down onto them, while the squadrons of Falcons made for the enemy's capital ships.

With the Jedi aboard those ships fully immersed into Harry's Battle Meditation, not a one was lost before they were in the proper position to fire into the rear shields of a Lucrehulk that had just diverted the majority of its shield energy to its front shield projectors.

They blew through the weakened shield, destroying the engines, and then moving along its outer hull as the Vultures had done previously to another Lucrehulk. But unlike them, the Falcons were armed with proton torpedoes, full magazines at this point, and used them ruthlessly.

That Lucrehulk's engines soon exploded under their protonic fire.

At the same time, the Tyrant's Bane turned its attention to their target: the Confederacy fleet's flagship. But just before they were set to lock on, Harry frowned, slowly turning over more of the battlement meditation to Aayla, as he saw a new danger through the Force.

OOOOOOO

"Order the two closest Munificent's to ram the Tyrant's Bane!" Admiral Loremy suddenly shouted, coming out of his mania as the idea occurred to him.

Everyone else on the bridge flag bridge turned to stare at him in shock, and he continued to rail at them, urging them to see what he had. "We have to take out that shield! A physical impact like that, along with the ship's own engines going into overload will have to take out those shields. They're not invincible, they can't be!"

Part of being a captain or even any kind of leader was to be calm, to always seem as if you are in control of events, thus forcing your people to be calm in the face of any adversity. But it was a characteristic that could only truly be tested in battle.

Lojemy had done so before. He had commanded ships in battle, had been part of a successful assault on a Republic world before being assigned this mission. But he had not faced anything like this when the enemy had overwhelming superiority instead of the Confederacy. And now his panic was apparent to everyone. And even if he didn't have Force powers, it reached out for the rest of his people.

But that didn't mean he was wrong. Such an impact could, at the very least, overload the enemy's shields around the point of impact. And once those shields were down, there was no chance that the Tyrant's Bane could take the punishment that their fleet was dealing out.

OOOOOOO

Feeling out the future, Harry discerned which ships were going to be ordered to ram them. As they overloaded their engines and roared towards them, Harry directed the fire of the Tyrant's Bane to a third ship, this one a Lucrehulk, as he reached out through the Force with the first, Yoda adding his own Force powers to Harry's along with every other Jedi not currently engaged in battle aboard the ship did the same. Even several of the Agri-corps members, those who felt the Battle Meditation begin, reached out to add their powers to this new gestalt. They weren't very good at it, and most fell out of it almost as quickly as they joined. But even so, enough joined Harry and Aayla to take some of the weight off their shoulders.

Both ships, Munificents of forty-thousand tons each, going as fast as their engines could go, were stopped as if they had run into a wall. The gestalt of the Jedi held them, and the weapons of the Tyrant's Bane began to pummel into them, every weapon that could train on them crashing into the same segment of shielding.

Then the Archers were there again. They did not target those two stunned ships. Instead, they targeted the enemy fleet's flagship from above.

Harrington and Rafael had moved their ships all along the battlefield, being careful to keep their engines away from any sensors on the enemy fleet. This wouldn't have worked so well if the enemy had thought to spread out their Vultures behind their fleet as well as into the dogfight, but they hadn't.

All of the crew now were sweating, gulping down water, as the heat contained within the ship as a byproduct of the runic stealth array began to get to them. More than a dozen crewmen were down from heatstroke, and even the two Jedi were beginning to feel the impact of so much heat, as more and more crewmen reported dehydration issues.

But Harrington and Rafael, on orders passed through to them by the Jedi, had wanted to get off that one fusillade before retreating. Their load down to less than twenty percent, the two Archers then retreated, finally cutting the runic her stealth array, the two Jedi powering it down by the simple expedient of removing a single steel slab from their positions to either side

of the small frigate's bridge which contained part of the array. This acted like cutting a circuit, and the runic stealth away fizzled out instantly.

Instantly several Vultures squadron turned to race after them, but the two frigates were already powering away from the battlefield, and their speed was such that even Vultures would have trouble catching them.

Behind the Archers, Harry watched their payloads hit home. Perhaps if the Lucrehulk had been able to redirect energy to the single section of shielding being hammered under, they could have survived, say, four-hundred proton torpedoes. Such was the strength of the Lucrehulks shield. Over five-hundred? No. And they couldn't have in any event, with fire continuing to hammer into them from some of the Tyrant's Bane secondary weapons, which were the equivalent of primary weapons on their opponents.

The Confederacy fleet's flagship exploded, here one moment gone the next, and Harry felt it. He felt the already wavering courage of their enemies break, felt them acknowledge that the battle was now truly lost. Still holding the two ships which had tried to ram them, Harry sent an order to Aayla, who quickly began to redirect fire from the Falcons and the Vultures on to the fastest of the ships to turn away, as the Force-captured Munificents started to come apart under the Tyrant's Bane's firepower.

As they did so, Harry looked over at his communications officer, one of the men from Serenno. "Contact the enemy ships. Tell them we will accept their surrenders. Our terms are that they are to power down their shields and their weapons. They may flush their systems, I doubt we could stop them from doing so. But then they are to board their escape vessels and make for the planet. Their ships are to remain intact, and no traps are to be left behind. Make it clear that any such actions will be seen as reneging of the surrender agreement, and they will no longer be treated as prisoners of war, but terrorists."

Of course, Harry wouldn't actually do so. But the threat would seem real enough to the Confederacy crews.

The man nodded firmly and got onto his radio, instantly sending that message off. One of the Lucrehulks that had heretofore only been battered instead of directly targeted by the Bane's turrets instantly took up Harry's offer, pulling away from the ongoing battle, heading towards the planet instead of attempting to try to find an edge to the gravity well that the Tyrant's Bane had created.

Two more had to have their shields smashed down, and most of their weapons destroyed before they got the message. They were followed by a Munificent, then a second, leaving only four, all Lucrehulks, to doggedly fight it out. Those four died as the others had as the Archers returned to the fight, adding their proton torpedoes to the Bane's firepower once more.

At that point, the battle was pretty much over. Stray enemy Vultures still remained amongst the wreckage, but they were being hunted down in turn by the droid starfighters of the Jedi, as the Falcons and Arrowheads had peeled off, following the escape pods towards the planet.

Ahsoka watched all this, then shuddered as the touch of the Battle Meditation started to fade from her mind than that of the others, pulling back one after another, with Harry giving the mental equivalent of a slap to the shoulder to each Jedi for a job well done.

She signed leaning back and stretching, oddly exhausted even though she personally hadn't done anything physically. But her Force powers had been added into the Battle Meditation's gestalt, and then into holding those two ships still. That was a lot of power to be used all at once, especially for a Padawan like her. And she had felt dozens of the Agri-corps Jedi collapsing as they fell out of the gestalt, with Harry and Aayla and Yoda taking up most of the slack they left. "That was just, that was just holy kriff!"

Harry nodded firmly as he stood up, moving towards her and Aayla. "Yes, I think it went very well."

"We didn't even lose a single sentient," Aayla added, touching Harry's hand as he passed to pat Ahsoka on the head.

"Lose a sentient we did not," Yoda interjected, throwing some cold water on their enthusiasm. "Losses among the Vultures, heavy it was."

"True Master, but even there we can make improvements. And now that we are going to start using the Tyrant's Bane like this, we can start to use ships which have already had the expansion techniques and arrays used on them as well as capital ships instead of simply transport ships," Harry replied, still patting Ahsoka on the head.

"Only to ships that have Jedi on them, though. A Jedi needs to be the one to provide the initial spark of power to the array," Aayla cautioned. "And frankly, the screening progress process for captains and the Jedi both for those ships is going to be rigorous, even more so than for the freighters."

Yoda nodded, before pointing at the holosphere, specifically the area showing the escape pods heading towards the planet. "With them, do what you will?"

"We'll take them aboard, transfer them to our shuttles," Harry answered firmly. "We can't leave them there, eventually the Confederacy, or the Sith, will send someone to actually discover what happened here. Frankly, I have no idea how we're going to spin what happened here. There's too much debris out there for us to just wave our hands and make it go away. But we can at least keep real-time data of the battle from getting out."

"As for our prizes, we can slave them to the *Tyrant's Bane*." Aayla took up the tale seamlessly, reaching up to squeeze Harry's hand as he moved back towards her, settling his hand on her shoulder. "All of them still have engines, even if they'll all be needing some intense care before being combat-ready again. Serenno has the crews for them, and then they can be sent to Corellia for repair after that."

Serenno could perhaps have repaired at most two of the Lucrehulks without stopping all of their work on creating more frigates and Arrowhead starfighters. But they just didn't have the dock capacity for this many Lucrehulks at once. Whereas Corellia did, and would only have to slow the reactivation of its mothball fleet.

Nodding, Yoda smiled thinly. "A good battle this was. Win the war, it did not. Go to your head, it should not." He waited for Harry and Aayla to nod before going on. "The coverup of what exactly happened, leave to me you will. Several ideas I have." At their quizzical looks, Yoda chuckled. "Tell the truth we cannot. But better than a lie, several types of misdirection can be."

OOOOOOO

Around the same time the Vultures were clearing up the wreckage of the enemy ships and the few escape pods which had launched before the end of hostilities, Senators Padme Amidala and Bail Organa were meeting with a group of Peace Party, Centrist, and GDL senators. They were making what amounted to rather pointed small-talk as they waited for a group of Senate Security personnel to clear the restaurant they were going to be meeting in.

As she was talking, Padme grimaced, both in some pain and at the audible grumble her stomach had just let loose. *Come on, I had a full breakfast, I shouldn't be this hungry!* Shifting on one foot, Padme grimaced as a slice of pain went through her right thigh. "Of course, I come by my appetite quite naturally," Padme mumbled under her breath, a scowl crossing her face.

This, and the preceding moment of inattention, caused Bail to ask, "Are you all right, Padme? You're looking a little sore?" He then chuckled, looking around at their fellow senators before leaning in conspiratorially. "have you found a new form of cardiovascular exercise lately?" Bail added a waggle of his eyebrows to the question, making it very clear what he was suggesting.

"Yes actually," Padme said, before pointing over her shoulder towards Zule, who simply smirked before exchanging a nod with a fellow Falleen, Senator Sestali before turning back to the Peace Party leaders. "This one has been running me ragged with four hours of exercise per day! Two hours when I wake up, and two hours before bed. The evening exercises help with my incipient insomnia, but I could do without the pain the rest of the day that the morning exercises cause. By the Force, and I thought I was in good shape too!"

"You'll thank me later," Zule replied complacently, chuckling and shaking her head. She had started Padme and Sabe on a revamped exercise regime since she had moved in with the

Senator from Naboo, and despite being in very good shape thanks to their previous training, neither girl had found Jedi physical training easy.

At that point, the Senate Security team sent into the restaurant to do a final check came back out, nodding their heads to the Senators. This being in the Senatorial District, that was enough to ensure the safety of the Senators involved, and they entered the restaurant passing through the crowd of other lunchtime guests, all of whom were people from the Senatorial District.

The restaurant, which boasted itself as 'a genuine Chandrillan cuisine experience' was one of the better, most high brow restaurants on Coruscant. It was organized like three conjoined circles set about ten steps down from one another. The topmost was the secure VIP section, the center circle the common dining room. The last, with a special plastel overwatch position for Security Personnel, was the kitchen. Four of the cooks, those who took turns at the pass to make certain the plates going out were up to standard, had poison detectors and several doctorates in Cross-species Nutrition, so that should anything go out that, say, could kill a human but was fine for a Bothan or something similar, the restaurant would know and make certain nothing untoward occurred.

Even so, Zule was watching every droid, waiter, and sentient moving around the restaurant, not relaxing until the group ascended to the VIP section, and Padme reached out a hand, squeezing her wrist. "Calm down. We're in the senatorial district itself, and security all over has been heightened since the start of hostilities. Heck, you've been part of that process."

"There's only so much security you can actually put in place on a planet like this one." She tapped the floor with a foot meaningfully, indicating the lower levels, which most senators didn't even think about half the time. "There are always ways up and down, you know?"

Grimacing, Padme nodded, understanding the point. And while a lot of the tension within the Senate itself had dissipated with the Confederacy senators leaving Coruscant, that didn't mean that the conflict had simply gone away. The Centrists were still none-too-happy with the GDL, although most of the good news from the war seemed to be coming from the GDL. Indeed, the GDL scoring what everyone saw as the first true victories in the war, turning back assaults here and there and ambushing a fleet over Enadmus and destroying it, had only underscored their resentment.

After all, if the GDL was so ready for war, who were they going to fight if hostilities with the Confederacy hadn't broken out? That kind of 'logic' made Padme's head hurt, but at the moment, the GDL was still riding high on public opinion, so beyond glares and mutters, the ardent (or as Padme thought of them, mindlessly zealous) Centrists couldn't do much.

It had been a week and a half since the war had officially been declared, and the Jedi Order had tossed their declaration of C'baoth being a Sith at the feet of the Confederacy. The Confederacy had responded by releasing a statement denouncing the Jedi as a tool of the

Republic, and the idea of C'baoth himself being a Sith being a bald-faced lie. However, red lightsaber using individuals had been seen leading planetary assaults, and furthermore, those assaults had been utterly vicious nature. On those planets, this was no longer a war of ideology or political structure. It was a war for survival.

So the Confederacy's words on not being connected to the Sith rang hollow for anyone with minds to hear it. Whether or not that included Senator Bonteri, Padme didn't know. But the woman had been making waves since returning to her planet, coming to head something called the Legistaturist Party within the Confederacy's own Congress. How much power that body really had was a question, but if they made enough noise, perhaps they could get something done?

Padme certainly hoped so. Or perhaps they simply believed the Sith a lesser issue to their own various problems with the Republic and how it was run. No one knew just yet. The Confederacy was clamping down on information flow to an incredible degree, and their ability to do so pointed yet again to the fact that this war had been one in the making.

"So, I don't suppose I could get you to calm down?" Padme inquired. "Only, I think you're drawing more stares than Bail's guards." Since the attempt on his life, which had been timed to coincide with the attempt on Padme's, Bail had been accompanied practically everywhere by two special security guards from his home planet of Alderaan, both wearing the colors of Alderaan's royal guard. Bail's relationship with the Queen of that planet had recently been announced, and she had evidently decided to protect her investment, something Padme had given Bail quite a lot of good-natured ribbing about.

"Not a bit of it. And I note you didn't have a problem with Chewie and his oversized toy." Zule replied even as she continued watching the crowd like a hawk.

Padme scowled. "I was overruled four to one about the necessity of having you here, so I didn't see a reason to argue that minor point with him."

A few minutes later, as the waiter took their orders, Padme began to get to the meat of the meeting. "Ladies and gentlebeings, the reason I have asked you to join me due to a treaty I wish to propose between the Confederacy, GDL and Republic. This is in no way a full peace treaty. Rather, I think of it as one step to pull back from the brink of total destruction..."

From there, as the food arrived and was devoured, Padme pushed her current agenda. Soon, her words, and the words of her ally on this point, started to sway the rest of the Senators despite their initial concerns. Hours later, one of them nodded slowly, looking at his data-slate, while leaning back and sitting on his post-lunch wine, before glancing around at the busy restaurant, visible over a balcony separating the VIP section from the rest of the restaurant. "I think we're agreed on the terms and much of the actual wording of the document."

"I don't know, some of this language might still be a bit too argumentative..." one of the GDL senators dithered.

"I doubt it," interrupted another GDL senator, shaking his head, his teeth grinding noticeably. Both were humans and were relatively recent inductees to the GDL party, having come from the Centrists. One, the Senator for the D'Astan Sector, had been ordered basically to toe the party line, as the leaders of D'Astan could see the writing on the wall: their sector was going to be embroiled in the GDL side of the war whether they liked it or not thanks to Serenno, so they might as well go with it. However, the other was an Outer Rim Senator whose constituents included a few planets that had already seen Confederacy attacks.

"But we are agreed that we should push for the medical ship neutrality act?" Senator Sestali asked, looking around at her fellows. "I think this action could help stem the tide of barbarity we see from both sides."

Everyone winced at that. No one there was so naïve as to think that war was a kind, gentle thing, but despite only being a week old, there had been a few ugly instances on both sides. Several examples of Republic Navy units murdering prisoners and targeting escape pods after hard-fought battles. For all the fact that many of the navies that were now incorporating themselves into the Republic Navy were called professional forces, that didn't mean they were used to taking losses as they had been in those fights, and afterward? It was very hard not to take revenge for dead comrades.

"We need to instill some discipline, some decency into this war, and creating a neutral Doctors Union, could be a way to do that," agreed Senator Mon Mothma, whose inclusion in this meeting had been a major boon in Padme's terms. "But we need their senators to condemn this, this barbarity at Azumelarn. Put that way, no one could possibly complain in the main. Just like the recent Prisoner Rights Amendment, or the War Crimes Act."

No one knew what had happened to spark it, but the planet of Azumelarn, home of the Azumel species, a six-eyed, four-fingered species that had much the same skin as the Gran and something of the same outlook on life, had been bombarded from orbit by a Confederacy fleet. Reports were still coming in, but it looked like a spoiling raid gone horribly wrong. Regardless, that kind of mass destruction and death had to be condemned by both sides now, before it became too blasé. After all, once the first atrocity was committed, you had every reason in the world to continue causing some of your own.

Part of that had begun with the War Crimes Act, which was a list of acts that would cause anyone who ordered them to become criminals in the eyes of the Republic, to be detained, tried and executed. That plan only covered the Republic side of things, however. The creation of a Neutral Doctors Union and the Medical Ship Neutrality Treaty would hopefully bind all three 'sides' of this conflict.

One of the other Centrist Senators, the Senator of the Alsakan Sector, spoke up then. The central planet of that sector had long been a rival of Coruscant, but their conflict had ended millennia ago in everything but economic matters. The man, a Nautolan oddly enough, was well-respected among the Senate. "However, I cannot stress this enough. We need to make certain that these medical ships stay neutral and are not simply clandestine spy vessels. Regardless of their point of origin."

"Agreed," Padme asserted with a firm nod. "Shields, little to no sensors other than that of navigational aids, and agreements to wipe any data that the locals require of them. Possibly even allowing for random searches, so long as everything is recorded and in the open. And, of course, so long as it does not harm the patients, and the doctors are not harassed in their duties."

"You think you can get enough doctors to agree with this?" asked another Centrist senator looking at the end of the table.

There a positively ancient, seemingly male being sat, calmly eating his food, a fully vegetarian plate which was not something this restaurant was known for. He was a Neti, only the second of that race that Padme had ever even heard of in all of her years working as Queen and as a Senator. The man, whose name was Tov Ra'al was easily the best doctor on Coruscant, and indeed within several dozen sectors. When Padme had thought up her plan, she had asked for a representative for the Doctor's Union to look over her proposal, and he had come forward to speak in its favor.

"I am positive. My fellow doctors and I might not have the same pride as a more martial group would perhaps have, but we do pride ourselves on our profession and being as open to helping other people as we can be. It is a very poor doctor who will refuse to put his own life on the line when it will save so many others."

"Well spoken," Mon Mothma replied, raising her glass in a toast to the man. Others followed suit.

Even Zule was smiling, and though she did not join the salute, not drinking while on duty, she stood and bowed deeply from the waist. "I had the honor of being trained by Master T'ra Saa when I was but a youngling. Even now, I look upon that training as one of my fondest memories, and I see that you do your race as much credit as she."

"Quite the praise," Tov Ra'al laughed. "But please, do not bow on my account. Bow instead to these brave senators when they put this treaty forward. It takes a lot of courage once hostilities have begun to reach out to your fellow sentient like this."

After the murmurs of thanks or embarrassment passed, Padme went on, her voice determinedly professional. "In that, case, I will personally reach out to Senator Bonteri...." She paused then, staring as a few of the Centrists senators looked at one another. "What?" She

asked, her eyes narrowing dangerously. "What is wrong with me reaching out to my old teacher? We might be on opposite sides now, but..."

"Padme," Mon Mothma slowly intoned, "you have to understand, even with you and the rest of the Peace Party remaining with the Republic, there are many of our fellow senators who consider you disloyal. Traitors in the making for how often you tried to put the brakes on this war. Indeed, there are many saying that if you hadn't, it would be the Republic who held the whip hand now."

"I'm uncertain how that even makes sense," Padme retorted bluntly, shaking her head. "For all our preparations for war, it looks as if we were at least another year from being ready for a par war with the Confederacy. And that's supposing they wouldn't have just kept on building up their numbers."

"I understand that, and you understand that. But at this point, but as you all know, ideology has truly replaced intelligence for far too many Senators."

"Orn Fre Taa, the Senator of Ryloth, in particular, is vituperative of his attacks on you. As is the Malastare Gand, Ask Aak."

"The Gand doesn't surprise me, the other one does," Padme admitted, thinking about the leader of the Rim Faction, which had, admittedly, lost a lot of power in the past few years. *Which, come to think of it, is possibly why he doesn't like me. He lost more than, what was it, half of his faction to the GDL and the Peace Party? Indeed, I wonder if Ryloth will reach out to the GDL soon, regardless of Fre Taa's thoughts on the matter.* "Still, I believe..."

Throughout this conversation, Zule had stood silently, keeping most of her attention on the surrounding restaurant where the meeting was occurring. But watching Padme even with half of her attention had been an eye-opener.

Zule had seen Harry in action, and there was something of Harry's passions in Padme. Both of them were extremely driven, extremely empathic individuals. Harry had a 'take them as they come' kind of attitude towards people, whereas Padme was determined to see the best in people until it was proven otherwise.

However, there were other differences too. Harry was a leader first and foremost, a statesman second, and a warrior third. Somewhere in there, perhaps as one-B was being a friend and a good Jedi. But regardless, Padme was different. She wasn't quite a leader, as most would understand the term. She was a diplomat, a spokeswoman, who could shift and control a conversation with an adroit ease that had to be seen to be believed. With only Bail and perhaps one other Senator here in her corner at the start, it should have been impossible for her to get ten Centrists senators and five GDL senators to agree to the idea of this neutral hospital ship thing.

Which, if Zule was honest, she couldn't see getting off the ground in the Senate. It was something that just could be all too easily turned to other means.

And yet, Padme had swayed them. Everyone there was determined now that the Republic would send a copy of this treaty to the Congress of the Confederacy, Even if they weren't certain how much the Congress actually had in terms of power.

Regardless, it's a step in the right direction to at least keep the Republic from becoming as uncaring of life as the Confederacy, Zule thought, before her Force sentences tingled, warning of danger. She moved to place herself between the Senators and the lower circle of the main dining room, her eyes tracking one side to another, then concentrated on the Force, feeling out the direction the danger was coming from. *From the kitchen? But with all the protections there...*

Staring over the crowd, Zule could see some kind of smoke coming out of the kitchen. *No, not smoke*, Zule suddenly realized. *Gas!* Luckily for the rest of the restaurant, the gas wasn't spreading very quickly. Unfortunately, given what Zule was feeling, the gas had been just a prelude. A sudden flare of the feeling of danger and Zule roared out, "Get down!" at the top of her lungs, seeing several small disks rolling through from the kitchen.

Two of them were knockout gas, which spread among the restaurateurs causing many to collapse as the rest, recognizing Zule as a Jedi, went to ground. Four more of the grenades were flash grenades, blinding everyone in the restaurant, even Zule. Yet she didn't need to see. Zule was a Jedi and had the Force. Moreover, before that flash, she had seen two more grenades that looked slightly different than the others. And unlike the rest, these had been launched towards the VIP section rather than rolled along the ground.

Reaching out, Zule grabbed at the two thermal detonators, halting them in the air. The explosion went off a second later and Zule, grimaced but ground her teeth together, kept her grip on the explosion now, containing it, as sweat began to pour down her brow, and attackers poured out of the kitchen. They were all combat droids, the B-1 type which made up the majority of the Confederacy Forces. *How the hell were they smuggled into Coruscant?*

Putting that thought to a side, Zule grinned at them. "Surprise kriffers!" She then released her hold on the explosion, the energy of which finally expanded. Most of that energy had already been expended, but the remnant tore several of the droids into shrapnel and hurled a few more back through the doorway into the kitchen, hampering their fellows.

Meanwhile, plasteel walls came up, separating the VIP section further from the rest of the restaurant. They only raised halfway though, before grinding to a halt as something went wrong with the gears, or perhaps the controls that moved them into position had been destroyed.

More droids came out of the kitchen, but the flash had faded. Now the Senator's guards, the two from Alderaan and a few Senate Security men had moved forward, taking position behind the plasteel. They started to fire at the droids over the heads of the now screaming crowd of civilians as all of the senators ducked behind the now upturned table.

All except for Padme, who reached under her skirt and pulled out the parts of a blaster rifle, which she expertly began to put together in under twenty seconds, before moving to join the defense. *All that training with Chewie really does come in handy!*

She put down a droid without even pausing, sliding into a defensive position next to one of the guards from Alderaan, as Bail too moved to defend himself. His gun was much smaller than the one hefted by Padme, but he fired it nonetheless, if inaccurately. "Perhaps Count Potter had a point that pacifism does not mean we should be unwilling to defend ourselves."

"Chewbacca," Zule said into a com-bead as she pulled her lightsaber off her belt, having recovered from the earlier exertions. She felt like she could sleep for a week but wasn't about to let that feeling control her actions. "Where are you?"

Her answer was a battle cry that nearly made her wince. Because this had been just one aspect of the attack.

Outside, a full company of droids had burst out from a building to one side, running over the road leading between that building and the building containing the restaurant, firing their weapons into it as they came, gunning down several bystanders. It was evident that the droids had no concern about innocents. However, whatever their intelligence about this meeting might've been, they were not prepared for Chewbacca.

Right before the meeting, Chewbacca and Sabe had left Zule and Padme. With Sabe's help, Chewbacca had found a place to overlook the road leading into the restaurant from above and had created a kind of sniper point for himself.

Now he roared a battle cry as he opened up on the droids with a large, multi-barreled repeating blaster, a weapon that most humanoids would have had trouble lifting, let alone firing. The fire cut down at the droids from above and just slightly to the side. There was no protection for the droids on the road, and only a few had the intelligence to retreat back into the building. The others just turned and tried to fire at him in turn while elsewhere, Senate Security personnel began to respond, closing on the disturbance quickly.

But Chewbacca ignored the returned fire even as several bolts came dangerously close to hitting the small window Chewie was firing out of. He simply walked his fire across the line of droids, cutting them apart.

When the last droid in sight fell, Chewie smashed the window out, looking every which way to make certain he had gotten them all. With a victorious roar, Chewie swung the weapon onto his back and clambered out, climbing down the side of the spire to the restaurant below.

Meanwhile, Zule leaped forward over the defensive structure around the VIP area and had closed with the droids using her lightsaber to block incoming blaster bolts, deflecting any of them that came near towards the attackers in a perfect display of Shien, shouting out orders while her other hand gestured. "Retreat into the VIP area. You will be protected there."

At that gesture, a shield appeared directly in front of half of the advancing droids, cutting them off from a straight walk through the scattered civilians. Of course, that meant there were several still on the other side of the shield, but she couldn't create multiple shields at once, and the droids were too mixed up with the restaurateurs who had been at tables nearest the kitchen.

For a moment, the civilians all stared at the shield she had just created from the Force in front of them. But then the shield sparked with blaster bolts, and dozens of people quickly rushed to obey.

Zule advanced on the other side, and behind her, the trained security guards shifted fire. The senators who had taken up weapons bar Padme took a bit longer, but they were also firing all around her, and Zule grinned as the droids continue to back away, more of them going down.

Then the door to the restaurant smashed open, and Chewbacca was there. He knelt, took aim, and fired into the kitchen doorway from that direction as with a snap, Zule canceled her Force shield. The remaining droids had all concentrated their fire on Zule by this point, turning in her direction, and were caught completely off guard by this flanking assault.

The last droid visible fell, and Chewbacca roared again, tossing the spent weapon to one side before he pulled his bowcaster from his side and charged forwards. He smashed a droid to one side with a fist that smashed its head off its thin neck, then grabbed its body to use as a shield as he entered the kitchen, with Zule hot on his heels.

Behind them, the security guards had their hands full with Padme, who wanted to go after her friends, but they were having none of it.

They would probably have lost the argument eventually except for one voice shouting through the tumult of cries from the other restaurateurs. "I need some hands over here!"

Zule turned and saw that Tov Ra'al had gone to one knee beside a wounded man, a Devaronian. Only one of the senators had been hit thanks to Zule and her early warning, and Senator Mon Mothma's hand, which had been hit by shrapnel of some kind, was not serious. But dozens of the rest of the restaurant-goers were down wounded or dead. After making

certain the safety was on, Padme dropped her blaster and moved to kneel beside Tov Ra'al. "What do you need me to do?"

The doctor didn't even look up from his work, having somehow pulled a doctor's bag from somewhere. He was slowly pulling out a bit of metal shrapnel from the man's chest. "A few shrapnel wounds for this one. I need you to help hold the wound closed after I remove this so I can sew the wound closed. Then we'll start handing out blister packs to everyone who has a blaster wound. That will deaden the area hit for now and let me concentrate on the most seriously wounded. And I hope the Senate will take it upon themselves to pay for these people's medical bills?

"Definitely," Padme replied instantly, answered by a chorus of shaky voices from behind her, and her fellows moved into the restaurant proper as medical personnel and more security-men arrived.

Zule came back quickly, saying, "The droids came up from below. They'd simply cut their way through several different floors one after another, killing anyone they came upon. I don't know where the gas that took out the guards in the kitchen came from yet. But one of the waiters, a Rodian, is apparently missing from the workers in there. Thankfully, it was just knockout gas, but still, this was too darn close to a Force-damned massacre for my liking. Chewie's on the trail of the Rodian for now. I'll join him as soon as we're done here, and I know you're safe."

Her report given, Zule went to one knee beside Padme, helping to hold down a patient for Tov Ra'al as he removed a splinter of something from the man's inner thigh and stomach.

"So, still thinks staying on Coruscant was the boring option?" Padme asked dryly, flicking a smirk at the other woman. "You said that this morning I believe. Lamented it, in fact."

"Me and my big mouth," Zule murmured, sharing a small if wan smile with the other woman before they bent over their work. "I just hope this doesn't kill that treaty of yours."

"If anything, it will give it impetus. It certainly brings the need for doctors to the foreground, doesn't it?" Padme said with another wan smile.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere on Coruscant, Darth Sidious scowled slightly as he leaned back in the Chancellor's office. Sidious had yet to hear from Dominus about the success of the attack on the *Tyrant's Bane*, which did not make him happy. On the other hand, Dominus had followed his orders on the next round of attacks, allowing the Republic Forces consisting of the clones and their fleet elements, who were already part of the true Republic fleet rather than the disparate sector or single system fleets, to get their feet under them. Those system and sector

fleets, which were supposed to become part of the Republic Navy in terms of organization, were taking massive amounts of casualties trying to slow down the CIS juggernaut.

Which was exactly what the Sith Lord wanted. He wanted those fleets smashed. Sidious wanted those planets humbled. He wanted the organization of the Navy, the centralized organization under his thumb, to thrive in this war, which he could use in a few months to start paring back to the local system defense forces and forcing those recalcitrant members of the Centrist party into giving those fleets up to the Republic Navy. The GDL would still be a problem, but in time, and Sidious was certain that he could simply paint them as just another enemy, another Separatist party by another name. Indeed, he already had a few Senators doing precisely that.

Even better, this new method of war was weakening the Confederacy, chipping away at their numerical superiority. And soon would come the renewed offensive into the GDL, crushing it with those numbers, sacrificing those planets to give the Republic more time to build up our own numbers. *Dark Side damn Dominus for his strikes against the hidden construction yards. Without them, that task will be an extremely slow one. So slow many of the admirals might question why the Confederacy isn't simply going for the jugular, using their numbers advantage to truly cripple the Republic.*

Still, the longer and bloodier the war is, the better. The Sith can afford to wait. Indeed it will allow me to space out many of my 'reforms', as it were. The Military Powers Act, the Naval Restructuring and recruitment Plan, the Hypercom Renovation and Realignment Plan. The Education Act, the Grand Moff Creation Act and more. Oh yes, Sidious had them all planned out, and as long as the war continued, Sidious' power and centralized authority would continue to grow apace.

*And the Jedi Order will be embroiled in it up to their eyebrows. Already, I have had reports of them joining the GDL and Republic Forces in their hundreds. They will be on the front lines, and even in groups of five, which annoys me immensely, they will be **vulnerable** there. No Jedi alive today knows what a war on this scale is like, not even that that sanctimonious ancient bag of bones Yoda! Sidious thought complacently, even as a flare of anger at Yoda went through him for his not rising to the bait of being in command of the Republic Navy. Sidious truly hoped that Yoda too had died aboard the Tyrant's Bane, along with Harry Potter and his Twi'lek whore.*

He frowned then suddenly, thinking about some of the moves that the Jedi had been making us late. For one thing, too many of the Jedi who had been reported to him as joining with the GDL or the Republic Forces already fighting the Confederacy were supposedly Guardians or Sentinels. He had known that a retraining program had been going on among the Jedi for some time, hence the reason why Count Dooku had opened a lightsaber training school on Serenno and why the new techniques from Master Fay had been allowed to spread through the Order so quickly.

Those new techniques will mean that the Jedi survive longer than I hoped. Forces Shield is a fascinating skill, he reflected. One that had taken Sidious many, many years to duplicate. Yet the sheer number of Guardians and Sentinels is concerning. Guardians perforce will be able to handle war better than Consulars or Sentinels. Sentinels, on the other hand, are all too often extremely good saboteurs, spies, and infiltrators. People who can disappear at will. Keeping an eye on all of them will be hard and get harder as the war builds to an ever-higher tempo.

His thoughts were interrupted as a message came in over his intercom, and Sidious looked at it, then pulled up the full file his secretary had just sent him, tapping his fingers on his desk as he perused it. He first sent off a note to make certain that the Senate Security Force leader was in his office with an hour to answer questions about this, and 'he better have ideas on how to stop something like this happening again', before smirking, setting off a message to Padme and the others in attendance, each of them worded slightly differently, to make it seem as if 'Palpatine' cared about each of them in turn as people.

Then he went back to watch the security camera video, scowling as he watched the events play out. The attack was good, very good. It would garner more hatred against the Confederacy and was just one of many acts happening across the Core Worlds which would be blamed on them, pocket cells of terrorists and droids on specific commands, who would cause chaos, and death. Furthermore, this, coupled with the act itself that the senators had been there to talk about, would isolate Padme and the now steadily shrinking Peace Party along with the GDL.

Backing it would make Sidious also appear earnest man and give him a few more levers to use the future. *Still, Amidala was supposed to at least be injured, and the others killed! The Falleen Jedi should have also been killed, further weakening Amidala's position.*

He watched Zule closely in battle now, scowling at her ability to deal with the explosions and with the Force Shield. The fact that Harry Potter had basically assigned one of his own Jedi to guard Padme was worrisome. Sidious wasn't certain about the command structure among the Jedi that followed Harry Potter, which was another annoyance, but hopefully, one that would be ended by killing Potter himself. Still, having her assigned specifically to guard Amidala and work with the other Jedi guarding the Peace Party members was both good and bad. Good in terms of PR, given that he could subtly use it as just another lever to widen the gap between the Peace Party and the Centrists. But bad because it meant silencing Amidala would be harder, now that Sidious wasn't certain how well his plan to use her to make Skywalker fall to the Dark Side would work.

Regardless of that plan, the woman is far too dangerous a speaker, far too dangerous a moralist to allow to keep going as she is. Perhaps I need to assign her some work as Senator. Perhaps meeting with our opposite numbers to discuss this treaty Amidala wants to put into action? Yes, that makes sense. And the Falleen would go with her obviously, along with that annoyingly competent Wookie. I still cannot believe that I have been utterly unable to get a

single listening device to her room! He even found a few of the bugs that Plagueis had installed in the spire's very superstructure!

Calming himself, Sidious used his anger at that to fuel his desire to see the Great Plan work, finding his center with ease.

However, he was interrupted once more at that point. Frowning, he looked up as his door opened, only to see one of his most favored servants entering. As he watched, Sate Pestage turned, closing the door behind him, locking it, and activating a series of controls that turned the room into a kind of faraday cage, an act that made Sidious other eyebrow rise in surprise. That was an extreme level of paranoia, and suddenly, the remnants of the Sheev Palpatine persona fell away to reveal Sidious beneath as he remembered that Sate Pestage had been part of a group of representatives who had been sent to talk to the Jedi Council about their role in the war going forward, and specifically, their place in the Republic intelligence apparatus. "Speak."

"My Lord," the man said, going to one knee in front of the Chancellor's desk. "I was in the temple earlier today, as you know, and I, I noticed something."

"Quickly, Pestage, your actions fill me with growing annoyance."

Pestage gulped but went on quickly. "The High Council always insists on meeting up in their high Council room at the top of the tower. Normally when we are led through the Temple, we see other Jedi going about their business, even some younglings taking classes. However, there were no youngling in sight today. There were no young padawans even. Many of the classrooms had been closed entirely, and when I tried to ask questions about it, my question was deflected. But my lord, I stopped on the way back for a visit to a bathroom and took the time to look around. There can be no doubt. The Jedi Order's younglings clans are gone!"

Sidious's eyes flew open wide as he stared at his servant, feeling the future suddenly start to slither out of his grip. Because just then, as if the Dark Side had reached out and implanted the information within his brain, Sidious knew that this revelation would be just the tip of the iceberg...

End Chapter

This doesn't cover as many events as I had hoped simply because of one thing: time. Even with Dominus ordering a change of the Confederacy's war plan, it would take a while, a few weeks at least, in order for those changes to be made apparent. Still, I hope you all enjoyed this, and especially the *Tyrant's Bane*'s debut LOL. Now, what could Yoda have planned to cover the event, I wonder...

In other news, the mental aspect of what is going on between Aayla/Harry and Ahsoka was very difficult to visualize. Essentially, the Force is making the bond between them, uncaring about what it can carry back to Ahsoka from the already joined pair. I tried to show this, as well as the fact Ahsoka's mind is NOT organized, and that it wasn't anything she was doing, or they were allowing consciously. Indeed, they took what they thought was enough precautions, before being proved quite wrong, as they just didn't notice the problem because it wasn't an attack on their mind, but the Force itself doing it.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and here's hoping it will start winning the large story poll more often in the future... as it is taken out of the rotation for October to make room for ATP. Ouch. LOL.