

I am not British nor affiliated with Darth Mouse. You can take our IPs, but you will own the souls of our fandoms!!

Oh, and RoP season 2. My brother tried to watch it, walked away fifteen minutes in. I didn't even bother.

Regardless, here we go folks. Really late where I am, but I wanted this done and out so I could spend all day on Stallion if **Tomon** gets it back to me. Enjoy, and point out mistakes please. I worked my arse off over the last five days after losing almost the entire weekend, but I don't doubt there are mistakes within.

Also, Acclamator is not a word. But it is a starship class. Ugh.

Chapter 25: Offensive Action

Since even the nigh-magical properties of bacta could not heal someone overnight, Harry would have to stay in the bacta tank for at least two full days.

While Harry was resting comfortably in his tube of reddish-green gunk, everyone else had more than enough on their plate. Padme returned to acting as the interim head of state for the Terran system from the main CIC, now body guarded by not only Chewbacca and his wife, but clone troopers vetted by Anakin from the surviving members of the 501st. This was not a sinecure, even in the hours directly after the assault on Harry failed, as Padme bluntly informed them she would be using more as personal assistants and her eyes and ears, not just in the CIC but wherever she felt she needed them across the system than actual bodyguards.

That, and Padme believed in being on the job twenty-four hours in a crisis. As she said to the clone troopers, "Sleep is for when your work is done, not before. That is what stim sticks and caf is for!" Since she was downing a mug of caf like a woman dying of thirst at the time, they all believed her.

Zule wasn't part of Padme's retinue right now. Instead, Ahsoka had been seconded to the Senator, almost undoubtedly getting a crash course in what it was like to be a leader on the civilian side of things as well as acting as a living lie detector.

She, Aayla, and Anakin had to first deal with the local fallout from the fight. Then they'd made a report to the Jedi Temple. And now, several hours after Jerec had died, they had taken a shuttle out to meet with the officers of the Fleet Jerec had led into the Polith System and investigate his personal quarters.

This would have been more of a priority if not for the fact that Anakin had vouched for the clone troopers that made up the vast majority of that fleet's personnel. While Zule and Aayla soothed the ruffled vratix, he had counteracted the fleet and had countermanded any order Jerec had left with them. Luckily, this was easily done, as the fleet had apparently been under his command since they had entered the system, something Anakin hadn't realized until then. That, and Jerec apparently hadn't thought of using his flotilla to cause trouble for some reason.

Anakin and Zule handled the questioning of the officers since Aayla, being one of the leaders of the GDL, would have created a conflict of interest. At least in the minds of those looking for such things. Of which there was a disturbing amount in the various intergalactic news agencies and the Republic bureaucracy. Indeed, many of the news agencies covering things in the Polith System were wondering if the GDL had ulterior motives for being the ones to save the star system, while others were questioning the timing of everything, hinting at collusion between the Confederacy and Galactic Defense League.

Thankfully, that wasn't something Anakin or Zule were fit to combat, so they could concentrate on more important matters.

"Master Jerec was placed in charge of us around a month after the war began. We'd run hit-and-run assaults, some deep space defense missions, and one relief operation together before being assigned to reinforce Sixth Fleet," the clone trooper who had been trained as a starship captain and acted as the flagship of the heavy cruiser Green Fern, Jerec's command ship, stated, staring back at the two Jedi sitting across the conference table from him and his officers. "He was good. Master Jerec had a grasp of space tactics that most Jedi seemed to lack and was very good at countering the enemy's starfighter swarm assault. But he was standoffish, officious, and distant. He wasn't someone who was looking to understand us, only lead us. Most of us troopers were fine with that."

Zule cocked her head thoughtfully, hearing more than what the words the man was using was saying. She hadn't really interacted at all with clones up to the battle against Jerec, but thankfully, Anakin had. He seemed to understand what the clone was saying, and his question of, "So he was not a warrior, you saw him simply as a Jedi?" Seemed to rouse a chuckle from several of the clones around the conference table.

"That's it exactly, General Skywalker." The difference in title seemed significant to Zule's ears, but she didn't say anything just yet.

"But he never led you in any kind of infantry action? You didn't take any missions for him that were off the books, so to speak?" All the officers shook their heads at Anakin's question, and he frowned. "When we first contacted you about what happened, you said that all of his

personal communication logs had deleted themselves from the ship's computer system, and always did, correct? When did that start?"

"From the moment he came aboard, general. We thought that was just a regular security feature of High Command's orders or a Jedi Order thing given the whole... um, the blanked stuff." One of the other clones spoke up, looking uncomfortable about bringing up the Blanked, although Zule could tell it was not because he was worried about offending the two Jedi. Rather, the whole topic made him uncomfortable, his thoughts shifting away from it like he just could not understand it.

"None of us work have been trained in counterespionage, general." Another clone trooper said. "ECM and ECCM, yes, but espionage, no."

"Exactly. And there wasn't anything overt about Master Jerec's actions that could have clued us into his true loyalties. He wasn't one of the proper officers, but he wasn't one of the worst either," the flagship captain added.

His name was Nikey, although Zule had been somewhat thrown by the fact that he had initially introduced himself by his trooper number and didn't seem to have a last name. *I can see why common Republic citizens look at clones askance. Being in a room with more than a dozen people who all have the same face is unusual, especially when they do things like that.*

"Can you at least tell us when he was using your ship's communication systems?" Zule asked aloud.

"We can do that. In fact, we pulled that information before you arrived. Master Jerec apparently called someone here in Polith System at least twice. Both times were short messages," the man who had mentioned ECM and ECCM stated, giving them precise times for both transmissions according to Galactic Standard Time, which was based on Coruscant's day cycle. "Both times he received replies, but like his outgoing messages, because those went directly to his personal comms number, they were deleted from the ship's logs."

Humming thoughtfully, Zule looked at the logs as the electronics warfare expert brought them up on the screen set to one side of the conference room. "When we fought the three Dark Side users, I got the impression that they were... well, obviously young for one thing. Younger than you, Anakin, and far more impetuous to boot. I don't think that they were working with Jerec long-term." She looked at the clone officer. "And you are certain it was Jerec who first sent out this anonymous call, not the other way around?"

The Specialist nodded, and Zule went on. "So it makes sense that he was trying to use those three in some fashion. I would wager anything that the first attack on us was them jumping the blaster. They attacked without Jerec being in position to back them up. But

evidently, whoever was giving Jerec his orders thought that taking out Harry was important enough to bust his cover for. I can't imagine he thought he would be able to get away clean."

Anakin nodded, then turned back to the officers. "I know we already went over this, but as this is part of the official investigation, I'll ask again from the records. Did Jerec leave you any orders? Any orders to follow on the announcement of his death? Are you in possession of any secret orders given to you by Master Jerec at any time since his assumption of command?"

Nike stiffened a bit, but he knew that the Jedi had a point, so he did not take the question personally, even though he had answered at least the first one already. Instead, he simply shook his head. "No, General. To the best of my knowledge, neither I nor any of my troopers have ever been given any secret orders."

"And would you be willing to be examined by Knight Secura?" Zule asked, her tone sympathetic. "We believe you, but C'baoth has shown an insane level of mastery with Mental Domination, a Force ability that allows him to change the minds of others in various ways. If Jerec learned such techniques--"

"Some of us could be ticking time bombs," the ship's security officer interrupted, his eyes wide. "Is that why you ordered us to shut down all our weapon's power systems, General?"

Anakin had ordered that during his first communication with the relief flotilla (which normally would be called the 789th Independent flotilla or simple Command Jerec, but Anakin the first was too generic, and the latter no longer applied). Now, he nodded grimly. "That, and the order on putting a lock on all your hanger doors."

"In that case, we can submit to such a, I don't know the term, a mental medical evaluation?" Nike looked a bit bewildered but understood. If there was even a chance someone in his fleet had been implanted with some kind of long-term order, whatever the type, he needed to know.

"Don't worry, Captain. In non-Force users, such orders will not be subtle things. Rather brute force messages implanted in your mind, forcing you to act in a certain way in relation to a specific set of exterior stimuli," Zule soothed. "That will have left residue that Aayla, or even the two of us, if with more difficulty, will be able to discover."

"That is for later," Anakin interjected. "I can see to it over a few days. For now, tell us more about Jerec. Did Jerec have a personal shuttle? A starfighter that he always used? A personal navigation droid?" The clone troopers that had helped to defend the vratrix hive from the droid commandos were already going over the ship that Jerec had taken down to the planet, but it was better to be sure. "When did he take command of the fleet? Was it ordered by

the High Command, or did he assume command because he was already in the area you were operating in?"

"When we were in combat, Master Jerec was always on the bridge. He seemed to disdain starfighters for the most part," Nike answered. "He was ordered to take command and seemed to resent it at first. We were first introduced to him over Kuat."

"And as you already said, he was standoffish and aloof. Can we assume that there was none among your crew that he routinely interacted with?" Anakin asked, seemingly unsurprised when the answer was a firm no, and he leaned back, frowning. "Still, given the actions of the Sith before this, I have to wonder why Jerec didn't try to use your fleet in some way to cause more chaos to cover his own attack."

"We would not have obeyed," one of the heretofore silent officers stated firmly. "One of the first things we did when we arrived in Thyferra was to our fleet under the command of Senator Amidala and yourself, General. As the officer involved in the defense of the Polith System, you were given nominal command over the fleet when we arrived. Command would have returned to Master Jerec if we were ordered out of the system, but not before."

That surprised Zule a bit. Not the order itself, of course. It made sense to assume that Anakin, as an officer who had been in the Polith System for much longer and who had worked already with the locals, should be in charge of the relief fleet. No, what startled her was the firmness with which the clone troopers stated that as if it were fact. Something about how he did so bothered her a bit, and she looked at Anakin. He didn't seem to think anything was off about it, and she resolved to speak to him about his work with clones in the future.

Anakin stood up now, reaching over to shake the Captain's hand, then the other officers in turn. "In that case, I think we are done here for now. I will be back to start vetting you for mental commands in an hour or so, which will let you organize your end of things. I take it that you are having your computer experts go through your operating system? Just to make sure that he didn't leave anything behind there, either?"

The looks Anakin got in return told him that no, they hadn't done so, and he sighed before making that an order. All the clone troopers looked worried, as well they might. Considering that a lot of the damage that the droid commandos had done here on Thyferra and elsewhere was malware-related, it was a valid concern, although, on top of their concerns about mental commands, it was a bit much. *There needs to be a limit on how paranoid we can become.*

As the two Jedi walked off to meet with Aayla in the quarters that master Jerec had apparently been assigned when he took command of this Force, Zule began her questioning of

her younger compatriot. "There seems to be a certain amount of significance with you being called General and Jerec being called a Master. Care to fill me in?"

Anakin chuckled wanly, shaking his head. "Sorry, I've been working with the 501st for so long. I've forgotten that a lot of Jedi haven't yet really worked with the clone troopers closely."

Most of the Jedi who were part of the Republic or GDL militaries worked in teams of five as attack groups or as part of command teams. Both groups, though, were made mostly out of Guardians or Sentinels, with only around a third of the Order's Consulars joining the war on the sharp end. That had been true since the war began. Despite the Senate's Military Oversight Committee always pushing for more Jedi at the front, Master Mace and Master Yoda were firm. No Jedi would face the brutality of warfare who they did not believe could handle it. Instead, most of the Consulars had picked up the slack in terms of criminal investigations, espionage, and elsewhere, particularly within the GDL and its vaunted Specters, although there, they were also helped by the former members of the Agri-Corps.

"The clones are indoctrinated from the moment their brains form in the cloning tubes to obey the chain of command. If a Jedi is put on top of that chain of command, they will respect the position, but he's got to back it up by actually performing well before he's given the title he's acting under. Until he does, any Jedi is simply an outsider placed there by the Republic. Master Windu and I earned our titles as Generals. Jerec didn't, apparently."

"So they respect Jedi as fighters but not as officers?"

"That, and they see us as outsiders. The clones have a, I hesitate to call it a society, but they have a brotherhood, a sense of camaraderie that is very hard to join. Shared danger can only be a part of it. There's got to be more to it, skill, empathy, ability, all that."

"I also don't like the way you use the term indoctrination," Zule said, her eyes narrowed even as they came to the lift that would take them down a few floors to the officer's quarters, where they would find Aayla and Master Jerec's room. "That word carries a large amount of negative connotations."

"Oh, I meant it to," Anakin said grimly. "Master Windu and I got some of the clones to open up about their training under the Kaminoans. It's brutal as hell, and especially so in instilling loyalty to the Republic, despite the fact the Kaminoans had genetically modified them to be more... docile. It's why clones are so willing to throw themselves into danger, even when there might be other ways to achieve their objective. Their sense of self-worth is almost entirely devoted to following orders. A common mantra among the clones is 'be loyal or be dead'. I know it's changing now that the Jedi Order's taken over their training. We're beginning to try to instill a more natural sense of loyalty to the Republic. But it's still there."

“Was that on purpose?” Zule demanded, stopping in place just outside of the lift as she stared at Anakin, aghast. “It sounds to me as if they were created to be almost as unthinking as droids. That is no way to train an army, let alone one you want to win against someone like the droids.”

“That’s what happens when a group of cloning specialists are told to create an army. They think numbers are everything.” Anakin looked disgusted, too, but waved off her concerns. “Unfortunately, it’s not like they don’t have a point. Without the clones manning our fleets, let alone making up the bulk of our armies, we would have lost the war already. Like I said, don’t worry. Master Gary’s already changing that, and believe me, Master Windu and I came up with a lot of new training regimens for the five hundred and first. All of their officers down to the Sergeant level know that we want them to think for themselves and to value the lives of their people.”

He smiled then as the door to the elevator opened and stepped through, gesturing Zule to join him quickly. “I’m actually quite proud of the 501st. They started as just one of many regiments, but I think we made them into some of the finest fighting troops in the galaxy, and only a portion of that has to do with the material we started with.”

Zule snorted at that. While she could feel the sense of attachment that Anakin was speaking about his regiment but said nothing about it. While Jedi were encouraged not to form attachments, in war, feeling a sense of fellowship with your fellow soldiers could only be a good thing. *And I’m the last person to comment on someone else’s attachments*, Zule reflected ruefully. *Well, next adjacent anyway, considering two of the people who I am so attached.*

Instead of commenting on that, Zule made a joke, even though she did have one more question she really wanted the answer to. “So you would be very much a training versus genetics sort of person? I bet the Kaminoans just loved that.”

When Anakin laughed, Zule let him do so, happy to see a spark of true amusement in the younger man. Whatever conversation he’d had with Harry before they had repaired the damage done to Thyferra’s weather system had seemingly worked. There was still a core of uncertainty, anger and restlessness within him, but it was much smaller than she had feared.

She did have a serious question to ask, though. “At any rate, I detected a lot of bitter-tasting thoughts towards the Confederacy, but I also caught a spike of confusion or something similar when we spoke about Harry in there.” Zule had a bit of Aayla’s Empathic skills but was much more at home sensing the general direction of thoughts than emotions, as most Jedi were. “I don’t think it’s about Harry as a person, but rather what he represents. So tell me, Anakin, what do the clone troopers think of the GDL?”

Anakin became serious, rubbing at his neck, his hands finding the padawan braid that still fell to one side of his face. Honestly, Zule felt that Anakin might well be another few months of seasoning away from becoming a Jedi Knight, despite how young he was. His connection to the Force was simply that profound, although his self-control seemed to be lacking a bit. "The GDL is a bit of a touchy subject. As I said, the clones have been indoctrinated to be loyal to the Republic. To many, the GDL deciding to split off from the Republic is almost as bad as the Confederacy. But they also know that the GDL are allies against the Confederacy. So it's a kind of moral quagmire that none of the clone troopers I've spoken to about seem willing to really dive into. They always fall back on the fact that they are loyal to the Republic and that from a military standpoint, the GDL might become a threat at some point."

He noticed Zule's wide-eyed look and shrugged as the doors opened. "I know that's not what you wanted here, but it's true. And it might be truer for other fighting men across the Republic than you want to know about either. Thankfully, I think the arrival of the Tyrant's Bane here over Thyferra is going to put paid to a lot of that thinking."

"I should hope so," Zule muttered, shaking her head. Her questions were answered, but not in a way she was comfortable with. "Say that I am happy that you are in command and not make. I was never trained to take command of anything but a criminal investigation or a small squad of security force operatives. Frankly, I don't understand how so many Jedi have been able to make the switch from our various previous occupations to that of commanding military troops in a war."

"It **is** hard. And I've noticed that a lot of Jedi who do tend to lean on their clone troopers for a lot of the logistics side of things, let alone strategy. Although I'm surprised to hear you say that, considering you're senior to me."

"You have more experience in this particular field, and you are firmly allied with the Republic. I'm not," Zule admitted with a laugh. Frankly, the idea of not being tied to the Senate but rather answering to the Force itself was freeing to her even now, years after she had stopped getting orders from the Order as a whole. "I protect Senator Padme because the Force told me I should way before this war even began, not because of being told to by the Council or the Senate. If anything, I'm allied to the GDL, given I was previously working alongside Harry and Aayla and their various diplomatic mission for the GDL."

In the long scheme of things, that actually wasn't all that long ago. It had not yet even been a year since the war began. But to many denizens across the galaxy, it sure as kriff felt longer. That was what happened when every day, millions of people were dying or fighting across the galaxy.

Regardless, Zule didn't see herself leaving Padme's side anytime soon. When she thought of being elsewhere, even before her feelings towards Padme had evolved, Zule hadn't received any hint of being needed elsewhere or not being where the Force wanted her to be. Not even the vague sense of restlessness most Jedi would feel if the Force wanted them to be doing something different these days, with the Veil blocking out the future as it was. *No, I am going to be with Padme for the long haul. Although, hopefully, the precise meaning of that term will change in the near future.*

Anakin nodded at that, understanding both her point, and there was a portion of the Republic that wasn't exactly too happy with the fact that it had taken the GDL's premier dreadnought and its leader to defend one of their most important systems. This was made even worse recently by a report that had come in just as they had docked with the Green Fern that the GDL already promised further military aid to the Polith system.

Apparently, a freighter had been there bringing in more defense station parts and had instead been ordered to divert to the Polith System. Soon, Golan fortresses would be installed here in Thyferra, and while those defense bases were not the end all and be all, having GDL-designed defenses in a Republic world was going to ruffle some feathers among the Centrist-dominated Senate and news agencies.

Already, Anakin was certain that there were pundits out there who would hear that news and push the narrative that perhaps the GDL wanted to somehow push the system to declare for the GDL. Even though that would be an act of war.

He said so aloud, and Zule snorted. "I'm not in that loop, but I trust Senator Amidala. She will be able to walk the line between what is necessary and what she has to do in order for the Republic to save face, even after it failed this star system badly."

Anakin snorted at that, a feeling of desire going through him when Zule mentioned Padme before being subsumed by the reluctant agreement he felt with that last statement. The Sixth Fleet and, more particularly its admiral had indeed failed the Republic as a whole and this system in particular by his inaction, by listening to advisors who had been bought and paid for by the Confederacy.

Yet there was something else in Zule's tone there, and he cocked his head thoughtfully, looking at her. "The way you say that it sounds as if you know what she might be deciding."

Zule shook her head. "No. And I have no idea why I said it myself. It just feels as if the Force is trying to tell me that Padme is going to make a lot of decisions here that will have long-term ramifications despite the best efforts of the Veil to block that. Whatever those choices entail, I trust Padme to make the right ones."

A moment later, the two of them reached the door leading into Master Jerec's quarters. The door opened with a silent swish, and the two of them stepped forward, only to find Aayla sitting on the floor of the simple, extremely spartan room, barely a foot in front of the door. Currently, the Rutian twi'lek was staring at several objects that she had laid out on the floor at the foot of the single, small desk, complete with a computer, that the room boasted. When the two other Jedi saw what she was looking at, they paused too, and Anakin let loose a gasp, his eyes staring from one particular object to another.

At first, Aayla didn't seem to notice them, and Zule looked down at her friend, seeing the far-away, lost look in her eyes, the same one she had when Zule had come out of her bacta tank and found Aayla leaning against Harry's. *Their connection is still dark, I see.* Gently she reached down and tapped Aayla on the shoulder, and the blue-skinned woman came back to the here-and-now.

"One of the first things my master taught me was how to use the Force to figure out where things were hidden: hidden compartments, places people could hide secrets or at least things of interest to me and the investigation." Aayla said briskly, as if she hadn't been sitting there for a bit without noticing the two newcomers. She pointed to one side of the room, where a portion of the bunk had been cut out to reveal a hidden compartment around the size of a man's head in the blank metal underneath the bunk. It was something very obviously added through brute force measures, but still very well hidden for all of that.

Another wave pointed to the desk itself, where a single drawer was open. When Anakin craned his neck up a bit, he could see that a false bottom had been removed from within the drawer. He could also see that both hidden sights had wires and a small, thimble-sized bit of some gray substance. "Baradium boob traps?"

Baradium was the type of explosive used in grenades the galaxy over. When treated with other chemicals, it could become as malleable as plastic, although overexposure could color the hands of the user.

"Yep. Luckily, Master Vos's training came in handy again. I was able to disconnect the wires before opening the false bottom or the side of that other hiding place," Aayla answered, not moving her eyes from where she was nearly glaring at the largest of the objects on the floor across from her. "It was extremely difficult, but I managed."

"Are those holocrons? I realize that seems a stupid question but that is the last thing I thought we would find," Zule said, pushing aside her worries for her friend to stare at the same objects that had grabbed Anakin's attention. "I've never seen two of them anywhere but within the library at the Jedi Temple."

Zule hadn't even seen the holocrons that had been sent with the Jedi younglings into the Ruusan Sector. They had been carefully stowed and hidden away and had not been removed until they arrived on Ruusan itself.

"They're old, whatever they are..." Aayla said, frowning, now fully present. "Extremely old. One of them feels like that of a Jedi. The other..."

"Sith for certain," Zule said, scowling. "The design tells us that much." She reached out through the Force for a moment, not sending energy into the thing to activate it but simply to feel it out. The instant she did, she nearly recoiled, such was the vile Dark Side energies... and the presence... within.

Beside her, Anakin also flinched but could not keep himself from staring at the object with a look far more avaricious than Zule liked before he seemed to shake his head. The next instant, he slumped to one side of Aayla, taking a meditation pose as his gaze flicked over the other objects laid out next to the larger holocron.

holocrons were not simple receptacles of information. First, holographic chronicles could normally only be activated by the Force and were always crafted using the Force to mold an organic crystal lattice into a structure that could store the memories of the creator. In so doing, the creator could leave a portion of himself into the holocron to act as an arbiter or warden of the information within. Occasionally, larger holocrons would hold information about specific topics, such as lightsaber training or the use of Force Push, or even all the missions a group of Jedi went on in a specific sector of space, with one ancient Jedi spirit to help guide the user to the specific information he was searching for.

The two holocrons Aayla and her companions were looking at currently were as different in appearance as they were in how they felt through the Force to the three Jedi. But both were also unusual in comparison to most in the Jedi temple in their appearance.

The one that felt 'normal' to their senses was a near-flat circle around the size of Anakin's palm, the top of it a slight mound as if the thing had been made to be held in a cupped hand. The top of the mound was marked by an inset area in which a red thread of some kind was protected under transparent plastic or aluminum, which seemed to merge with the rest of the holocron, creating a smooth surface.

The size of it was unusual and the shape even more so. Most of the ones in the Jedi library were slightly larger dodecahedrons about the size to be held in one hand. None of the trio had ever heard of a holocron being a semi-circular creation like this. That was strange, as was the fact the thing radiated in the Force far more than most holocrons made in the modern age, as marked by the end of the New Sith Wars more than a thousand years ago.

Anakin said so aloud, and Zule, who had spent more time in the Temple Library at the temple than either of the others, agreed. "It will mean that there is enough of the Gatekeeper within to act almost as if the enneagram is alive. It isn't a process that the Order uses much any longer, thinking it somewhat arrogant, and far more in keeping with how Sith Lords in ancient times were known to leave a kind of Dark Side Force Ghost imprinted into... their holocrons..."

Her voice trailed off, and all three of them turned their attention to the other holocron. "That was what I was thinking too," Aayla murmured, wishing for, oh, just the thousandth time, that Harry was up and here with her, or at least able to look over her shoulder through their link. But he was still unconscious in the bacta tank, the connection silent and dark. Yet she did not allow herself to dwell on that again, looking at Zule quizzically. "Although I've never heard the term enneagram before."

"Master Nu mentioned it to me once a few weeks ago. I've taken to spending time in the Library when Padme's in the senate building, and I can't be in there with her for whatever reason," Zule shrugged. "A spirit like that can be powerful enough to interact with the Force in some measure, especially Sith spirits, created by beings who believed in their arrogance that they are beyond death and used their holocron to, in some fashion, prove that very thing."

That sounded almost like a quote but the others didn't call Zule out on it. Instead, they continued to stare at the Sith holocron like it was a deadly snake, which, in a way, was quite accurate.

The Sith holocron was larger than its fellow. Far larger, in fact, beyond the size of normal holocrons. It looked around seven inches across at the base of the pyramid shape and 7 inches tall. There were markings on it, markings that none of the three had ever seen before in any kind of language. That was unusual as well, as normally, most holocrons would have no such filigree on them, although their containers could be quite ornate depending on the creator.

Anakin quickly pulled out a scanner, running it over the thing from a distance, and then pulled out his communicator, asking Artoo to run it through an analysis and a search of the Hypernet. He had added a highly advanced search function to Artoo's operating system years ago, a sort of secret tool for Anakin when he was assigned to research projects or sifting through data to search for a criminal or piece of information.

Soon, Artoo came back, reporting a negative. If that was some kind of language, it certainly wasn't one of the modern dialects used throughout the Republic.

Anakin reported this to the other two Jedi, fighting once more the urge to reach out and take up both holocrons, to activate them by allowing some of his Force to flow through them, to bring to life the spirits of the Force users which had been imparted into them in ages past. What information, what skills, and power could they hold?

But he refrained. Instead, Anakin closed his eyes, concentrating on breathing for a moment, the memory of his lessons with Master Windu serving in good stead.

Aayla smiled in approval at that, but most of her attention was on the Sith holocron itself. “The question is, is the spirit within the reason why Jerec fell to the Dark Side? Or was it given to him for that reason? Whatever the case, the spirit within will need to be contained and questioned, as it might be able to lead us to the Sith out there.”

For a moment, the three of them were silent, staring at the thing, ignoring the other holocron and the small data storage devices that lay between them which Aayla had also found. The three of them simply looked at it, then with a sigh, Aayla held out a hand towards it. The others both tensed, and Aayla sent out a small tendril of Force into the device.

Normally, it would take someone using the Dark Side, feeling hatred or anger, to activate a Sith holocron. But a Jedi could do so with enough concentration and willpower. It was like trying to push a needle at the end of a long thread through an invisible maze while the walls attacked your mind with hatred and fury, trying to not only break your mind with those feelings but taint it at the same time. If any normal Jedi Knight, and even most Masters, tried to activate a Sith holocron, they would face exhaustion or some kind of mental trauma.

But Aayla’s mind was joined to Harry’s, their conjoined mental landscapes protected via the method Lily had taught them. Occlumency. Their connection to the greater Force came in the mental scape’s version of large exterior hatches. The defenses of the Sith holocron raged and railed at her mental walls but could not find a way through.

The silent combat continued, but in the end, the winner was never in doubt. As the other two Jedi watched on, Aayla activated the pyramidal holocron. A moment later, the tip of the pyramid glowed a reddish hue, and a second later, the holocron’s spirit appeared above the pyramid.

The creature looked near-human, although his precise species was anyone’s guess. When he had died, or been imprinted into the holocron, he had been sallow faced, his skin so frail it looked like parchment with hundreds of wrinkles, through which his skull could almost be seen. His face also had strange markings on it, so tiny they looked like whole lines had been written in places. On his head he wore a crown made of steel and cloth, and his eyes, deep set, seemed to glow with tiny pinpricks of deeper blue than the rest of the apparition in dark sockets.

The being hissed, and a wave of raw Dark Side energy flashed out from the holocron. It became quickly evident that Zule’s warning was very accurate: the creator of the holocron had imparted far more of his presence and Force powers into the device than any Jedi would have. It

wasn't enough to impact the physical world, but all three Jedi grimaced as it assaulted their minds.

"Ahh, it is a foolish Jedi who believes themselves inviolate from the Dark Side, yet you were willing to take the chance in the first place. That speaks of arrogance, and that can be... what are you?" The Sith enneagram began, breaking off as it stared at Aayla, an expression of pure revulsion on his face. "What do I sense within you, something of the Light, a connection based on the Light alone? How was such a thing created?"

The being seemed to shake his head, and instantly, illusions began to assault Aayla's mind. They could not get through her defenses yet acted on it like a mix between slithering snakes and corrosive acid, eating away as they slithered around, trying to get through. This kept Aayla busy renewing her defenses. "Never mind, you cannot serve, slave race."

Even as she started to rebuild her mental defenses, Aayla realized with a start that the moment the Sith Gatekeeper's appearance had popped up, it had grabbed at the tendril of Force and was now feeding off it. This meant that she also had to attack that connection, not just hunker behind her mental shielding until the holocron used up its available energy.

However, the creature's efforts had roused Harry's mind somewhat. Color and sound flooded into her mental world once more through their connection as he began to pour his own Force power, slowly, unsurely, but steadily. His consciousness had yet to return, but it was a marked improvement, and Aayla smiled serenely at the spirit as she started to create the mental equivalent of Force Light. *It's worked before, why won't it work again.*

Even as the spirit tightened its grip on the Force tendril feeding into his holocron it spoke into Zule and Anakin's minds at the same time while keeping up the pressure on all three Jedi's minds. In this, it showed the mastery of the Dark Side that a true Sith Lord could reach, being able to create and manipulate multiple mental connections.

In the case of Zule, this took the form of images taken from her mind. Of Padme, of Harry and Aayla. Of one of them locked in the throes of passion with Zule. Of her sitting on a throne, with all three servicing her like a queen. Of her being lauded as the next Grand Master, having discovered the hidden Sith behind the war.

With a grimace, Zule fought through the pressure on her mind, though, ignoring his whispers, that Andeddu could teach her the Dark Side, and then she could take what she wanted. None of the images were right for her, despite a small portion of her being quite happy with each, Zule knew that like everything telse the Dark Side offered, such delights would fade quickly.

Yet Andeddu was not stupid. Within seconds he could sense this attack would fail. Zule did not have the same connection forged of Light Side energy that repulsed him in Aayla, but her mind lacked hatred or even real anger, the kind of violent, wrathful emotion that he could use to drive a wedge into her mind. It lacked the harsh, red-rimmed jealousy that could be used to cause a Jedi to fall, the kind of jealousy that was the main reason why the New Oath and the push to not form attachments began, the type that had led Githany and others to fall in the New Sith Wars. While she had desires and connections, Zule was fully in control of both and unwilling to wreck what was already there for her own gain.

Within moments, while Andeddu continued his assault on the two women, his main attention had shifted to Anakin, whose face was locked in a rictus of pain and anger as the feelings of the Dark Side flowed over him as it did the other two. "Yes...." He whispered into the young man's ear. "Yes, see it, see what you could do with the Dark Side."

His words were accompanied by illusions like the ones hammering into Zule's psyche, although the content of those images was very different. Grievous's head being crushed by a wave of Anakin's hand. A Hutt dying, Force Lightning turning the large leech-like creature into charcoal as she ghost of his mother cheered him on. Hordes of droids being destroyed by orbital bombardments ordered by Anakin, Anakin at the head of an army of clone troopers marching across the surface of Neimoidia wielding two blades, one red, the other purple in memory of his Master. Anakin freeing slaves while Force Choking their oppressors. Padme in his arms, staring at him with fear and adoration, Harry dead behind him.

"You have felt the touch," Andeddu continued. "You have given into anger. You have looked past the Jedi teachings more than once, only to be pulled back in by those you have some loyalty toward. But I sense it. You are ready, ready to throw off that shackle at last. To achieve the heights of power that you are destined to. Reach out, take my holocron in your hand, and I will teach you the ways of the Sith of the Dark Side, and everything you desire can be yours. Remake the universe in your image!"

However, the spirit had overstepped itself using that last image. It was in some ways the most enticing, but in one particular way, the image with Padme was also the most flawed. It did show Anakin an aspect of his feelings toward Padme and Harry that he didn't realize, the depth of his jealousy for their friendship even though he had not seen any hint of it being more than that, and knew about Harry's connection to Aayla. That wasn't the mistake, no, that was in the look that illusion-Padme was giving illusion-Anakin.

Fear was not part of love. It could not be. Adoration was not love either, although it could be part of that greater emotion. The look that Andeddu had put into illusion-Padme's face was that of a slave being forced to serve a master she feared and had been trained to adore, the

look of Andeddu's concubines when he was alive. This was not love, and Andeddu could not even conceive of how to make that emotion look right.

That was enough for Anakin to start fighting back. That illusion faded, and gritting his teeth, Anakin began to push the other illusions and the feelings of controlled anger and delight that came with them out of his mind. "NO..." he growled as he buckled down. "You would help me like you did Jerec? Making his head so big he thought he was infallible? Or is that just a Sith thing? Did you turn him to the dark side, or did someone else?"

"Jerec, ah, what a magnificent mind that man had. Full of tricks, of knowledge, and desire for more with little to any true connection to the regimented Jedi way of thinking," Andeddu mused. "But even he does not know the true power of the Dark Side is seen in controlling others, in the use of anger and hate to make one stronger! All he cared about was knowledge and gaining power through it. It was not enough obviously to truly drive him to greatness, or you three would not be here."

Andeddu's expression seemed to twist for a moment as he looked at Aayla again, feeling her start to take control of the thread of Force power away from him. "Pick me up, Anakin Skywalker, give into the Dark Side and feed me! Only I can..."

Anakin stared back, no, glared back at the spirit. "**No.**" The one word seemed almost forged of durasteel as he spoke aloud, the first time in who knew how long any of the Jedi had made an actual audible sound, all the previous words being spoken directly into their minds, although not in the same manner as Aayla and Harry could speak, as Andeddu voice was clearly an exterior element. "You're right. I have felt the pull of the Dark Side. But I will not give in. Your illusions hold nothing for me!"

"Then you will forever be weak! A follower when you could be a lord, taking what you want!" Andeddu hissed, redoubling his attack on Anakin's mind.

"Taking is not earning, and fear is not **any** part of what I want!" Anakin roared back, pushing out the final illusion in his mind.

That was as far as the spirit got before Aayla finally struck. The Force she had been gathering in herself lashed out around the grip the spirit had on the first Force tendril she had sent out. The mental/spiritual version of Force Light slammed down on Andeddu's mental hand on that thread with all the power of a lightsaber.

"AGHGHH curse you, Jedi!!" The ghost of the ancient Sith Lord held within the holocron screamed. Aayla's Force energy ceased feeding into the holocron with all the suddenness of a guillotine as the spirit roared, almost as if it was in physical pain, no longer connected to the Force beyond its prison.

The instant the spirit disappeared, the Dark Side pressure all three Jedi had been operating under faded, and Aayla slumped to the side, leaning against Zule, who in turn leaned against her, looking even more haggard than Aayla. Although it had been Aayla's Force powers Andeddu had been leeching off, she had a connection to Harry to buoy her up, a connection that had faded back into the same Andeddu as it had been for the most part since he fell unconscious. Even better, Aayla had been a part of an even more devastatingly exhausting mental battle before, when Aayla and the others with her fought the spirits of the Sith and twisted Jedi within the Force Font on Ruusan. Zule didn't have either of those and looked as if she could barely move, let alone stand up.

Anakin was only a little better. He had a far greater connection to the Force than Zule but had also become the main target of the spirit as it tried to take him over. Yet after a moment, Anakin shook himself, then stood up resolutely, only to grasp the side of Jerec's bed beside him as his legs nearly gave out below him. "Ooh, I, I am going to find a safe somewhere on the ship, and I'm going to stuff that thing into it. Then I'm going to seal it shut!"

"A most excellent idea," Aayla breathed, recovering quickly. "Zule, I think you or Anakin will need to deliver that back to the Jedi Temple. They can safely examine it and perhaps do away with the stored Dark Side energy within. Or just destroy it. Frankly, at this point, I do not care which. I doubt Andeddu would be able to give us any answers about Jerec or how he fell to the Dark Side in the first place at this point."

"His taunts aside, I agree. If Jerec had learned anything from that spirit, we would have seen it in our battle with him," Zule answered as Aayla put an arm around her shoulders as Anakin marched out of the room. As he left, Zule went on, glancing over her shoulder at the now-closed door. "And can I say how very happy I am that Anakin was able to pass that Trial of Spirit? If what Andeddu showed him was similar in tone to what I saw, anyway."

For a moment, Aayla didn't get it, then she began to laugh quietly. "Yes, I actually believe that would count as a Trial of Spirit. If so, he is one step closer to becoming a knight. Master Windu would be pleased, I think."

The two fell silent, then as slowly Aayla stood up and helped Zule move over to where she could sit on Jerec's bunk. Their silence was a companionable one but was also somewhat fraught with unsaid feelings. The two of them had come to a semi-understanding of the fact that there needed to be a conversation soon, but it wasn't just with the two of them. It had to happen with Padme to start with, and Harry when he was up and about.

So it left the two of them somewhat in limbo for the moment, and Andeddu's illusion-based assault on Zule's mind didn't help matters. She had rejected the Dark Side feelings of

conquest and domination that came with them, but that didn't mean the illusions hadn't had an impact on her libido.

Still, the pair remained silent, simply leaning against one another. And if the two women clasped hands, that was no one's business but their own.

When he returned, Anakin also brought a data pad that would be able to read the data discs that Aayla had discovered along with the two holocrons. Zule held open the safe, and Aayla pushed the holocron into it with a rough shove of the Force, closing it quickly. Anakin then used his lightsaber to lightly melt the door so that it would take a lightsaber or a construction-grade plasma torch to get through the metal again.

When that was done, they all looked at the smaller blue holocron, then back at one another. "I had never even heard of a Darth Andeddu. You want to bet that that thing is just as old?"

"It doesn't feel as if it is," Zule hummed, shaking her head. Aayla agreed with that, but there was only one way to find out.

Anakin took the lead this time, shunting a bit of his force power into the holocron. Instantly, an image appeared above it.

She was a middle-aged woman, the set of her face and shoulders showing a profound sense of experience and gravitas, but the set of her mouth showing a hint of good humor. Her hair was flame red, mixed with a bit of gray and went down to below her shoulders. Her eyes were dark green, reminding Aayla very strongly of Harry's. That gave her a clue as to who this could be, and she gasped even before the image spoke.

"To you who have earned the opportunity to learn from my mistakes and triumphs alike, greetings. My name is Nomi Sunrider, and I welcome all three of you to learn from me if that is what you wish." She seemed to lock eyes with Aayla for a moment, her smile widening as she seemed to sense something within Aayla, as had the previous ghost. "Ah, there is something unusual about you, young lady. A connection to someone else and the shape of that link is not that of a master and padawan but of equals. It also seems to be... interestingly colored with emotions, emotions that remind me of my husband. I'm happy to see that the Jedi still maintain such connections."

"Ah, heh, not so much these days revered one." Aayla felt somewhat embarrassed for some reason as she admitted that. "My bond to my other half was forged accidentally when we were very young, and without the approval of the Jedi Order as a whole, although they did not believe it safe to try and break it either. Neither of us has ever had cause to regret it, and it has become the bedrock of our lives."

Nomi laughed, a rich, almost maternal sound. "The Living Force moves in mysterious ways regardless of what age one has been born into. Believe me, I well understand that given the depths my life reached, the darkness I fought, both personal and Sith-related, the various travails I saw. Overcoming such can become a strength, although I sense you already know this."

Aayla nodded with her own laughter echoing around the room as Anakin and Zule slowly came out of their shock at seeing one of the most revered Jedi Masters here in holocron form. Nomi Sunrider was a Jedi Master after the end of the Great Sith War and had been instrumental throughout the war in various ways, besting Ulic Quel Dromma and capturing him, defeating the Sith's plots on Empress Teta once before leading a retreat later on, commanding many of the battles in the war, up to and including the assault on Exar Kun's last holdout, whose location had long been lost to history before now.

"Your pardon, Master Sunrider, but the previous owner of your holocron was Master Jerec, a Miralukan Jedi who apparently had turned to the Dark Side. Can you tell me how he came to be in possession of your holocron? It was thought lost during the New Sith Wars when Skere Kaan turned on the Order and set off a bomb in the Jedi Temple to cover his escape from Coruscant."

"This holocron was never actually part of any greater collection to the best of this memory's knowledge," Nomi answered. "This was a personal holocron created by me for my daughter Vima and our descendants. It was to be sent to Corellia, where Vima had settled down, but as you can see, it never arrived."

The enneagram shrugged. "As for Jerec, yes, he did activate my holocron, although as an embedded Gatekeeper, I have no sense of time. All I can tell you is he activated me many times. The first three dozen times he did so, he was a Jedi like any other, eager to learn. Jerec and I had several incredibly engaging discussions about my past, although he did not seem to want to learn anything specific from me as a Jedi Master. Rather, he was most interested in the events I was a part of. I imagine he wrote up several treatises on the campaigns I was a part of during the Great Sith Wars."

"Those would be amazingly helpful. Given all the wars since your time, our understanding of ancient history like that is sparse at best," Zule admitted.

"I hope that his work on that score was not tainted by the Dark Side. I could sense within him the last two times he activated my holocron. At that point, he demanded to know about my ability to sever someone from the Force, something I had mentioned when speaking of Ulic." A very conflicted expression crossed the semi-spirit's face as Nomi spoke of her former lover turned enemy turned friend before she continued. "I refused to teach him my technique. Neither that nor the Light Wall technique that I and many Jedi knights had to use in our final

assault on Exar Kun's base. He was persistent and obstreperous, and I refused to aid him further."

"... There is a lot to impact there," Aayla murmured. "This Force Wall sounds like a Force Light Construct. If we can learn that... propagate the ability through the Order, the Veil of the Dark Side won't be as much of a problem any longer."

The spirit's eyes widened at that, but she said nothing as Aayla went on. "Although I have never heard of someone's ability to simply cut off someone from the Force."

"It is a difficult technique, and it is only possible in cases of extreme duress upon the user. I might be able to teach you, as you know something of Force Light already, but it will be difficult and time-consuming," some right or said.

She then turned her attention to Anakin and Zule. She started a little at Zule's appearance, apparently being thrown off a bit by her light reddish skin, but smiled after a moment, examining both of them closely. "Interesting. And do the two of you wish to learn for me as well? I sense that you, young man, have recently had a brush with the Dark Side and yet renounced it. Very well done. Those who can come back from such trials are often more centered on the Force and their own skin. And as for you, Miss. You are quite strong in the Force and yet feel anxious about something. Something emotional."

"You sense correctly, Master Sunrider. But myself and those involved in such can deal with it in time. I would be delighted to learn lightsaber techniques from you or anything else you would be willing to teach. But I warn you, I will have to remand the custody of your holocron into the greater Jedi Order."

"That shift was one of the things that I pushed for, copying and having multiple copies of our ancient teachings, spreading them out to many different temples. Having it all in one place, as we did on Ossus, was a dangerous weakness. I was not in favor of Coruscant becoming the main temple, but I understood the necessity of the time, with the Mandalorian Wars beginning as they were. Still, I felt it was a move that would come in time to bind us too closely to those making policy rather than the common man of the Republic."

Anakin snorted, shaking his head. "Then you might be interested to know that kind of tendency did indeed occur but that many are trying to offset it these days. Primarily thanks to Aayla and her bonded."

"That pleases me indeed," Nomi answered. "Far too often we were forced to work with the Republic on a military level in my day, forsaking all our other duties, particularly to the common man. But come, young ones. Do you wish to learn from me now, or did you simply wake me up to ask questions about Jerec?"

“Unfortunately, Mistress, at the moment, we are trying to discover how Jerec fell to the Dark Side. If, as you say, you do not know nor can give us a time frame, we will have to turn our attention elsewhere.”

“I can tell you that he was searching for one thing more than anything else,” Nomi answered. “Something he called the Jebble Box. I sensed at the time that it was an old artifact, older even than my age not just your own, and dangerous. But while I attempted to lead him in that search rather than in other... more dangerous things, I could not tell him anything about it, which he eventually discovered.”

The spirit smiled a bit grimly then. “At which point he was very close to throwing my holocron out of the airlock. But his obsession with knowledge stayed his hand, although he never used this holocron after that. I believe that it was his search for knowledge, his obsession to learn and know more than others, that eventually led Jerec to the Dark Side. That is another tool that the Dark Side users can use to drag you down into the darkness. The fact that they believe that they have esoteric information, skills that no user of the Force alone could ever discover or use. Never realizing that it is because they have no fear of the consequences or pain they cause that allows much of their so-called Sith Magic to do what it does.”

Nomi shook her head then. “I will warn you, young ones, that Jerec was, for all his eog, a past master of discovering esoteric knowledge. I do not doubt that he will have unearthed Dark Side things elsewhere in the galaxy, and if there are other Dark Side users out there, they might be in possession of them. Although not the Jebble Box, at least.” She added to somewhat offset that moment of pessimism. “Unless something has changed markedly anyway since the last time he contacted me he still had only begun to narrow down his search for that item. Although, again, I cannot tell you when that was.”

The spirit again flickered, accessing its memory of the previous times Nomi’s enneagram had interacted with Jerec. “Specifically, there were only two names he used in front of me that could be of use to you. He mentioned that a ‘Sidious’ was right and spoke the name with a tone of veneration, fear and annoyance. As if he were a master that Jerec was forced to serve rather than follow his own interests, and it annoyed him that I could not give him the information he sought to be able to combat him. He also mentioned, however, that he had at least been able to keep my own holocron and a Sith holocron from Sidious’ eyes.”

Aayla and the others all looked at one another, wondering if maybe that was the name of the Hidden Sith Master, the one who was truly behind the war rather than C’baoth. Or if perhaps that was the name that C’baoth had taken when he became a Sith. Either way, it was interesting, although not very helpful, as was the hint that maybe Jerec hadn’t been all that loyal to the man.

"The other name was Prophet Cronal. That name was spoken of in an almost friendly fashion," Nomi's spirit mused. "Jerec seemed to feel some measure of fellowship with him as another seeker of knowledge. That is all I can tell you, young ones. I wish you luck on your investigation and your efforts against the Sith going forward."

"That has been helpful, mistress. Thank you. Please go back to your earned rest for now. I am certain that there will be many a Jedi Knight coming to you for advice and training in the very near future, even if, as you say, the passage of time does not matter much to you," Aayla joked lightly, filing the name Cronal away as well. *Names alone won't help, but at least they give some measure of shape to the evil we have been fighting for so long.*

The spirit of a woman who could be in many ways called the founder of the modern Jedi order chuckled and disappeared, flowing back down into her holocron.

Aayla slowly removed her force powers from the holocron, looking over at the other two. "Well, that was fascinating."

"Are you certain that Lily wasn't related to her? Because I can't be the only one who saw the resemblance there, right?" Anakin asked sardonically, causing the other two to chuckle. Something about interacting with Sunrider's spirit contained within the holocron had banished all the wariness and tiredness they had been feeling after dealing with Andeddu.

"You aren't," Aayla and Zule laughed as one. "I can easily remember several times when others wondered if Lily was related to the Sunrider clan when we were younger." Aayla was actually tempted to keep the holocron of the ancient Jedi Master for herself but knew she could not. It would not be right. *Although requesting a copy is certainly acceptable.* She had no idea how to copy a holocron but knew the High Council would and would see the point behind doing so, too.

With renewed energy, Anakin picked up the data discs, sliding them into the data pad he held. One did seem to contain what Jerec had been speaking to Nomi about, a treatise on the Great Sith War. While probably fascinating and very informative, sifting a thousand pages plus work like that would take days of dedicated work, if there was any information on the present-day Sith within it in the first place.

Next, though, the trio of Jedi found themselves looking at what looked like several star maps.

"It looks as if these were different search patterns," Zule said, frowning thoughtfully. She and her past master had hunted down murderers and serial killers who had fled from their home system, and she was familiar with what a search pattern built on determining where ships

leaving a single system could be bound for looked like. “Those are shipping designations for the various tracked ship routes.”

“This one is deep in the Core World sector,” Anakin pointed to the second star map, frowning. “Or at least the edge looks like it. I recognize the Star Swarm Cluster, although it isn’t labeled here. And the map is...good grief. The Deep Core. That whatever he was searching for is in the Deep Core?”

“Or could be hidden there. If all three of these maps have to do with the same thing, then Jerec had some radically different ideas as to where it could be. Look, this one is the Gordian Reach. I know that territory very well, as it’s very near the D’Astana Sector.” The D’Astana Sector was where Serenno was located, and the entire sector had become part of the GDL bar Ord Cestus, a penal world that had been part of the Techno Union prior to Harry leading an assault on the planet that destroyed its orbitals. Since then, the planet had not received any aid from the CIS, who had seemingly written it off as a bad investment.

“But what this could pertain to, I don’t know. The Gordian Reach is a very sparsely populated area of space, with only about seven systems I could name off hand. It’s a mixture of Republic and CIS, but the worlds aren’t producers of anything and are self-sustaining,” Aayla rattled off from memory. “I could maybe see them as a place where the CIS could hide their hidden shipyards, but we’ve had no intel of odd ship movements or anything else.”

“Hmm, it doesn’t have much information, does it? It’s just a map no markers on it or anything. In contrast, this one looks as if he narrowed down the area he was searching for anyway,” Anakin said, pulling up a fourth star map.

This one Aayla also recognized instantly and she shook her head with a chuckle. “Good grief! Was he trying to find a way into the Ruusan Sector? Really? Even knowing it is cut off from the rest of the galaxy?”

Zule looked at her sharply, and Anakin frowned pensively. “The sight of where the New Sith Wars ended, right? There’s a continual Force Storm around the entire sector that’s cut it off from the rest of the galaxy. No one can go in or out.”

“True.” Aayla chuckled dryly, keeping everything else inside. There was no need for Anakin to know about that Force Storm’s change of management, and keeping Ruusan a secret had become second nature by this point. *Master Fay would eat his brain alive! Or purge him of the Dark Side somehow, one or the other.*

Those maps and the treatise on the Great Sith War were all that the computer disks contained. There was nothing else there, no commentary, no notes, no information on what he was seeking. It was very evident that whatever Jerec had been doing, he had kept to himself,

above and beyond his connection to the Sith. This annoyed all three Jedi, and they spent several moments looking between the star maps, debating what he was looking for and the importance of this Jebble Box, whatever it was, as well as whether or not they would have time to search it out themselves.

Zule's communicator buzzed, ending their discussion. She opened it and saw Padme's visage filling the small screen. "Senator Amidala? Is there something wrong?"

"If by that you mean dangerous, no. Although there might be a great deal of things that have been going wrong here in Thyferra for a good while. I request Jedi aid to help me sift through... certain accusations and information that have been coming forward. Ahsoka can only do so much, I'm afraid. And if Anakin is there, ask him if he could recommend a troop of clone troopers who are good at computer cracking. Specifically, the type that are able to figure out when numbers are lying to them."

The clipped, angry way Padme said all this had Zule sitting up abruptly, straightening her back and nodding, while Anakin stared at her communicator, frowning. "I do have a few from the 501st who lived through the battle against Grievous that might be able to help in that area. I'll get you in touch with them, Senator," he said loudly enough for Zule's communicator to hear him.

"Good. And if the three of you are certain of the loyalty of that fleet, might I ask that all three of you return? As I said, there is a lot to get done around here."

With that, Padme cut the connection, and all three of the Jedi turned to look at one another before Zule chuckled. "You heard the Senator." With that, she stood up, and headed for the door. Since they had all come in their own starfighters, she didn't need to wait for the other two, and she sensed that Aayla wanted to talk to Anakin.

This left Aayla and Anakin alone for the moment. Sensing that the older Jedi had something she wanted to say to him, Anakin waited instead of heading out the door himself. Looking at the Rutian twi'lek, he felt slightly nervous but still proud of the fact that he had been able to refuse the temptation offered by Andeddu.

This was the first thing Aayla brought up, smiling at the younger man. "You did very well to push through the assault on your mind that the Sith Lord attacked you with. I know how hard that can be. When a Sith attempts to lure you to the Dark Side rather than simply attacking you is when they are at their most pernicious, just like the emotions hatred and fear are more treacherous than anger."

"It can also be seen as a sign of weakness. If that Sith spirit could, he'd have simply invaded our minds and taken us over. He couldn't. Andeddu could only send those illusions into

our minds, whisper his sickly sweet words in our ears... and I just imagined the physical equivalent of that," Anakin shuddered a little, shaking his head. "Gah, those teeth! But he made a mistake, showed me images that he... Well, let's just say that Andeddu couldn't get the details right. Yet you think that anger can't be insidious?"

Aayla chuckled at Anakin's joke before raising a hand and waving it back and forth a bit. "It's not so much that anger can't be treacherous, and that is the word I used, Anakin. Insidious implies more conscious control on the part of the Dark Side. Hatred and fear are debilitating whenever we Force users feel them, and they should be discarded as quickly as possible. Anger, on the other hand, can be useful if it is tempered and feeds into righteous determination and is not fed by the other two emotions. In most well-balanced people anger is also fleeting, there and gone. Fear and hatred tend to stick around longer. But so long as your righteous determination is controlled? Everything in moderation and under control is the key. So long as you have that, you are not in danger of falling into the loop that is the Dark Side, your darker emotions constantly feeding into themselves, driving all out all else."

That reminded Anakin of the first lesson he had ever had with Master Windu, and for some reason, the memory of it caused him to smile. "When you say that, you remind me of this time that Master Windu took me into the arts and crafts room in the temple. You know the one; where younglings are taught how to paint and so forth as part of their lessons in meditation, observation, and controlled expression?"

When Aayla nodded, he went on, shaking his head. "Looking back on it, I have to say that what strikes me most about the memory is how, how out of place Master Windu was there. We had just met, and he was really intimidating, you know, especially after I learned it'd been him who had killed that Dark Side user on Naboo. He was so tall, towering over me, his presence filling the room. And then, he was playing with paint, talking about how each color was a different emotion, and how fear and hatred was the equivalent of the color black, which would eventually take over everything else."

"Master Windu was far more than simply a renowned duelist. His understanding of the Force and his teaching skills were both profound. He will be missed, but I know he would be proud of you, Anakin. And not just because of your ability to refuse the blandishments of that Sith spirit. No, he would be proud of the person you have become since he first met you. Have you had the chance to listen to the message he left you?"

"Harry told you, of course he did. The two of you can't keep secrets, can you?" Anakin's tone was droll but also questioning, and Aayla answered with a shake of her head.

"I'm afraid not. There have been a time or two where we've been able to keep small secrets, such as where we're going to eat for a date or something similar, but those are very rare

and more about misdirecting the other person rather than simply hiding it within our joined mindscape.”

“I don’t think that I could deal with that. Having someone else’s mind connected to my own, having someone else’s mental words going off in my head, would be disturbing,” Anakin confessed, shaking his head. “A part of me, a part of me thinks that your connection is perhaps the most certain expression of love there can ever be. The rest of me would be very worried that I’d lose my individuality if I had something like that.”

“Understandable, it certainly wouldn’t be for everyone. And most relationships can be built without such a connection. Indeed, I have always wondered if our connection was somewhat cheating in that regard. We were able to cut through all the kriff, misunderstanding and communication issues. I take it that love is something you want?”

Hearing no hint of remonstrance or judgment in Aayla’s voice, Anakin slowly nodded. “A part of me is jealous that your connection was allowed to remain in place once the two of you got back together, you were allowed to stay together. I mean, I was there, I know when the two of you met up again, and have decided the two of you were with one another.”

He grinned as Aayla had the good grace to blush a little at that long-ago day on Tatooine and how out of it she and Harry were. “But yes, eventually, I want to, I want to have a family, I think. I’m not sure I could be a father yet. Give me another ten years before I take on an padawan. Then we’ll see about doing that before thinking of fatherhood. But a wife, someone to spend my life with? That appeals to me a lot.”

“It should. It certainly appeals to most humans, most twi’leks and indeed most other races throughout the galaxy. But becoming involved with someone is dangerous for Force users, because it can lead to jealousy and anger. Anger at the universe for keeping you apart, for example, or jealousy if you think the other person is somehow going behind your back,” Aayla warned. “There is a reason why the Jedi Council carefully examines those Jedi knights or Masters who want to have a relationship outside the Order or even inside it. I was told of a specific story about a female Jedi who had fallen into the Dark Side because her husband had cheated on her. Her mind had broken into two personalities, one hidden entirely from the other. The Dark Side personality killed her husband and his lover and killed several Jedi sent to apprehend her, all without the ‘regular’ personality knowing. Instead, that personality thought she was on a hunt for the killer and refused to listen to reason. This is just one example of what can happen if you suddenly fall into the negative emotions of the Dark Side. Master Koth was the one to eventually hunt her down.”

Anakin winced a bit, shaking his head. “I haven’t heard that particular story, but consider me warned.” He fell silent for a moment, staring at Aayla thoughtfully. “I believe I will get there

in time. This latest brush with the Dark Side, not just here, but with my reaction to Master Windu's death, I think... I think the Dark Side no longer holds any fascination for me. Anger no longer holds any fascination for me. I... I do not hate Grievous any longer, thanks to what Harry said to me. I still have issues with slavery and feel some hatred towards slavers, but I have been dealing with that for years. I can control that, I think. And I think I can control my own ego now, which, let me tell you, has not been an easy journey. I used to be so arrogant, but Master Windu helped me through it."

Anakin paused and then decided to come clean. Looking at Aayla earnestly, he confessed, "I used to be jealous of you and Harry, too. All the techniques that you and Harry learned through Master for a that I wasn't allowed to, it frustrated me."

"We were used as a test bed, true, just like Master Dooku's lightsaber school was. But by this point, you've learned most of the techniques from Master Fay and Clan Saa," Aayla answered with a shrug. "You have nothing to be jealous for any longer."

"I know that now. But it was very hard to ignore the people who spoke of me and my connection to the Force as if I was supposed to be this shining example of what a Jedi could be. And then see the two of you. So different, so unusual compared to the rest of the Order, and yet so respected at the same time. But as I said, I think I have my ego under control now, too."

"A strive to be better is always a good thing Anakin, but do not allow it to overwhelm your sense of empathy. Your sense of fellow feeling towards others who are not as skilled, who cannot follow you where you lead," Aayla warned. "Always measure yourself against yourself, not anyone else. We are all unique, different lights shining in the darkness, but shining all the same,"

Aayla then smiled and gestured down to his communicator. "But now, I think you should listen to what Master Windu has to tell you. I think that will be the last step in your acceptance of his passing, and it may help you to understand what you should do going forward. A question I can see all too clearly in your emotions."

Anakin slowly nodded at that, having wondered much the same. Without Master Windu, should he return to command of the 501st? Would he be assigned another Jedi Master? The idea made his skin crawl a little. The very idea of someone else coming in to try and replace Master Windu in his life was anathema. Should he just return to the temple and stay there for a few weeks to get used to being alone before telling the High Council he was ready for more instruction, as he knew was the usual routine? Or should he ask Harry and Aayla to join them on the *Tyrant's Bane* when they leave?

That last idea had some appeal, as he knew, despite Aayla's humbleness a moment ago, there was still quite a bit he could learn from both of them. Not to mention a lot of techniques

that they or Master Fay had come up with had come up with that had not yet been shared with the wider Jedi order. "You're right. I should listen to it now before we get swept up in the various rebuilding projects and whatever else Padme has for us to work on."

Seeing Anakin call R2-D2 and ask him to relay the message that Master Windu had left him to his communicator, Aayla made to stand up, but Anakin surprised her by asking her to stay. "I, I would like someone to be here with me to listen to this. We're not close, but it would take a while to even find one of my friends in the Jedi Order, let alone anything else. But I don't want to wait any longer to listen to it."

"Whatever help you need, I'm here," the empath said, sitting down and gently placing a hand on Anakin's shoulder from the side. That touch was soothing, and Anakin breathed in deeply, centering himself in the Force, releasing a bit of trepidation and a small flash of anger at how his Master had died into the Force before asking R2-D2 to play the recording.

The screen on his communicator flashed on, showing Master Windu's face in front of a backdrop of the Adamantine's bridge. To one side, there was some screaming going on, and there was also smoke in the background along with the sound of someone using an emergency fire extinguisher. Evidently, this recording had been made mere moments, if that, before the destruction of the heavy cruiser.

"Anakin. I am afraid I do not have much time. Suffice it to say that I should've agreed with you and Plo about how Jedi should always be in starfighters during fleet actions. At the time, I thought that how it allowed us to keep our minds entirely on the tactical picture, keeping the bubble intact more easily and communicate our orders without an intermediary was worth more than our personal safety. More fool me, I suppose."

The tone Mace was speaking with was at once both more sardonic and more strained than Anakin had ever heard from him before, and the emotions of seeing his dead Master's face again raged within him. Aayla's hand on his shoulder helped him to center himself, weathering the storm, and after a moment, he restarted the recording.

"Worse yet, all of the escape pod hatches have been blocked off or simply destroyed along with the escape pods beneath them. None of us who are still on the ship are getting off it alive." Master Windu seemed to breathe in a bit, his voice coming out both more softly and more controlled when he spoke up once more. "Jedi Masters are routinely able to see there and coming, and I knew that my death was a possibility in this battle. I have accepted that. Harder to accept was the fact that I would be leaving you without a master. Without my personal guidance, as much as that might smack of arrogance. I am sorry for that, Anakin."

He looked to the side for a moment and barked out an order to change targets from a group of vultures to a more distant Munificent. This was followed by another order to rotate the

ship in place, probably to shield one sector of the shielding from heavier fire than the rest had been currently dealing with.

When he turned back to the pickup, Mace's face was even more intense than usual, giving his words all the more weight to his young padawan. "I have had other padawans. None have matched your potential or your skill with the Force. Nor in how much of a challenge they were to teach. Yet I am proud of the man you have become, my young friend. You're still a little too opinionated, a little too prone to think, 'Yes lightsaber equals answer', but you're young yet, and those learned responses can be smoothed down with enough experience. Go forth and find that experience. You are ready, or will be very soon, for your knighthood trials. Tell Master Yoda and Master Ranicisis that I have said this. Find a way to learn those last few lessons on your own, and you will be stronger for it. Never lose that sense of justice, that sense of wanting to make the universe a better place than you have always had, Anakin. Because I fear that if you do not retain that, the universe will lose something altogether precious. May the Force be with you, Anakin Skywalker. And maybe a very long time before you join me in its embrace."

There, the communication ended, and Artoo warbled a low, almost keening noise as if asking his Master if he was all right. "I, I think I'll be alright, Artoo. I'll be back at the hangar bay in a bit."

Aayla slowly removed her hand from Anakin's shoulder. She could feel his emotions slowly roiling and then fading, coming under his control, as he finally allowed himself to release the last bit of guilt for not being with his Master, guilt for not being able to save him, anger at himself and at the galaxy for his passing left him, leaving Anakin almost cleansed and filled with renewed purpose. When he opened his eyes again, they were clear, a little red around the edges Touche be sure, but Aayla wasn't going to comment on that. "How are you feeling?" She asked, although she already knew the answer.

"Renewed. More purposeful than I have been since Master Windu's passing. I know what I need to do now. Back on Tatooine, when I was a slave, I always dreamed of becoming a Jedi, of bringing justice to those who thought themselves beyond it. Of giving voice to those who had none. That is what I will do in the future. For now, I will play the part of a warrior. I wish to see this war through along with the 501st. But after, whatever the Order might think, I will choose my own path through the Force." He smiled then, nodding at Aayla. "Like Master Fay and your own Master Vos, and the two of you."

"That is a fine answer, I think. But come, I think we have spent about as much time as we can on personal things. There is still a lot of work to be done."

"Agreed. And," Anakin said as he stood up, bowing to her, as Aayla also got to her feet. "I thank you for your help, Master Secura."

"I'm not a Master yet. Despite our dual stewardship of Ahsoka, neither of us will have earned the title until she stands for her knighthood trials," Aayla answered with a chuckle.

"Could've fooled me," Anakin said dryly, shaking his head, causing Aayla to laugh.

And speaking of knighthood trials, I think he's ready for them. Zule might have mentioned them jokingly before, but she had a point. Skill, Courage, Perception, Spirit. That only leaves the Trial of Flesh. Yes, indeed, I think that being his own teacher will serve Anakin better than trying to bond with another Master. Although he'll have to be assigned at least a partner when it comes to combat operations, but that isn't the same thing at all.

Shaking those thoughts off, Aayla took one look around the room, then picked up the safe containing the Sith holocron, Master Sunrider's and then the three data discs. With those in hand, she followed Anakin out the door. The Tyrant's Bane would hold those things for now until they could be sent with Zule back to Coruscant.

Scene break

"Senator Danu, Lord Kuat I realize that our local time zones are, despite the Galactic standard Time, quite different at the moment, but I wish to speak to you both at the same time, considering the deal I wish to make with your shipyards, speaker."

"Color me intrigued," Senator Giddeon Danu of Kuat said, tapping his cheek from a finger with each hand thoughtfully as he steepled his hands together. "You are quite the busy individual, are you not Padme?"

"I am, although this work has to do with my current task here on Thyferra. And it is on behalf of all of the people here in the Polith System that I am speaking to you now."

"If you are asking us to divert some of our newly built warships to defend Polith, I'm afraid I'm going to have to refuse." Lord Onara Kuat of the Ruling house of Kuat said brusquely. He looked at Padme with scant favor, his own thoughts towards the Peace Party being somewhat colored by the fact that he had been on the same station in which two Blanked Jedi, Jedi Night Kiske and his padawan Nech had run amok prior to the start of hostilities with the Confederacy. Peace was nice but in scant supply in the universe at present, and he was a little leery of the Jedi Order and their allies now.

"I am not. But I understand that you still have some dockyard space devoted to civilian shipping? And that you can still ship your finished products out relatively freely?"

Ruled by Ten Houses of which Kuat was the most senior, Kuat was one of the premier shipyard builders in the Republic, beating out even Corellia and Rendili. Not so much in capacity but in speed. They built ships in bulk, faster than those two systems, while also meeting their

quality, at least when it came to large starships. Their starfighters and small freighters had never matched either Rendili or Corellia, and their utility had never come close to Corellia's famed YT brand.

Kuat Drive Yards was also far closer to Coruscant than Corellia and Rendili and even more well-defended than Serenno or Corellia. Their sector had not, as of Padme's last military briefing, come under attack at all except for small spoiling raids against outlying resource extraction systems, and even the Confederacy, with its massive reserve of capital ships and vultures, would need to devote far too much in the way of resources to that campaign, taking the pressure off the Republic in dozens of other sectors.

"We can. And we do. What kind of ships do you think you will need? And, not to put too fine a point on it, but how is Thyferra going to pay? Given how much of their GDP is going to have to be folded into rebuilding and the last report we had was that the planet was dealing with storms that would damage their bacta production, I have to wonder if the corporations that control Polith will have enough monetary backing to make a large-scale purchase from us."

It was obvious the man wanted to steer the direction towards paying for those ships with bacta, which, given the massive rise in price since events here in Polith, was smart. Buying bacta on a trade deal rather than on the open market would be far better for Kuat, and since Padme had come to him, it would be Lord Kuat who was able to drive the deal forward.

"You will be surprised," Padme answered, not taking the man's efforts to force a good deal personally. "I know I was when we finally began to look into the numbers and how rich precisely these corporations, or rather, the families ruling them, had become. Although that is the least of the surprises we've been running into here, and I am simply speaking about after the Confederacy's attack."

Padme tapped a few buttons on her controls, sending over a data package that appeared on Onaru's screen for a moment, showing the money available in several dozen bank accounts. "I trust that combined, this will prove enough for, say, a preliminary run of twenty-five ships of this particular design? And for a team of two hundred engineers to come to Thyferra to help replace the majority of the destroyed shipyards."

The next data package flew over, and Onaru looked at it, then looked back at the numbers, before disappearing from the screen for a moment to run some further numbers on his end. This left the two senators looking at one another, and the Senator of Kuat smiled placidly, although his eyes were sharp and narrowed as he looked at the younger woman. "Interesting. You have grabbed my colleague's attention most assuredly by appealing to his bottom line. But you did not need me here for that. What exactly do you want from me, Padme?"

"I am going to bring up some proposals in the Senate soon, not only about what I have been doing here on Thyferra but also in terms of the Medical Ship Neutrality Act. I mean for that institution to be centered here in the Polith System. I want your vote on all of it, as well as your help in making agreements with Depon Mining. Thyferra is going to need those raw resources," Padme said bluntly.

"You have tried to bring up the medical ship concept before, and it hasn't made much headway. Primarily because you would need to get the Confederacy to sign off on it too. I don't see that happening, and I don't see the Centrists being the first to agree to it without some assurances that the Confederacy will do so in turn. Do you think that CIS will agree to it now, horrified by what they attempted to do to Terrence for some reason?"

The older man's words were almost teasing, but his tone was more scathing than anything else. He was a firm believer in realpolitik. There was no good gained without some give. He understood and respected the moral position of the Peace Party, but that did not mean that he agreed with all of their goals, nor would he give his vote lightly.

There was also the fact that he was devoted to the Chancellor and would never sell his vote without the younger man's permission. *Padme's star might be in ascendancy now, but she still has quite a few enemies among the Centrists, and eventually, the shine of her actions in Polith will fade and will probably do so far faster in the holes of the Senate than in the eyes of the common people. I will need to tell the Chancellor about Padme's wheeling and dealing after I am done here.* "What are you offering in return?"

"Beyond haggling with my own vote on the line, I do not negotiate. Nor do I bribe other Senators to give me their backing, as you well know." Padme smiled thinly. "However, I am not above threatening."

Another data package was sent with a few taps of buttons, and soon, the Senator for Kuat was reading about several...agreements he had made with the corporations of bacta. Most were to do his part to block any kind of oversight sent into Polith to ensure that the vratrix had been given a voice as they should have after the Stark Hyperspace War. Others were agreements made for access to several types of drugs that apparently were byproducts of the bacta-creating process but which were highly hallucinogenic and illegal throughout the Republic.

When the Senator for the Chomell sector spoke again, it was with all the cold control she had learned over her time as Queen and then as Senator under Senator Bonteri's tutorship. "Please don't try to insult my intelligence by trying to convince me that this is not real, Senator. We both know it is. So here is what I propose. You will vote for the creation of the neutral medical aid charity, and I will not send this immediately to the Senate oversight committee,

along with all of the other evidence. I will still do so in a few months, but at least waiting will allow you to retire gracefully and appoint your successor. Or I will drag you through the mud, paint you as a species, and ruin you in the eyes of both your fellow senators and the public.”

The older man’s cheeks tightened, and his face whitened in the holographic pickup. A part of Giddeon almost protested, wanting to shout that the Chancellor himself had told him to vote against sending an investigation team into Thyferra after the Stark Hyperspace War. But he hadn’t ordered it; Sheev had instead suggested it, and that had been enough for Danu at the time. As for the drugs, while he could easily point to at least twenty other Senators who used them, he didn’t doubt that if she had found information on his deals with Xucphra, Padme would have found similar with Zaltin or one of the other, smaller corporations. *The Chancellor can’t protect me if she goes public with that as the bitch has threatened to do.*

Setting aside the court of public opinion, which would vilify him for both those things, even with the war going on, the Senate Oversight Committee, led by Senators Organa of Alderaan and Senator Yarua of Kashyyyk had become even more stringent about making sure that senators were not making under-the-table deals of any kind. It was a matter of Republic security now as well, as a bought or crooked senator might be willing to sell more than just his votes, and not just to other senators but to the Confederacy. There wasn’t any evidence of that for Danu, but even so, the possibility would be enough for the mob.

The only way I could get out of this is if I could convince the Chancellor to step in and stop it, and even then, the Nabooan harlot’s bloody-minded enough to release all the evidence to the public regardless. But if I simply take it and retire, I can then go to the Chancellor afterward for any aid I might need. And even retired, I will still have my contacts to make Amidala’s life as miserable as possible. Best to go along with things for now.

“You will allow me to retire gracefully?” Giddeon ground out. “In what kind of timeframe?”

“Six weeks should be more than sufficient to find your successor and put everything in Order. Unless you have a specific reason for why it should take no two weeks at most longer?” Padme inquired politely.

“Six weeks. That is enough. You will have my vote, Senator.” Giddeon could have left it there, but he was feeling quite petty at the moment and could not stop himself. “But I will not forget this.”

With that, the older man clicked off, allowing the image of Onaru to enlarge on Padme’s screen a second later as he returned. He seemed to notice the lack of the Senator and smiled thinly. The two men came from rival Houses, and politics between the Houses of Kuat tended to be vitriolic behind closed doors. So long as nothing occurred that damaged the yards, the

Houses were not above outright violence, let alone such blasé things as intimidation or character assassination.

"I note my companion is not with us. Since we have dispensed with politics, let us get down to, as they say down on the docks, the welding spots of the matter. What kind of timeframe are you looking for us to deliver on these first fifteen or so ships, how large will the total order be, and you expect us to also try to crew them here in Kuat, or will they be permanently crewed in Polith and we will be simply supplying a delivery crew for each vessel? How much are you willing to pay in credits, and how much would you be willing to pay in bacta?"

"Let us talk about that. Because there might be even more deals to be made here. As I said, Thyferra will need a lot in terms of raw metals to help them rebuild," Padme began.

About an hour later, the call finished. Padme started to look through some notes but stopped and turned around as she heard footsteps coming down the walkway into the central flag officer segment of the command and control room. She hadn't left it since returning to it after the attack on Harry, and signs of her habitation were everywhere.

Seeing Zule striding towards her, Padme smiled, thinking about the fight against Jerec and Zule in general. How the half-falleen Jedi had gone from acquaintance to bodyguard/trainer to friend to confidant since they had first met. Padme was closer to Zule now than she was even to Sabe, and Padme could not stop herself from admitting she also found the other girl attractive, as her gaze dropped down slightly to Zule's front as it had often done to Harry and Aayla.

Those Jedi robes they all wear do absolutely nothing for their figure, and yet it makes me wonder even more about what lies underneath it! She didn't allow her eyes to linger, though, simply gesturing Zule to join her. *Ugh, enough of that girl! You know you, Harry and Aayla have a conversation coming up on that score. No need to make it even worse than it already will be.*

Zule shook her head as she stepped around several discarded plates and water bottles. "I take it you haven't even gotten out to have an actual meal?"

"As I warned the clone troopers and Ahsoka when they were all seconded to me, this job is far more intensive than even being a senator normally would be. At least when I am on Coruscant doing battle with my equally august members of the Senate, there are drinks and canapés. At present, I think we can all be happy that we aren't facing a food crisis on everything else, but actually taking the time to have a real meal would take too long," Padme shrugged whimsically, not realizing how Zule was staring at the bags under her eyes or how her body was vibrating a little in place. These military rations might be tasteless, but they fill me up."

She could see the protest forming in Zule's face, but Padme cut her off, asking, "Did you find what Essex and his group pulled us might be up there?"

Essex was the sergeant in charge of the team of clone trooper hack'n'cracks that Anakin had ordered to help Padme pry open whatever computer she pointed them at. And there were a lot of them. The corporations running Thyferra had been so corrupt they made the Senate before Chancellor Palpatine's push to clean up the judicial system on Coruscant. But in the chaotic aftermath of the battle against the CIS and everything else, thousands of people, both human and vratix, had come forward with evidence of illegal activity. So much so that, in conjunction with several acts by the high-ranking members of Xucphra and Zaltin, Padme had more than enough evidence to prove the oligarchic model as practiced by the locals had failed. She had begun to seize bank accounts and more ever since.

The 'might be out there' they were currently speaking of was a small out-of-the-way space station buried deep in the Polith belt, a asteroid ring around the system. Due to its extremely low energy signature, it had gone entirely unnoticed by the invaders. It was not the only one to do so, but it was perhaps the largest one, and what was stored there was even more interesting.

Almost as interesting as finding that far too many of the corporate heads of Zaltin and Xucphra had kept meticulous notes about their various illegal activities. Of which, it could be argued, this was one. After all, there was a law on the books at one point about price gouging, although it's never been enforced until the war began. At that point though, oh yes, it became not only illegal, but treason, Padme thought. As was the fact many of them had made plans to try and escape the system during the battle taking with them their fortunes.

She'd had no hesitation in seizing those fortunes. Measuring in the trillions of credits, they would pay for a decent portion of the rebuilding process. Just as they would pay for the medical ships. *Honestly, I thought the locals would not approve of my bankrupting several hundred of their former leaders, but apparently, learning so many were willing to cut and run, plus the various people coming forward to report their illegal activities, seems to have cut any public support they might have had off at the ankles. That, and the vratix's continued aid. I doubt I could find more than a hundred locals who think the vratix are mindless drones any longer.*

"Yes, we found it," Zule reported, pulling Padme from her thoughts. "Enough bacta to see to the needs of at least two Core World sectors for a week. And it wasn't the only one. I heard from Anakin and Ahsoka. Their most recent forays turned up three more, smaller but just as full of bacta."

Aayla was not part of that project. She was overseeing the security around the dockyard that had just begun to repair the Tyrant's Bane. Now that the last emergency repairs to ships doubling as homes for refugees who no longer had space stations to go back to and various military personnel who had been picked up from the detritus left after the battle, the largest surviving dockyard in the system had been completely turned over to the GDL to repair the massive battleship.

Considering that the dockyard had been built originally to service small to medium ships, everyone was very grateful that it had recently been enlarged and upgraded to handle military ships. It would still be a very slow task to repair all the exterior damage done to the ship, let alone replace the hyperdrive, which had been thoroughly trashed by the deep jump that the Jedi had forced it to do despite its robust nature. But the Verpine and Jedi who were overseeing it, and the surprisingly large horde of astromech droids, that were doing a lot of the small-scale work, were determined to get it done as quickly as possible.

In all honesty, Padme was of two minds about turning over that dockyard to the Tyrant's Bane. She knew it was necessary and that the dock workers had already seen to as many repairs to the civilian ships still in use to house refugees as it could, but it could still have done more. And worse, it was the only dockyard left intact by the Confederacy.

That particular dock, called Auspicious Green by the locals for some reason, had been almost literally under the planet from the main Confederacy force's attack vector, and neither of the dreadnought forces that had split off had moved in that direction, something that Padme could only put down to luck considering how the rest of the battle had gone. She was also incredibly thankful that more industrial stations, defense fortresses, and bacta storage stations had been destroyed than the main civilian habitats. The death toll would have skyrocketed into the millions if so.

"You need a break," Zule said, drawing Padme back to the present for the second time in as many minutes as she strode forward, touching Padme's face gently with two fingers, causing the Senator to flush a little. It might be how much stims she had taken, coupled with how little sleep she had gotten since the battle, but she seemed to have lost a bit of her self-control for a moment. "The locals can handle everything for at least eight hours. Then you can come back and political phrases."

"Assumption of authority, I think," Padme answered. "And I can't just yet. I have two more calls to make and then one meeting. After that, I can rest."

"I will hold you to that," Zule warned. "Don't make me get Mala to drag you out of here."

Padme snorted at that but did not argue, knowing the motherly Wookiee would have no qualms in doing so, with Zule, Sabe and Chewie all cheering her on. An hour and a half later, just

as Zule had returned from another little mission to help some of the locals, Padme was finally allowed to have a full night's sleep.

She woke up to the smell of someone cooking. For one blessed moment, Padme grinned wildly, thinking it was Harry. She hopped to her feet and was out of the hotel suite's master bedroom before she remembered that Harry would still be in his bacta tank for at least another half a day. Although the sight that greeted her in the suite's small kitchen was almost as welcome.

Aayla stood there, humming something under her breath, cooking near-bacon while fresh Alderaan-style bread bits, which they called bagels, rested nearby, made from the resources on the *Tyrant's Bane*, whose botanical area, like the rest of the ship's interior spaces, had come through the fight relatively undamaged. "Good morning, Padme. It'll just be a moment. Zule should be back soon, and Ahsoka's out with Anakin, Essex and his team. I wanted her to learn more about computer-based investigations. She certainly won't learn much about that from either me or Harry. Our talents lie elsewhere."

"What, being gorgeous?" The compliment didn't really make much sense, but Padme felt it was the thought that counted, and she moved up behind her girlfriend. A girlfriend that, although they'd been in near vicinity of one another for the past two or three days, Padme hadn't had any time with.

Aayla blinked as she felt Padme kissing her neck, humming in delight before turning her head around and meeting Padme's lips with her own. She then squawked as Padme's hands found her breasts, kneading, then squeezing. "You," Padme hissed, pulling back from their kiss and letting her lips run down the side of Aayla's neck, nipping and licking between each word. "Have no kriffing idea how I've missed you and Harry! We had only just gotten together, and then we had to part like that! That was frustrating as all hell!"

To say nothing of Zule and her growing presence in my life, She reflected but did not say. Hopefully, there would be time for that conversation when they sat down to eat.

Chuckling throatily, Aayla flipped the last rashers of near-bacon out of the pan before setting down the spatula and turning, pushing Padme back just enough to lean in and kiss her. "Oh, I think I've got an idea. But don't worry, before we all have to part again, Harry and I will be sure to pamper you rotten."

Whatever response Padme might have made was silenced by Aayla kissing her hard on the lips, her tongue instantly pushing through Padme's lips. The two of them stayed there, hands exploring, tongues dueling, until Zule came out of the fresher. This time, at least, she was fully clothed, but she still stood there for a time, watching the two women make out for a bit

before announcing her presence with a whistle, something she had heard human men use when they saw something amazing or arousing. “*SHWSHW!*”

The two women reluctantly parted, and the half-falleen mockingly waved a hand at her face as if she needed to cool down. “Oh, don’t stop on my account.”

Aayla and Padme were both of a mind to take that invitation, but Padme’s stomach decided to announce its unhappiness at that point. Chuckling, Aayla pushed Padme out of the kitchen, ordering her fellow Jedi to set up the table. For a few moments as they all sat down, the trio of women were too busy eating to talk much. While they had Jedi training to go without food for long periods of time, that didn’t mean Zule and Aayla had smaller appetites than Padme when they could eat, and while Aayla didn’t have Harry’s flare for cooking, she had learned a lot from him. Then, when the conversation began, the topic of everything going on here in Thyferra and Padme’s plans for the future dominated. This involved some intriguing plans for the future.

Hearing some of those plans, Aayla nodded decisively. “If the vratrix are willing, I think the GDL would be happy to subsidize any colony they want to set up in our territory. I can think of two type one planets that have much the same weather as Thyferra and would be positively ecstatic to have some kind of tradable resource.”

“Although we’ll have to be careful, as any such move would make those planets targets not only for the CIS but also for pirates once the vratrix start producing bacta,” Zule warned. “Still, I think it’s an excellent idea. And we should maybe ask if some of these, what did you say Aldo called them, seed-groups?” When Padme nodded, Zule went on. “I think we need to convince one of these seed-groups to be sent into the Ruusan Sector. They’ll be utterly untouchable there, and there’s got to be one planet in there that’s got the same kind of weather as Thyferra, right?”

“Um...one. Not the whole world, but one large southern continent for certain. We discovered that after we had dealt with a local barbarian horde. The civilized locals don’t have much in the way of local tech, but they are slowly rebuilding to the point they’ll be able to start exploring the stars again, even without the help of the other planets in the sector,” Aayla mused.

“There you go then. Two seed-groups for the Republic and two for the GDL. In return for the sectors where they set up in getting Thyferra and the rest of the system rebuilt. Alderaan’s already agreed, and I think that the Chancellor will be able to get any sector to agree to sponsor the second. The difficulty will start when I propose my plan to reach out to the Confederacy. With Mina’s death, I don’t know anyone but that cowardly, treacherous waste of space, Gunray. And I would rather take a blaster bolt than try to make a deal with him. I might have to convince

the Senate to begin formal talks about the Medical Ship Neutrality Act directly with C'baoth or Shu Mai, the leader of the Commerce Guild."

Both Jedi commiserated with Padme's annoyance at that but could not offer anything better. "I would advise you to split up your presentations, and also make a point to mention how the GDL is willing to pay half of the price of the whole run of medical ships gratis. I can make that agreement even with Harry still unconscious."

Padme smiled and impulsively leaned over, kissing Aayla again. She hummed in delight as Aayla hugged her back before they parted as Zule decided to eat the blaster bolt and bring up the topic which had been hanging between all three of them whenever they were around one another since the battle against Master Jerrec. "*Ahem*", in the interest of having this conversation now before the vagaries of the Force send another interruption our way, um, I think we need to speak about, well, me. And the three of you."

Pulling away from Aayla, Padme sighed but met the half-falleen's eyes calmly, seeing how nervous she was behind her momentary bravado. "How long have you had feelings for Harry and Aayla? Or is it just Harry?"

"Actually, it was the other way around," Zule shifting nervously on her chair as she looked between the two women. "I started to have feelings for Aayla when we and the rest of Clan Saa were on Coruscant in the Temple. I started to feel something more than friendship towards Harry when we were all on the Tyrant's Bane going around the galaxy solving problems and making allies for the GDL." Zule grinned suddenly, the expression both teasing and nervous somehow. "And you didn't mention you, Padme."

Padme surprised herself by blushing a bit. "I think I have seen how you look at me change over time, so that wasn't a mystery." She paused, then shook her head. "And in the interest of honesty, I can't exactly say it is one-sided on your part. I've caught myself looking at you in a certain way, too."

"It doesn't hurt that both of you are supernovae hot," Aayla laughed.

"This coming from the woman who could be called one of the most gorgeous young women in the galaxy?" Padme retorted archly before kissing Aayla on the cheek. She then became serious then, looking between the two Jedi. "I suppose given how our duties have separated you, me and Harry, Aayla, and how close Zule and I have become, it could be seen as inevitable that complications arise. But there are still a few problems with this. For one thing, our relationship was complicated enough when it was just the three of us. Adding Zule will only make it more complicated."

“Or could make it easier when our duties separate us again. This way, at least you and Zule both will have someone to cuddle.” Aayla pointed out with a laugh. “For my part, I’ve always been aware I found Zule attractive, and she has been my best friend besides Harry since the moment we met as younglings. I have always enjoyed being around her, and, well, making a jump from that to love is relatively simple, so long as it does not ruin what you, Harry and I have.”

“And do you know Harry’s thoughts on Zule?” Padme looked between the two Jedi again, biting her lip. “And, I realize this might sound ignorant, but will Zule be able to form the same connection as you and Harry have? I would feel very left out if so.”

“No,” both Jedi answered as one, with Aayla continuing. “Harry and I forged that connection when we were in great duress and young. Neither of us knows how we made it so permanent, and I would not be willing to experiment for many reasons. You will never be left out, Padme. Harry might not be able to speak to you mind-to-mind, but he will never be unwilling to speak to you normally. The same goes for me, my love.”

Hearing the earnestness and the affection in Aayla’s voice, Padme blushed for the second time in this conversation. “Alright, that, that sets some of my concerns at ease. And... I cannot argue that the idea of having someone to cuddle and more when you, Harry and I are separated is nice. But I am not willing to say my affection for Zule is as deep as it is for Harry and you, Aayla. We... I think that I am not averse to this, as I was when you brought up that Ta’a Chume woman, as I know Zule.”

She looked over at Zule who was smiling at them both warmly but a bit uncertain. “But I am willing to try. So long as you both and Harry, when we bring it up with him, understand that this is on a trial basis. And by the Force, there better not be any other women trying to join this group of ours!”

Zule and Aayla chuckled before Padme turned to the Rutian twi’lek once more. “By the way, you didn’t say how Harry feels about Zule.”

“Heh, he’s not blind, and he and Zule became almost as close as she and I are when we were all on the Tyrant’s Bane. I won’t say it would ever have occurred to him to think there could be something between you two, Zule, not like he did with Padme. But he certainly has found you attractive. For more than that, we will need to wait until he wakes up.” Aayla smiled, pulling Padme into a hug. “You were the hardest sell here, my dear, and remember, you still have veto power, alright?”

Padme thanked her, then reached over and then the suite’s door chimed. Mala and Chewie came in a second later, and the three women looked at one another before chuckling.

The galaxy at large called, and it was time to set aside their personal drama once more to deal with far larger matters.

scene break

While the three women were discussing a possible change in their relationship(s), a certain Chiss émigré was pondering the nature of the universe and war in general, although, at the moment, the specific topic on his mind was the Polith system just as it was for the three women as they ended their personal conversation. Although, in Mitth'raw'nuruodo's case, he was contemplating the assault on Terrence itself rather than the reconstruction efforts.

Specifically, how incredibly foolish it was. To the Chiss's mind, it was not crazy nor inhumane. In war, there would always be civilian casualties. To think otherwise was to be hopelessly naïve, a sign of weakness that anyone with a more pragmatic view would take advantage of. *Some might argue that it takes true strength to be able to show compassion, but that can only take you so far against enemies who do not think in the same manner.*

But in this case, Thrawn was disgusted. *Not only was the attack completely foolish, it was not even accomplished well! Why would you attack bacta of all resources? There is no logical sense to that target. Causing bacta to become even more scarce or to simply cease to exist in the long term would be a political and social nightmare the like the galaxy has never seen before. If the attack was abandoned by C'baoth, then the Sith, whatever they are, are even more blood-hungry than the Vagaari and need to be expunged from the galaxy. If it was Greivous exceeding his orders, then he needs to be put down like a rabid animal.*

Even as the Republic had hastily put together this fleet and gathered the resources necessary for this assault, reports were coming in of internal unrest among the CIS. It was because of that and the discovery that there was a series of holes in the defense of the Rimma Trade Route that had allowed this offensive to be launched in the first place. It was being launched a bit too quickly for Thrawn's mind, but the outcome could be tremendous, and in war, some gambles were necessary, something Thrawn had long ago reconciled himself to.

There was also a bit of hubris there. Thrawn was the one who had come up with this plan, and the High Command had decided to run with it despite few of them believing they had the firepower to truly start up the campaign Thrawn hoped to. *But that is the beauty of the operation. Several variables will determine the outcome of this battle on a strategic level, but if I can win this first battle, I will discover which variables are in play. And that is a victory all on its own.*

The Rimma Trade Route was one of the major hyperspace lanes in the galaxy. At present, it was heavily contested all along its length, with many planets along its length having joined the CIS while others had remained loyal or joined the GDL. Thus, like along most of the other

hyperplanes throughout the galaxy, there were constant small-scale skirmishes and even large-scale fleet engagements as the defenses all three sides had thrown up. Those competing defenses – hyperspace traps, minefields, and dedicated defense fleets - made the route impossible to use.

But Republic spies had discovered a small, unknown offshoot to an empty system leading to the Oulanne System. A system with a single planet, it was not the planet itself, but rather the large space docks in orbit, the vast repair and fuel facilities there that made Oulanne important. That, and the fact that taking it would leave the Republic Fleet in position to strike at the systems on either side of it along a CIS-controlled portion of the Rimma Trade Route. One of which was the strategically important system of Yag'dhul. The system from which Grievous had launched his assault on the Polith System.

Taking that system would not be easy, but if the Oulanne System could be taken and reinforced, held against the inevitable counterattack, then the possibility was there. *Hence why my fleet is so small, but the reinforcements that can follow up so much larger. Still, I am grateful for the four divisions from the 6th Fleet. They will be eager to expunge the failure that the fleet was labeled with after the events in Polith. Even with those ships, it will be a challenge if I am correct that the Oulanne System falls under the defense directorate of the Body Calculus, but it is possible.*

Shaking his head at that thought, Thrawn turned his attention back to what had sparked so much anger and rage among even men like Yularen that they had agreed to take this gamble. Grievous's attack was not just stupid because of the target but of how it was done. *Cruelty has its place, but only in moderation. It needs to be wielded appropriately to pacify a region and bring it under stable control, perhaps something done out of necessity. But that is not the case here. Instead, that attack was simply an extension of the CIS policy of cruelty. In so doing, they have created enemies rather than any benefits. Utterly foolish.*

Thrawn chuckled, allowing his gaze to shift to a few of the small pieces of art that dominated his quarters. One was Coruscanti, made by a young woman who had dragged herself out from the lower levels to become one of the greatest sculptors in the galaxy. *The other was a painting made by a Corellian. In five years or more, the galaxy might look back on that battle and realize it was the single moment when the rest of the galaxy truly understood that they had a single enemy they needed to excise. But will that enemy end up being the CIS, the so-called Dark Side users running them, or something else?*

There came a beep from the door, indicating someone was outside, interrupting his thoughts. "Come."

The door opened, and Thrawn hid a sigh with some difficulty. *Ah, the captain. Predictable. And he has brought his tactical officer. Again, within parameters.* “Yes, Captain Kerrick, is there some problem? By my clock, we have another forty-five minutes before we exit hyperspace into Oulanne.”

Thrawn’s flag Captain, a muun, paused, staring around him for a moment. Kerrick had previously been in Thrawn’s room, having wanted to show off his ship to the Chiss as proud as a rooster when he first came aboard but had not yet seen it after all of the admirals... knickknacks had been unloaded and put on display. His annoyance with how much there was of such had come through at the time, though. Beside him, the younger man, who Thrawn had not yet gotten to know, also took in the display, his eyes wide before they seemed to begin to examine everything in turn.

A flag officer’s quarters were normally a very large spacious area where the admiral could set up a dining table or a large sitting area, depending on preference. In a nod in that direction, there was a small but extremely comfortable chair behind a desk at the far end, but otherwise, Thrawn had added several small plinths on which around a dozen pieces of artwork were shown. All around, numerous paintings of various styles were hung on the walls. The area now looked nothing so much like an art museum, aided by the fact more art pieces were being displayed in 3D from the holographic projector in the ceiling.

After a moment, during which the admiral stayed silent as he stared not at the captain but at one of the pieces of art on display, the muun man was able to recover from his surprise. “That would be correct, sir. But, sir, I wished to speak to you about the orders you had us relay a moment ago. The **non-discretionary** orders that you sent off individually to each starship, sir,” he emphasized. “That was highly unusual and your orders more so.”

“So they are. But I am certain you had a specific question. Surely you did not come all the way here to simply tell me what I have already done,” Thrawn led the man a little, hoping it was indeed a question and not a demand.

“Sir, the orders you sent make no sense,” the captain answered, sounding somewhat frustrated despite his race’s normal temperament of unemotional calm. Still, Thrawn had learned over his time in the Republic that common perception was often mistaken. “The fleet is in formation. We are going to hit the outer edge of the system as a unit. Shifting our various ships around like that the instant we come out of hyperspace will negate our advantage against any nearby defenders.”

“Advantages based on surprise against an enemy that relies so heavily on droids are fleeting. My plan will allow me to learn much of our enemy from the start. And in war, knowledge of your enemy is one of the most important factors,” Thrawn answered calmly.

He hoped the man was intelligent enough to connect what he was seeing around Thrawn at the moment to that factor, but once again, the captain disappointed him. Growling, he turned away. "T.O. Put the display up on the hologram."

"With your permission, sir?" the Tactical Officer asked politely. Thrawn nodded at him, and the man pulled out a datapad, sending some orders up to the holographic projector in the ceiling. The next moment, all the 3D art pieces disappeared, quickly replaced with a projection of space that then evolved through the fleet's arrival and the first maneuvers that Thrawn had ordered the fleet to do. At first, all was order and precision, then it was as if a bomb had gone off in the midst of the formation, sending single ships, squadrons or divisions in every direction. Some of those courses intercepted one another, although there were no actual collisions, given the timing of the various ships.

Which was something Kerrick pointed out as he gestured at the display. "Sir, I don't know what you mean to discover about the enemy, not with such strange maneuvers! Sir, some of the courses you have ordered our ships to take, they will almost be practically running into one another. It looks to me more like you are trying to sabotage this assault."

"Are you calling me a traitor then?" Thrawn slowly turned from the display, spearing the man with his eyes for a moment. He had been very clear that he wanted a ship's crew that was not composed of clones but as many races as possible, and he had gotten it. Thankfully for him, most of the rest of his fleet was composed of clone sailors and officers, and they would obey their orders regardless of how unusual they might be. *Such soldiers have their place, although I wonder if the Senate and the Republic as a whole understand the true nature of the military they now wield?*

The muun quailed a bit under Thrawn's red-eyed gaze, and he backpedaled. "No, sir, I'm not saying that at all. I simply want to know your reasoning."

"Very well. I will indulge that." Thrawn waved a hand as he moved through the room slowly, the gesture encompassing most of the artifacts and paintings on display. "Tell me, do you recognize any of these? The style, not the pieces themselves."

"Sir, I have never been a big art fan, nor do my race put much faith in such. Perhaps if you could simply tell me your..."

"Captain." The single word froze the officer's words in his throat, and Thrawn sighed faintly. "Blunt force objects have their place in any fleet. But not in command. I was attempting to open your mind." He let those words lay in the air for a moment before continuing. "I will explain, however."

Thrawn moved quickly, shifting around several of the plants from a standing start so swiftly that he caused the man to flinch again; another test failed. He stopped alongside one plinth closer to the rightmost bulkhead from the entrance. There, he gestured to the piece of art on the plinth itself, an art sculpture of a humanoid rising from a square bottom area, an altogether unassuming and quite unoriginal sculpture. "This was created by a Givin, an 'arithmotist' as such are called among his folk. Give me your honest opinion about it."

Now thoroughly off balance, the captain complied. "It, it looks ugly, unimaginative, I suppose. There is a lot of hard angles and strange curves. It, it looks almost, almost like someone tried to map it out rather than just create it." The muun shrugged. "As I said, my species does not go into art much, but that is what I can see."

"And you, Lieutenant?" Thrawn asked of Kerrick's companion.

"Sir?" When it became clear that Thrawn was waiting for them to actually reply, the younger man looked to his commanding officer, who made a brusque gesture for him to do so. The young man, a human, slightly tall for his species, with a square jaw and decently strong shoulders, frowned, thinking as he stared at the object and then around at the others as if comparing them.

That caused Thrawn to smile a little. It looked as if, while the captain might well be a lost cause, this one at least had some promise. *I am quite glad suddenly that I did ask for my flagship to be crewed by a mixed group of sentience rather than the clones. I doubt any of them, despite the subtle differences they try to cultivate between themselves, would have an appreciation for art.*

"Er, building on the Captain's words, I suppose it looks mathematical, maybe? Someone designed it by the numbers rather than by the feel. The person's obviously a Human, he's pretty accurate, but I don't get an impression of movement, or emotion or, I suppose, individualism? I'm sorry, sir, I can't put it any better than that."

"There is no need to do so. You are quite close. The Givin, like your own race, captain, are far more alike than most humans, and one of the things the whole race has in common is they are all natural mathematics. To the point that they use math as introductions, as if an exchange of mathematical formulae was the same as shaking hands among humans or saying how do you do. They're not unique in having strange small rituals like that, but they are one of the few species out there that have raised mathematics to such an important portion of their culture that even their leaders are chosen via contests of mathematical formulae. They're not unfeeling automatons, but everything they do is connected in some fashion to mathematics, including love and art. As you said, art by the numbers."

Thrawn had turned aside to look at the object in question as he spoke and now turned back to the two men. "Tell me, how would you react if you were working on an equation, an equation that could mean life or death for many people. You thought you had a solution, you were working your way through it, and then, suddenly, someone comes around and erases some of the numbers, replacing them randomly, chaotically. There is no rhyme nor reason. You cannot figure out how the equation is changing, only that the numbers no longer add up as they should."

Finally, finally, the captain seemed to understand. "Oulanne, if the local commander is a Givin like pre-Thyferra data suggested, he or she won't understand our wild maneuvering, they'll be thrown off, maybe even lose cohesion?"

"Perhaps. It depends on how much of the enemy fleet's command is composed of Givin rather than droids," Thrawn said with a shrug. "If only the admiral is a Givin, his sub-officers might be able to override him."

The Lieutenant once more showed that he had been listening and now turned around, his hand clasped behind his back. He was young for the serious mien that he was trying to put on his face, but he wore it quite well. "That was what you said earlier, sir. That the maneuvers would tell you instantly what kind of commander we were dealing with."

"Take that thought to its logical conclusion, Lieutenant Commander," Thrawn said, allowing a faint smile on his face as he stared at the young man. He might have put a little more sternness into that gaze the normal as a further test, but if he did, the man didn't seem to notice much.

"... Republic intelligence wasn't able to tell us whether or not Grievous had done anything to the command structure of Yag'dhul prior to launching his attack on Terrence. You're not certain who is in command over there, and you think that the wild maneuvering will be able to tell you that. So how would a droid commander react?"

"Logically," Thrawn answered simply. "While there are droids out there that have what I believe are called emotional input devices within their operating systems, the droids used by the Confederacy lack such. Moreover, the droid commanders of the enemy, while extremely competent and, as I said, logical, lack any kind of flare or understanding of the previous point I already raised."

"You mean the importance of knowing your enemy?" the T.O nodded thoughtfully, then seemed to realize that he had been speaking out of turn and froze, looking over at the captain.

To show he had been following along, the muun nodded rapidly. "I see. But, sir, the droids, they will react logically, as you said. They will storm forward, attacking us when we are weak."

"When we are **seemingly** weak. But this is why I ordered the fleet to come in well out-system. While the droids will have real-time data on us instantly and be able to respond instantly, that response will still take time to reach us. Time enough for our fleet to reform in a manner of my choosing. And for us to deal with the mines in place."

Thrawn fell silent, turning to look at a few other paintings. These had actually been created by artists who had, in turn, been using droids to do it. They had been experimenting, trying to either prove the idea that droids could create art in one case or disprove it in the other. The experiments had failed, but in their failure, they still told Thrawn much of what mass-produced droids could do or in what manner they thought. *I could wish I had more specific examples of combat droids attempting artwork, but I suppose that kind of thing would seem rather foolish to their users*, Thrawn thought with some amusement.

"But, sir, we will still be within the minefield if they are fast enough to catch us, especially given our time table coming out after our mine sweepers. Further, you just said that a droid commander's reaction time will be near-instantaneous. I would still advise you to change your orders in some fashion. We don't need to put the entire fleet in danger just to figure out what our opponents are. We can just deal with what they have. I feel as if you are willfully endangering our fleet, sir, to the point that I believe, if you do not, then I should call Republic High Command and ask you to be relieved."

"The mind is far more important than the material," Thrawn answered calmly. "We have some idea of what we are dealing with in terms of tonnage and fixed defenses. With that, and with knowledge of the mind that is wielding it, be it droid or given, the proper tactics can be devised to give us a win. You are relieved, captain."

The abruptness with which he said that seemed to take both men aback, and by the time they had recovered and the captain began to process truly what had been said, Thrawn was standing in front of him, staring at the taller muun, his red eyes staring at him coldly.

Despite that, Kerrick's anger was such that he ignored the warning signs. "Sir, I cannot be relieved without cause! The rules and regulations of the Republic Navy state that, as your flag officer and deputy, I have a duty to--"

"Questioning orders in the face of the enemy to the point that you were thinking of going above and up over my head. A commanding officer does not allow such to go unpunished, regardless of the timing." *And I do not need a blunt object for my flag officer, not here, not into the future as I begin to weld this fleet into the weapon I wish it to become. It might've been*

made of disparate units brought together just for this assault, but the Chiss admiral meant to take those disparate materials and mix them into a fine blade.

Thrawn gestured, and the two guards that, as Admiral, he was assigned came to attention and quickly moved to either side of the previous captain. "Escort Mister Kerrick to his room. He is to remain there until we return to dock."

Thrawn fell silent, simply staring at the captain again as he was escorted out of the room, shouting out about how this was unlawful, against the regulations he had agreed to as a member of the Republic Navy. *Not even able to take his removal elegantly. A disappointment to the end.*

The Lieutenant had been silent throughout this confrontation, standing aside and watching, saying nothing. *Wisdom. Yes, you will do quite well, I think.* "Remind me again of your name, Captain."

The man blinked at the sudden ascension but answered steadily as he stared back at his Admiral. "Gilad Pellaeon, sir. Of Coruscant."

"Thank you. Now, Captain Pellaeon, I believe we are both due on the bridge in twenty minutes. We have a battle to win and a system to return to the Republic."

"Yes, sir. I'll see you there in twenty minutes, sir. I need to make some announcements first." The newly promoted captain said, saluting crisply and marching up the door.

As the door closed behind the man, who was probably only around seven or eight years younger than Thrawn himself if he was any judge, Mitth'raw'nuruodo smiled, a little wider than he would have allowed if anyone was there to see. He then turned back to contemplating the images of the droids who'd been forced to try their hand door, staring at them thoughtfully.

Scene break

The first problem that any attacking force had to face in this war particularly was the problem of minefields. Not every system had them, but enough did that they could be a severe obstacle when attacking from a direction that the enemy themselves did not routinely use.

Such had been the case with Grievous, who'd gotten through the issue for two reasons. One, because of the size of the Lucrehulk sent in first to help clear out the minefields. The massive carriers could withstand a tremendous amount of punishment, and their typical anti-fighter weaponry was excellent at sweeping away mines. And two, because of the security programs which had overridden a good portion of the mines, telling them the CIS fleet was a friendly formation. If they hadn't, Grievous might well have lost all of that first group of Lucrehulks, such was the density of the minefields defending Thyferra

It was simply a logistical and material solution to the idea of space interdiction. Mines could be purchased cheaply and spread over a large amount of space in dense clusters for the same price as a single capital ship and could be built on a faster time frame than even starfighters without hyperdrives like the Confederacy Vultures. They were not a combat system that could be used again after they were first used, but even so, the positives far outweighed that single negative.

Thus, the first ships that came out of warp were seventy-two frigate-sized vessels of the new Martyr class, purpose-built to sweep mines. They had eight quad laser cannons each, heavy shielding and good hyperspace engines so they could jump instantly back out if they took too much damage, hopefully before they were completely destroyed. All of them had special electronic warfare suites that allowed them to register as much larger vessels, an idea that Thrawn knew the Galactic Defense League had taken to the next level, using decoy satellites to pull missiles or torpedoes away from their capital ships occasionally. He hadn't seen any analysis of how good those systems were, but he felt they might well be quite effective. This thought came to him now, as well as what Thrawn felt of as an irrational moment of anger towards the Galactic Defense League. Something about them just seemed to bother Thrawn on a deep level, and for the life of him he could not quite work it out, which annoyed him still further.

Spread throughout the area of space where the rest of the fleet would be coming out of hyperspace, the limited guns of the frigates opened up, and the mines all around them instantly activated, zooming toward the frigates within milliseconds.

As the frigates began to take damage, Thrawn made note of how many were dying. Whatever had been done to their hyperspace engines to allow them to shift instantly back up into the hyperbands didn't seem to be working. More than half of the frigates had died already, but they had pulled down **far** more than their weight in mines. *And it is not as if a single sentient is losing his life at present.* All of the frigates were controlled by droids, which Thrawn was somewhat amused by. He found it highly ironic that there were some missions that the Republic would make droids do, but they would not use them in combat itself, instead throwing away the lives of clones in precisely the same manner. *Yes, indeed, the Republic has a very strange kind of moral system.*

He turned to his adjutant, a human cyborg, who had a computer embedded in his mind to help with memory retention. "Please make a note of the Martyr class's limitations, Lieutenant. The tactic seems to be working, but we have lost over 80% of them already. That is far too much to sustain in the war overall."

The cyborg nodded and moved over to pull up the information on one of the five screens within the Admiral's portion of the bridge. Thrawn knew from experience the 'note' would

instead be a very detailed report based on observed data and engineering records of the new class of ship.

A moment later, the Stalwart burst out into real space along with the rest of its division. Instantly, Thrawn's eyes flicked up to the main screen rather than the incoming data from the few remaining Martyr's. And just as quickly, the plot updated, showing the ships of the fleet coming out into real space in their dozens.

When they all appeared, there were forty-eight Dreadnought-class heavy cruisers, four divisions of which came in from the 6th Fleet. Sixty-four Acclimator-class cruisers, half of which came from the 6th, five hundred and sixty gunboats, and nearly three thousand, two hundred Torrent starfighters. There weren't as many Torrent starfighters for this large a fleet as there should be, and Thrawn wondered if the enemy would recognize that. *Doubtful, neither a Givin nor a droid would recognize that as more than a statistical anomaly. But that is why I came up with a third plan if so.*

Typical Republic combat doctrine had yet to truly hit on the right mix of starfighters to capital ships, although they were getting better at it as the war continued and the need to address the Vulture swarm became ever more important.

As for the Acclamators, that variety of ships was habitually used as a landing vessel to deposit tremendous numbers of clones onto a planet at any given time. Longer and wider than the dreadnaught class, they were designed to resemble arrowheads almost, with most of their weapons forward, allowing for concentration of firepower while minimizing target profile.

The typical Acclamator was designed to assault contested systems, break hostile orbital blockades, and land troops directly on the battlefield. It had proven very effective in that role, although Thrawn felt the term penetrate rather than break was more descriptive, as up to this point, only a few orbital blockades had truly been broken on the CIS side of things.

These were outfitted as carriers instead of troop transports and had thankfully been done so from the keel outward, the Acclamator-C variant. Instead of twelve quad turbo laser turrets, these had eighteen, losing quite a lot of their internal cargo capacity for more generators, leaving them with only space for a single wing of Torrents. Their normal twenty-four-point defense light laser cannon had been upgraded to thirty-two, and they retained their four heavy proton torpedo launch tubes that were located near the arrow-shaped prow of the vessel. Each also had two hundred proton torpedoes rather than one hundred.

This actually gave them a larger magazine than the dreadnought class heavy cruisers, although the light cruisers lacked anything like the twenty heavy turbolaser batteries of the heavy cruiser or even the ten medium turbolaser batteries. Their shielding was not as good

either, although they did have more anti-fighter weapons, as the dreadnaught class only had twenty light quad turbolaser cannons.

In previous battles, the larger size of the Acclamators had occasionally caused enemy capital ships to concentrate on the newer design, much to their eventual chagrin. *Still, I think the Republic is going to need to push for a true battleship design soon. Heavy cruisers are nice, but if the CIS starts fielding more dreadnaughts as I suspect, then...*

Thrawn's thoughts on the future ended as a second after the last ships entered real space, the captains of the vessels that comprised his fleet instantly began to act on Thrawn's orders. What had been a good, compact formation burst apart as if someone had just tossed a bomb into the middle of it. Even as the surviving mines moved to attack and the twenty-four remaining Martyr class vessels with the fleet went to work on them, each ship moved almost as if they had suddenly decided to act independently, breaking their formation.

The maneuvers were wild and uncoordinated, zipping through space in three dimensions, heavy cruisers moving in treacherously steep angles up, down or even entirely around. Gunboats zipped through here and everywhere while the light cruisers shifted only slightly less ponderously than their more heavily armed fellows. They were much faster in a straight line, and in hyperspace if they really wish to be, but lacked in maneuverability as practically all capital ships did.

As they did, Thrawn heard some cursing from the young Devaronian manning the helmsman's position, but Gilad was on the man in an instant. "Silence! This is a ship of the Republic Navy, I will not have anyone cursing on this bridge, or questioning their orders. Follow that course until otherwise ordered, Lieutenant. This is all part of a plan, not just chaos for its own sake." He turned, sending an apologetic glance over at the Admiral, more for his crew's sake than anything else. "Sorry about that, Sir."

Thrawn played his own part, waving it off. "It is of no moment, Captain. We are already seeing a response from the enemy fleet."

The enemy fleet had already been moving in the direction before the Republic fleet had come out of hyperspace, of course, warned by the arrival of the minesweepers. Thus proving Thrawn's point to Kerrick about surprise not being possible in most system assaults. They had launched Vulture fighters, and now the rest of their fleet was moving out.

But he had noticed the Vultures suddenly pouring on more speed, emergency level speed. It meant that they wouldn't have enough onboard energy to get back to their carriers, but that was of no moment to the droid brains controlling them.

Nor the droid brain that had launched them forward, Thrawn thought with some degree of delight.

Similarly, the rest of their fleet had suddenly started to gain speed, and Thrawn smiled thinly. "We are dealing with a droid officer over there, Captain. The Givins are not in charge here, which might have implications elsewhere. Lieutenant, make a note of that as well. Communications signal all ships. Shift maneuvering orders to Package Beta. Once that signal is sent, signal task forces two and Three. Wait for my orders. Plan Beta is a go."

The fleet was slower to respond than he would've liked. The gunboat captains seemed to chafe, for the most part, at the order to form into a true formation. There was an exception, though, and Thrawn made a note of it, silently pointing it out to his aide-de-camp, who quickly pulled up the transmission logs of that force for the Admiral, keeping it on another of the secondary screens around the pair.

Even so, within a few moments, just as the enemy fleet began to disappear from their sensors in a microjump, the fleet had reformed. The same helmsman breathed a sigh of relief, and Gilad growled at him a little, but Thrawn had to smile faintly as he could see the bridge crew all looking at one another in relief. The unusual maneuvers had spooked them all to a man, and he would wager that it had startled the clone troopers that made up the vast majority of his fleet's personnel. *They would have gotten over it in time, far faster than a Givin would have recovered from the shock of seeing it, but that is something to remember in the future. My officers are not mushrooms to be kept in the dark and fed on fecal matter. I will remember.*

Still, it had worked. The enemy had left their fixed defenses around the single planet within the system behind. And those fixed defenses were entirely heavy weapons based rather than fighter platforms. Something, again, that Thrawn had been right about and which pointed at the Givins having been involved in emplacing those defenses. *But they are not here now.*

Microjumps were difficult to calculate. The shorter the distance, the more difficult to calculate. In a system like this, with so few gravitic bodies to deal with, it was much easier or would be for a single ship. Even slaved together on the computational level, there could still be errors in such a calculation for a fleet of any size, and such mistakes could have ships overshooting and being isolated or coming out into the same area of real space as one another, with disastrous results. Only the Jedi, through the use of the Force, could do such things without courting trouble.

It was a gamble, one the droid commander had made with the cold calculus only an unthinking machine would make.

A moment later, the enemy fleet came out of hyperspace right in front of the now-reformed Republic fleet, already in weapons range. Twelve Lucrehulks, forty-two Munificent

class, and two Confederacy-style dreadnoughts, ships that Thrawn was not pleased to see. They were accompanied by more than two hundred and twenty Wavecrest class frigates.

Those frigates had been designed by the Givin, and while not very robust, they were highly maneuverable and somewhat well-armed for both anti-ship and anti-fighter warfare.

Although, Thrawn was more interested in the fact that there were two dreadnoughts here. That was a sign that the Confederacy was bringing more ships of that bulk online across the board, perhaps. That would mean deadly things for the war going forward, but right now, he had a battle to win. *And their formation is spread out only a bit, although they did not lose any ships entirely. Pity.*

"All ships open fire," Thrawn said aloud. Although the word was somewhat superfluous. The fleet had already begun to do so, the Torrents zooming forward to fight the enemy starfighters as they poured out of the Lucrehulks and, in far smaller numbers, the Munificent class. The Wavecrests did not have any onboard starfighter complement. "Lieutenant, keep an eye on those starfighters."

The starfighters in question were the first wave of twelve thousand plus that had been launched from the Lucrehulks and had already begun moving out towards the area of the minefields that had been cleared by the minesweepers. They had been left behind by their fellows now and were around thirty minutes away from contact. Better for the Republic fleet, the enemy had clearly expected to attack a fleet that was in almost complete disarray for some reason. *And droids do not understand bluffs very well. A given might have eventually, but the shock of seeing it would have been far greater.*

Instead, they came face-to-face with a fleet in formation, ready to fight, with the Torrents already zooming forward toward where Thrawn had estimated a droid commander would bring them out of hyperspace. That meant that even as the Vultures launched from their carriers, the Torrents were already in among them, launching concussion missiles against capital ship shielding.

"Heavy cruiser divisions Two and Three. One of the Lucrehulks nearest your position seems to have issues with its shielding. Exacerbate them. Divisions four through twelve target the Munificent class vessels. Division one, targets of opportunity." Experience up to this point had proven that the spinal mounted turbolaser batteries that the Munificent class posted made them deadly ship killers. Thankfully, they were slow to cycle after each shot, and the enemy commander had made the mistake of bringing them in with the rest of his fleet rather than separating them into a separate task force behind the Lucrehulks in the dreadnoughts. It was common doctrine but a mistake that he would pay for.

“Light cruiser divisions, targets of opportunity. Gunboats stay close for now. Keep the fighters off of us, husband your concussion missiles. Our own fighters will do for an offensive punch into their formation for now.”

Space lit up with the violent exchange of turbolaser, laser cannon, and the explosions of dying starfighters, with the two dreadnoughts shifting forward slowly from the rest of the fleet, the enemy attempting to pull his Lucrehulks back rather than his Munificent class. Again, a common mistake.

Already, two of those Munificent class were badly battered, shifting around to bring their less battered shielding around, no longer trying to use their spinal-mounted turbolaser cannons. A few of Thrawn’s ships had already reported taking hits from the rest of the Munificent class, and shields were being hammered all around the fleet. But each ship captain knew he had discretion on flipping or rotating his ship as need be and was already doing so.

Watching the battle, Thrawn slowly leaned back in his chair, staring coldly at the screen, a picture of calm even as shouted reports came in from several of the bridge officers. He listened to it all; he watched the screen as it updated from data being constantly sent from all the ships, and he gave orders, which had the entire fleet slowly starting to fall back. This attenuated the problems already facing the Confederacy fleet, as he had hoped the moment he saw the movements of the dreadnaughts.

For more Munificent class died, and one of his own heavy cruisers listed out of position. Its captain had been just a bit too slow to rotate and had found itself targeted by several of the enemy heavy cruisers. Five of the Acclamator class ships had been blown apart by the two dreadnoughts, who apparently had both fallen into the trap of believing them the more dangerous ship to ship fighters for a few moments before they began to shift fire onto his dreadnought class vessels.

Instantly, more of his ships began to report taking more damage. As they were not being specifically targeted by any of his ships, the two enemy dreadnaughts had been striking back with impunity. But the two dreadnoughts had pushed just a bit further out and away from the enemy fleet than they should have, away from the defensive envelope of the rest of the Confederacy capital ships.

“Order to all heavy cruiser divisions!” Thrawn barked. “Shift fire. The target is the dreadnoughts. Order to Light cruiser divisions seven, nine, ten, change course, forward, 80° to port and 80° down from the elliptic. Order to Gunboat flotillas seventeen, twenty-two, forty-eight, same orders. Local tactical command to fall onto Brevet Commodore Fresh on the Cataclysm.”

The use of a brevet rank to give a captain more authority over his fellows in combat was well known by now and did not raise any eyebrows, although Gilad was somewhat astonished that Thrawn seemed to know the name of a specific clone captain without needing to look it up or resort to his aide. He hadn't bothered to learn any so far himself, but he determined to do so now as his Admiral continued to shout orders.

"Light cruiser divisions fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, shift course, forward, 80° starboard, 80° up from the elliptic. Gunboat flotillas forty-seven, forty-six, forty-five same orders. Local temporary command to fall onto Brevet Captain cross on gunboat four-seven-two."

That startled Gilad from his own work, and even as the ship rumbled a bit, taking and receiving fire from one of the dreadnoughts, he turned to look at the Chiss admiral, trying hard not to flinch as those eyes seemed to flick to him the moment Gilad looked in his direction. "Ask."

"Sir, a gunboat gunboat officer? Even if he was a division commander, his rank would only be that of commander." All captains of course, were given the nominal rank of captain while aboard their ship, but gunboats routinely had only between 60 to 80 personnel aboard. That was simply not enough people in the military to warrant the rank of a real captain. As for who led a flotilla, that was normally decided by seniority.

Thrawn gestured down to the screen directly in front of him, which was showing a readout of specific orders sent from ship to ship, mostly battle chatter, between captains of various divisions. At the moment, it was showing a steady stream of orders from Cross to his two fellow flotilla commanders. "Cross kept all three of those gunboat flotillas together, whereas every other gunboat flotilla has broken down into divisions which are operating independently. That kind of command ability is something I wish to cultivate. If he survives the battle, he may go on to bigger and brighter things."

Gilad nodded slowly and then twisted around, barking an order. "Helmsman, flip us on our axis. Bring us about twenty degrees to port!" The next moment, the ship did so, although nothing changed on the ship's bridge thanks to its internal gravity generator. Georgia had noticed, the fact that a portion of the shielding facing one of the dreadnoughts had begun to dim down from orange to red out of the corner of his eye and taken the appropriate response.

Even as the dreadnoughts began to take fire they returned it, the much larger vessels shrugging off most of the incoming fire from the fleet of heavy cruisers and even the light cruisers that were taking shots at them. The rest of the Confederacy fleet also continued to fire, but once more, the enemy had made a mistake. The droid commander had gotten tunnel vision on defending their largest vessels, one of which might well be their flagship.

Even as the Munificent class began to batter his heavy cruisers, putting three more out of commission in quick succession, the light cruiser and gunboat formations that Thrawn had hastily created hit their formation from above and below on opposite sides. Two divisions of the Munificents were isolated on each side and began to lose shielding quickly, breaking off their attacks and slowly trying to turn around towards the light cruisers and gunboats.

“Sir, two minutes before the first wave of Vultures enters the combat space,” Thrawn’s adjutant reminded him.

He nodded in thanks toward the man and looked over to the communications specialist. “Comms, signal task force two and three. They are a go. Send them the following coordinates...”

Even as the intact squadrons of Vulture fighters went to work on mauling the scattered and already battered groups of torrent fighters that had arrived with the fleet or been launched previously, the next two task forces of Thrawn’s fleet arrived. Composed entirely of Torrent starfighters and numbering nearly eight thousand fighters, Task Force Two arrived directly behind the Republic fleet, zooming through their formation, taking losses from the capital ships but closing with them quickly, launching their concussion missiles and as they did so, one of the dreadnoughts began to lose shielding along its port side, while the other started to lose shielding on its prow even faster.

Thrawn instantly saw this, and orders flashed out to the ships that could target those areas while Task Force Three, another six flotillas of gunboats and eight wings of Torrents, flashed into being directly above the fleet. That force Thrawn ordered downward, where it began to fight with the Vultures that had ignored their fellow starfighters in order to launch themselves into the teeth of his capital ships. With the added gunboats, they began to die quickly, negating the advantage they’d had of coming into the battle sphere as complete squadrons.

Several more orders were quickly barked out, and this or that gunboat or this or that heavier ship shifted targets suddenly. The prow of the enemy dreadnought lost all of its shielding to proton torpedoes and concussion missile hits, overwhelming a small segment. A group of Torrent fighters roared along its length, getting underneath the rest of its shielding and taking out weapons emplacements from under the range of most of those weapons. The other dreadnaught was able to rotate its battered shielding away from the battle a bit, presenting another side to the incoming fire from the Republic fleet.

Gilad continued to fight his vessel even as he heard the barked-out orders from behind him, bringing his ship forward with the rest of Division One into closer contact with the badly damaged dreadnought. Its fellow tried to move over to defend its lamed sister, but the rest of the Confederacy fleet had already been hammered badly. The last of the Munificents exploded

even as the Stalwart took a position along the firing line, passing the enemy dreadnought. The ship's fire was precise and deadly, spearing deeper into already damaged segments.

Two more heavy cruisers died, followed by a third. But that dreadnought soon stopped firing back, all of its weapons taken out, although its heavy armor remained to protect its vitals for a time. Instantly, Thrawn ordered a shift in targeting to the other dreadnought, but they did not have an easy time of it any longer, with the rest of the Confederacy fleet in position to batter the Republic ships more than they had been previously.

Somehow, though, Thrawn was able to keep the entire battle in his mind. Gilad had not seen another officer able to do that to such a degree save from the one Jedi he'd served with prior to this and was astonished, comparing the two in his head even as he continued to bark orders to his crew.

"Gunboat flotillas five, six, and seven, shift targeting to that Lucrehulk on your starboard. Its shielding is flagging. All gunboats, limitations on concussion missile usage are lifted."

Reminded of his own ship's expendable resources, Gilad quickly checked with his weapons officer, hearing the grim news that they were down to only twenty proton torpedoes. He informed the Admiral of this, and he nodded solemnly.

"I know Captain. We will have to meet with the fleet colliers before taking on the system's static defenses. But I believe we have enough for this."

Gilad wasn't so certain. Lucrehulks took a lot of killing and only one of them had been knocked out of the fight so far. He was about to point this out, but then, the ship that the gunboat divisions Thrawn had just ordered to shift fire to lost its shielding. Instantly, every capital ship that could shifted targeting to it, and within minutes, the ship then exploded thanks to a few lucky protons torpedoes slamming into its hyperdrive engines.

With a start, Gilad looked over at the main tactical screen, not taking in the small area around the Stalwart for once but the overall battle. There were no more Munificent class ships with the enemy fleet. The second dreadnought had pulled back, putting the Lucrehulks between it and the Republic fleet. The Wavecrests had lost more than half of their number despite not having been targeted up to this point. The Republic fleet had been battered, but they still had the numbers advantage in capital ships. The fact that the Torrents had been even among the Confederacy fleet had allowed them to practically wipe out whole wings of Vultures as they were launched from their capital ships piecemeal directly into the battle.

They were winning, they were winning, and their losses so far... They weren't much. Gilad had been in three pitched battles before this, one led by a Jedi, the other two by a clone officer. The Jedi had been able to keep their ships from dying so much, but only at the cost of

practically every starfighter they'd had, along with their gunboats. The clone trooper had done worse. Here, Thrawn had seemingly been ahead of the enemy fleet at every step in the engagement.

"Know your enemy, Captain," Thrawn said, as if reading Gilad's thoughts. "The same principle can be used on practically every level of warfare, including that of capital ship engagements. Know your enemy and know your own abilities, and you have a chance to win every battle."

He then turned aside, shouting orders to the surviving Torrent squadron commanders. Half of them instantly broke up and away from the battle sphere, exiting in small groups or even single fighters before jumping to hyperspace and away. They would return forty minutes later with their concussion missile magazines filled.

By that time, seven more of the Acclamators, along with three more of the heavy cruisers, had been forced to withdraw. But the enemy had lost two more Lucrehulks battered into scarp and had been completely denuded of Wavecrest ships. They still had starfighters aplenty, and the gunboat losses had grown tremendously, but that ended abruptly as the new Torrent fighters came blazing back into the battle sphere as a single unit, slamming into and down from above. Concussion missiles flared out, destroying starfighters, and the next group of Torrent fighters peeled up and away, taking the time to go and rearm themselves in turn. Only a bare thousand, eight hundred, but that was enough.

Again and again, the Stalwart rocked, and shields flared and died along its length. Weapon systems began to go offline, but Gilad kept on fighting his ship. Another Lucrehulk exploded, then a second lost engines, falling quickly out of formation, the rest of the Confederacy fleet having begun to fall back after the destruction of the first dreadnought.

"Make a note of it, Lieutenant," Thrawn murmured, not turning away from the screen, before breaking off what he was about to say to issue some more commands to a few of the gunboat divisions that he noticed still read as having concussion missiles on board. Soon, another Lucrehulk had lost its shielding, and then started to lose weapon systems quickly. By this point, the enemy fleet's shielding was battered across the board.

"The Confederacy has not reinforced this system despite us being here for close to two hours now. That implies that either they do not have forces that can get here in any appreciable length of time, or that they believe the forces here expendable, and they can retake the system afterward."

For the first time since the battle had begun, Gilad heard Lieutenant speak, his voice almost robotic, yet with a flare of interest that few droids could match, dragging him away from his own duties for a second to look over at the young cyborg. "It is also pure conjecture, sir, but

perhaps the droid commander simply did not receive orders to inform his superiors of any assault on this system? It is, after all, an unimportant system and has not been contested before this.”

“Never assume your opponent is stupid until you can prove it accurately. No, they will try to retake the system afterward. We may be forced to withdraw if they attack us with a sufficiently large force before our own fixed defenses can be put into place.”

The targeted Lucrehulk blew, suddenly revealing the battered dreadnought. The Stalwart rocked as it opened fire through the debris of the slain capital ship, and Gilad barked out an order to evade, their fire heading up and away. The dreadnought twisted in space, shifting on its axis enough to continue to keep the Stalwart under fire, but other capital ships started to hammer it in turn, and its shielding hadn't been fully reenergized from earlier. Segments started to fall, and the Torrent fighters, which by this point had numerical superiority over the Vultures, dove in.

The ship was still there ten minutes later. Although the Stalwart had thankfully been able to shift up and away from its fire, instead, the Stalwart and its companion, Pike, joined in on punishing a Lucrehulk instead. The other two ships of the division had been battered into retreating into hyperspace by the dreadnought, but it had lost practically all of its shielding and a good portion of its weapons.

And then the second group of Torrents that had been pulled back on Thrawn's orders arrived back in the battle sphere. With only a few dozen Vulture fighters still around, most of their concussion missiles slammed into capital ships across the entire battlefield, and the dreadnought was not the only one to be knocked out of the action.

The battle still continued after that for another thirty minutes. The final Lucrehulk's weapons fell silent, then exploded in space, and Gilad stared at his screen in something approaching shock. The majority of their missing ships had been able to pull back, and even so, more than half of their capital ships and gunboats were still nominally in fighting shape.

Even accounting the retreating ships as mission kills, that was the best exchange of tonnage that Gilad had ever heard of in this war outside the rumors of the battles the Tyrant's Bane, the GDL's flagship, had been in. And since those rumors were so fantastical, Gilad had never really considered them as real.

“Signal the fleet. Reform into combat formation epsilon. All ships are to take aboard their surviving Torrent squadrons. Rearm them. Signal Task Force Three forward. We will need to rearm ourselves before we take out those six orbital fortresses.”

“Yes, sir!” The comms officer said, actually turning around and saluting for the moment before getting back to work.

Thrawn smiled faintly at that and looked over at Gilad. “See to your ship, captain. Stand down battle stations for now, and make certain everyone gets a good meal. We will not be taking our capital ships into range of those fortresses, but we might see still more action before this operation is finished.”

“Yes sir,” Gilad answered, imitating his junior officer, up to and including the salute.

Not three hours later, the battered Republic fleet hovered in orbit over the single planet within Oulanne, which had the same name as the star system itself.

Oulanne surrendered an hour later. The local population, mostly givin and muun, had taken the opportunity to overwhelm the droid army stationed there. They reported what Thrawn had suspected: the Body Calculus had been overthrown leading up to the attack on Thyferra. The givin might still believe in the CIS cause, but they no longer had any loyalty to their current crop of leaders, and the local members of the Body Calculus were willing to back the Republic against the CIS for now. It wasn’t a total reversal back to compliance with the Republic, but it would do for Thrawn.

All around the currently stationary fleet were shoals of single-shot turbolaser satellites, ready and waiting for any response from the Confederacy. At the same time, the Republic High Command had been able to get them still more Torrent squadrons, as well as gunboats and even two flotillas of frigates. No heavier ship just yet, but they would come in time, too, as the High Command got over their shock at this attack having actually succeeded.

That response did not arrive for another five hours, during which the fleet colliers had done their best to repair the damages done to the capital ships, refilled, again, all of their onboard magazines, and deposited still more shoals of single shot turbolaser or proton torpedo launcher satellites. Work was already beginning on a defense station as well, although that would take more than a week. Even the GDL, with their prepackaged Golan-style defense installations, could not throw them up in less than a day. However, the sheer amount of firepower that the shoals of satellites gave the fleet triple the amount of firepower they’d had before entering this system for the first exchange.

The enemy fleet commander seemed to realize that. He sat in the out system, launching starfighter wing after starfighter wing. After his entire fleet had launched every starfighter it had, the capital ships waited there as a starfighter swarm many times larger than any that Gilad had ever dealt with flew toward the planet.

However, with the quad laser satellites, even fifty thousand Vultures could not get through to the fleet. Hundreds, then thousands of them, began to die as the quad laser satellites opened fire. The only kind of satellite that wasn't single shot per use, they could fire up to seven times before running out of energy and did so now in this incredibly target-rich environment.

The Torrents waited, well down into the planet's atmosphere. The identified friend or foe program on quad laser satellites was not the best, and Thrawn wanted to retain them for the fight to come, just in case.

That fight, however, did not happen. Seeing that he had expended all of his Vulture fighters for so little gain, only smattering the energy shields on a few of the Republic capital ships, the enemy commander decided to jump for hyperspace.

By the time the enemy came back five hours later, still more Vultures, still more satellites, and the first of the Republic fleet's heavier reinforcements had begun to arrive. Six light cruiser divisions and four more heavy cruiser divisions.

The same fleet colliers that had released so many single-shot satellites had also begun to build up scattered minefields around the planet. They were scattered and not very deep, but dangerous for all that. The outer layer of the system was still pocketed by a tremendous amount of Confederacy mines, but they would be cleared out in time.

Although he still launched his newly refilled fighter bays again, once more, the enemy commander decided once more not to pay the blood price and capital ships. He had not been reinforced, still having his fourteen Lucrehulk, twenty-four Munificent main force, with only a few more Hardcell transport ships joining them.

At that, Thrawn sighed. He had remained on the bridge even though he had ordered Gilad and the rest of his bridge crew to switch out with their fellows for a time. Now, he stood up from where he had been sitting, nodding to the returned captain. "Signal the fleet. Order the Torrents out to exchange concussion missile fire with those fighters coming in. They are not to engage in dogfights but pull back after that point to rejoin the fleet. I'm going to go get some rest. We've won. Now, all that remains to see is if that officer over there is going to be replaced by someone more daring or if we will be able to reinforce this system far too much for them to want to try to take it back."

Gilad Pellaeon nodded and saluted the Admiral as he walked off the bridge, smiling very slightly to himself as the bridge crew started to cheer behind him. *Well, we now know that the Givin are no longer ensure charge of their own space, which is an interesting little factoid. I do hope that the Republic Intelligence will be able to do something about it. It will make the rest of*

this campaign far more difficult, but the outcome could be far greater for the Republic. We will see what we can do with the rest. The Chancellor will be very pleased.

Thrawn stopped at the entrance to his door, frowning faintly at that thought even as he returned to the salutes of the two troopers stationed there. *How odd that I think of simply the Chancellor rather than a high command there. And so strongly, too. Still, I suppose he did make an impression on me.*

Shrugging that off as inconsequential, Thrawn entered his room, sat down at his desk, and began to compile a report for the High Command. This was, after all, only phase one.

Scene break

Not two hours after Thrawn had announced the conclusion of that operation, Chancellor Palpatine announced his victory to the Senate to great cheers from the sheep. Normally, such victories would be simply part of a larger presentation given every other day to the Senate at large by the Senate military oversight committee, of which obviously the Chancellor was a part. But today, with all of the bad news about unrest and continued attacks from the CIS they had been getting since the assault on Thyferra, the Chancellor had hoped to hear some good news and had interrupted the flow of the session to announce the minor victory.

As he smiled and waved at the cheering Senate, Sidious was vaguely pleased with how well the day had gone. He had been able to somewhat vilify C'baoth even more than previously, hinting that whatever his public persona might say, the Dark Side user was behind the attempted genocide on Thyferra.

Internally, he was still furious about how that attack had played out. He had agreed with it, and after feeling through the Force that Harry Potter was about to arrive and do his best to stop the attack, had moved Jerec into place in order to take advantage of it. But not only had that failed, but the bombardment had not been part of the plan Sidious had approved. Denying the entire galaxy of bacta would feed the Veil of the Dark Side like no other single act could, but it would also weaken the galaxy at large for decades, if not centuries, until an equivalent substance could be found.

Worse, Sidious's own hidden cache of bacta wasn't all that large. He had used a great deal of the substance stored on Wayland when he had followed up on his former Master's Force Sensitive cloning experiments, and the other cache on Byss, his own personal hidden fortress, wasn't even enough to fill a single cloning cylinder just yet. C'baoth was still too uncontrolled, too willing to go his own way, and that threatened the Great Plan. *Still, my true apprentice is within his command structure now and will be waiting to remove him if need be. He has already begun to lose his Dark Jedi followers, and that process will continue.*

On top of vilifying C'baoth, Sidious had very subtly emphasized the fact that he was a former Jedi, and the Jedi Order had not known of the depths of his ambition or how far he had fallen. It was subtle, but it would remain in many a Senator's mind, and it was something that Sidious could feed in the future. Even better in terms of his own power base, Sidious's intermediaries throughout the Senate had taken what had happened with the 6th Fleet and run with it. Now, the Chancellor could dismiss any officers in any military force across the Republic and had been given more control over both the military and the Senate Military Oversight Committee, cutting down on the number of people on that board by two.

Senator Amidala would be one of those two. Sidious was very, very certain of that. Although his chosen agents within the Senate had not been able to convince the Senate to allow him to dismiss them by his own authority, rather, the other senators on that committee would be voted on, and the two with the least votes would be forced to leave. The Emergency Powers Act had also been enlarged, with more power shifting to a centralized authority. The Senate or, more realistically, the various commissions within it, would now control even more in terms of the industrial capacity of the Republic in order to feed the ever-growing demand for more war material. That this would take more power away from even Core World sectors was not something that any of the Senators cared about at present.

After all, it was simply an Emergency Powers Act. It said right in the law itself that once the war was over, the extreme measures would end.

Sidious allowed himself a moment to gloat over that fact before a gentle cough from Sly Moore behind him reminded him that Senator Amidala had sent a request to speak to the Senate as a whole about events within the Polith System since the attack. That was almost enough to ruin his mood, despite knowing what was coming. The Senator was more than likely going to be able to push through her ridiculous Medical Ship Neutrality Act, which meant he would have to block it using C'baoth, and talking to him was quickly becoming a chore.

Although I find it amusing to know how much dirt she has discovered about various senators. I will cheerfully back up her crusade against them in the future, considering that only two of them are my creatures at present. I can shield Danu and the other man, if not their positions, and thus make them even more indebted to me while also replacing them and the rest with other people I can similarly control. My hold on the Senate will continue to grow, even as Senator Amidala's voice within it continues to grow. And even that serves me, Sidious consoled himself for the upcoming annoyance. After all, it is well-known that she and I are close as we come from the same planet, and she looks to me as one of her mentors along with Mina Bonteri, even if we do not always see eye to eye on political matters.

Reinforcing his Palpatine persona, Sidious held up his hand and felt a visceral thrill go through him at how easily the entire Senate silenced itself on that simple gesture. "Gentle beings of the Senate, I realize that we are all effusive about the victory in Oulanne. But we cannot forget the horror that precipitated it within the Polith System. Thanks to the last-minute intervention of Count Potter and his magnificent vessel, the galaxy was saved from a great evil. But repairing what that evil had already accomplished has been an ongoing project. And now, our own Senator Amidala has asked to speak with this body."

Moments later, the Hypercom connection into the Senate activated, and a series of holograms of Senator Amidala appeared across the vast cavernous area, each of them pointed in a different direction. She sat in a chair, her face immaculate, thanks to a Force trick from Aayla, which had removed any hint of tiredness and even the stress lines from her face. Padme wore the most formal outfit she had brought with her on this trip. Her hair was done up in a severe bun, and there was no hint of makeup beyond a bit of eyeliner on her face.

She looked every bit the serious bureaucrat in Sidious's mind. Yet it was very apparent that the rest of the Senate did not agree with that rather caustic opinion because the moment her image appeared, the entire Senate went crazy, a wall of sound that filled the world.

If Sidious had thought the cheering for Thrawn's victory had been effusive, it was next to nothing against this. Worse was the feelings slamming into him via the Force, even under his Force Cloak. The upswell of adoration was so powerful it almost made him sick, the feelings so anathema to the path of the Dark Side, the true power of the Force.

He watched as the young woman smiled and raised a hand, saying something lost in the tumult of noise echoing around the chamber. *Bask in it while you can, Amidala. Love is so easy to turn into hate or disdain, and though they cheer for you now, you still have enemies aplenty among the centrists. That will not go away and will grow when you take on the new duties I have for you.*

Smiling very faintly, not at the woman's presence but at his future plans for her, Palpatine pushed himself to his feet, holding out his hands in every direction as he shouted for order. "I will remind this august body that Senator Amidala is not here just to grace us with her presence. She is here to give a report! And I would like to hear what Senator Amidala has to say!"

It took a few moments, but Palpatine eventually was able to calm the Senators down without the use of the sound system's override. Not that it would've done much good, considering how much of that noise was being sent out into the Senate Hall without the use of such.

“Thank you for that acclaim, gentle beings. But the Chancellor is correct. This is not a pleasure call. I will not speak of the war nor of the enemy’s barbarity in his assault on the Polith System. I’m certain wiser heads than I in military matters have already spoken of it, and you saw my preliminary report about the damage done to the system. I will instead speak of the vratrix and how he failed them, and yet how they are willing to do their part to recover from this monstrous act and even to make the Republic stronger going forward. I will also speak of the role that the illegal actions of those who held power in this system played in this assault, and now they have wielded that power in the past. I have all of their computer systems under my fingers right now, and I will warn you, this is not going to be pretty. And there may be those among you who do not want to hear what I have to say,” Padme began grimly.

From there, the Nabooan native explained how the vratrix, who had convinced the rest of the galaxy of their sentience during the Stark Hyperspace War, had been treated like chattel by the humans of Thyferra, used solely to run the various plants and farms needed to create bacta, without ever being given a voice in how they were governed. How that was a massive mistake, not just because it went against the basic rights of all citizens of the Republic, but because they were the ones who had created bacta in the first place and could do so to such a degree that the bacta they created was of far higher quality than what the human corporations sold on the open market.

Padme spoke about how someone within the two main corporations, Xucphra or Zaltin, had sold information to the Confederacy, which in turn allowed Grievous to plot out his assault, both the commando droids and the deactivation program for the mines while others had lied to the Sixth Fleet’s admiral about what was going on in the Polith System. The various corporations had also been lining their own pockets from well before the Stark Hyperspace War, driving the price of bacta up by keeping its creation and distribution at a set point, a process that had continued into the war.

That last was treason, and many of the Senators who had not cared about the treatment of the ‘bugs’ began to shout furious diatribes on that score. This eventually forced the Chancellor to restore order with the override system.

When he did, Padme nodded in his direction and continued to explain how many of those self-same leaders had attempted to escape the system before the Confederacy had closed in, how they had also tried to escape afterward but been stopped by Republic forces. “With this and more evidence of specific moments of illegal actions, I have seized their assets, both monetary and personal, and ordered groups of slicers to peel away their computer systems for any irregularities. Because of that, I have discovered several dozen hidden caches of bacta here in Polith and more hidden elsewhere. Several of which were marked down in their systems as

being to feed the black market with the Confederacy that began almost the moment the war did.”

Senator Amidala waited for a few moments as that statement won her still more shouts and roars of indignation and then changed tack. Padme instead spoke about the rebuilding efforts.

That somewhat surprised Sidious, as he thought that she would take this moment to publicly castigate the various Senators who she had not needed to make deals with for her upcoming demands. But then it occurred to Sidious that perhaps Amidala knew she would be able to ride the wave of adoration the Senate might be feeling right now without any more votes needed. *I cannot say it is not so. Thus, she will simply hand over the information on their criminal acts to Organa and let the Senate Judicial Committee hammer them. Clever, thought it does not matter much to my plans there.*

The young woman shifted then from talk of the rebuilding efforts to the system of government that she and the Republic bureaucrats she had worked with had designed to take over from the essentially two corporation-system that had run it before behind the guise of democracy. While there was no way to truly separate the economy from the state simply because of how much of that economy was based on the distribution and creation of a single material, there had to be limits on the oligarchies, and that was what Padme and her aides had devised.

A constitutional oligarchy, with the rights of the individuals protected by an entirely separate judicial branch of the government, the upkeep of which was set by the new charter and could not be changed. Beyond that, there was a minimum limit of twenty-four corporations to handle the distribution and creation of bacta. Before, there it only been eight, with two, Xucphra and Zaltin, being far, far larger than the others.

Each of those corporations would handle a portion of the bacta creation process, as well as distribution to specific, defined areas of the galaxy. They would be in competition in terms of public perception, as well as how much money they made, obviously, but there would be severe limits on their powers over their people in terms of education, minimum wage, basic civil rights and how they treated the vratix. In fact, nine of those corporations were now led by vratix, which would probably give them a leg up, at least on the creation side of things, for a while.

Senate oversight would be needed for a few decades to make certain that the corporations didn't try to go back to the status quo, as Padme was in no way certain that the feelings towards the vratix could not change over time back to what it had been once the planet had rebuilt its infrastructure. People would be people regardless, always attempting to get just a little bit ahead of their fellows.

Above and beyond this, through was perhaps the most radical concept. It was one the corporations of Thyferra had always said was flatly impossible, and to explain it, Padme turned over the communication to Speaker Aldo. This was the first time a vratrix had spoken in front of the Senate, but there were numerous other bug-like aliens within the Senate, so Aldo's appearance did not matter much save to those with hidden xenophobic tendencies, like Sidious.

The idea of bacta not being able to be created anywhere else was something the corporations had come up with back when they had fooled the rest of the galaxy into thinking the vratrix were simple bugs. Nothing could be further from the truth, and to help break the previous monopoly of Bacta, the vratrix had agreed with a proposal Aldo and Padme had worked out: they would agree to create colonies on other planets that met the environmental criteria to grow alhazi and kavam. Each colony would then be free to create their own corporation to sell the bacta from these new hives.

"Events have shown we vratrix that we cannot remain on a single planet. It is putting all of our eggs in one hillock and cannot be allowed," Aldo stated to shouts of astonishment and delight. "To solve this issue, we can, given two months, prepare seed groups that will be able to set up a hive anywhere where the climate is suitable for us and our crops. We believe that offering two such seed groups to the Republic and two to the GDL is appropriate."

That, and some of the earlier points, caused heated debate within the Senate. The idea of a bidding war for access to such a hive came up but was shut down. Only the planets best suited for the vratrix would be considered, and only planets that did not have agriculture-based economies already, which might be ruined by the shift in produce. Sidious was already thinking of ways to somehow make one of these seed-groups disappear or figure out a way to redirect their product in the future.

He did not even try to fight it. For one thing, this aspect of Padme's proposals had not been in the package she had sent to warn the Chancellor. For another, the idea of more planets able to, if only on a small level, produce bacta was too good for anyone in the Senate to turn it down. Even if it might not directly enrich them, having more bacta available would sharply cut down on the medical costs across the galaxy. No, it was better to not even try to stop such a windfall, only put pieces in place to take advantage of it in the future when this 'seed' budded.

Padme fielded questions for the better part of two hours, along with Aldo, doing most of the talking for the pair. Eventually, both the new version of the Polith System's government and the concept of the vratrix finding other planets to colonize were okayed by the Senate at large. There would still need to be a lot of investigation as to where those colonies would be and the exact wording of the new constitution on which the government would be based, but that would take weeks for the various bureaucrats and secretaries to work out.

At that point, the discussion shifted to the defense of the Polith System, which Padme fielded by passing them straight over to “General Skywalker.” Her use of that rank rather than rank within the Jedi order caused the two Jedi in the Senate to raise their eyebrows, but Sidious had to hide a smile. That was good. Already, the ‘Jedi Without Fear’ was gaining popularity, and this would only strengthen that.

What Master Yoda and Siri Tachi, a human woman in her late thirties, felt about it, he did not know. Yoda seemed to disprove, but reading that one’s face was impossible even for Sidious. As for the woman, she was one of hundreds of Jedi not powerful enough to make a difference nor interesting enough to garner any special attention from Sidious or his previous Master. The only thing he knew offhand about her was that she was a close friend of Obi-Wan Kenobi, the man Sidious had thought would take over young Anakin until Master Windu had stepped in.

He listened intently as Padme took up the conversation once more, turning the discussion to her plan to use the bacta hoarded by the previous rulers of Thyferra as well as the rest of their ill-gotten gains to fund the ships and organization necessary for the Medical Ship Neutrality Act. “Doing so removes one of the bottlenecks on our end of ratifying that act and the ensuing agreement with the CIS. And I have Knight Secura here as well to speak on the GDL’s willingness to pay for half of the ships necessary, as well as provide crews to man them.”

The beautiful rutian twi’lek female’s face appeared then beside Padme, and she nodded her head to the Senate, reiterating that position and saying as well that the GDL was willing to sell the fortresses that they had already begun construction of in the system to help defend it against any further incursions to the Republic for pennies on the dollar. “The distribution of bacta must be maintained, or the entire galaxy will suffer for it.”

There were some grumblings about this being too good to be true and some glares at the twi’lek woman, but in the reflected glory of the *Tyrant’s Bane* and it's arriving just in time to stop Grievous from wiping out the entire planet, those noises were mere background. Indeed, Sidious had noticed a distinct cooling of the annoyance and, in some cases, outright antipathy towards the Galactic Defense League since that attack. He made a note of it now. He would need to stoke those fires in the future.

But now was not the time. Instead, Palpatine stood up and approved the measure, saying aloud that, “Especially after the barbarity of the attack on Thyferra, we need to show not only our own constituents but those of the enemy that we can be merciful and willing to look out for their best interests even when their own leaders cannot. I will take it upon myself to reach out to Shu Mai, the leader of the commerce Guild and one of the members of the separatist counsel on that score.”

This won him some cheers as well, and Palpatine smiled, waving at the crowd.

Later that day, after the Senate had stopped work for the evening, Sidious called Padme back, asking to speak with her privately. He pasted on his best Palpatine smile, adding a hint of concern and worry to it, as he asked about her health before praising her actions wholeheartedly and then admonishing her for worrying him. "I am not an old man, but I certainly felt like one when I realized that you were in the crosshairs of that Grievous creature."

"I think perhaps you need more exercise, my old friend," Padme laughed. "Although I thank you for your words."

Keeping a smile on his face, Sidious went on, saying, "But in a way, it is perhaps precipitous that both you and young Count Potter are there at the same time. The Republic High Command wishes to place a liaison officer within the GDL, and the Senate also wishes to send an ambassador. We are scheduled to send such to the..." He ostentatiously made to look down at his notes, smiling faintly. "I see they haven't yet gotten around to changing the name from Congress of the Stars. At any rate, their legislative body. But at the moment, all they have is the executive branch."

He smiled cryptically, then held up a signal used among the Senators to ask one another if they were fully encrypted. When Padme nodded, he went on. "More importantly, High Command believes that the GDL has something planned that will entail actions by the Tyrant's Bane involving former Republic worlds, by which I mean Confederacy worlds that seceded with the rest of the Confederacy of Independent systems. At that time, there will be quite a few political issues that arise. Under those circumstances, it might be best to have a senator on hand. As you are friends with Harry Potter and have proven your loyalty to the Senate and the Republic many times over, might I ask if you would be willing to serve in that capacity?"

That last was nothing but the truth, yet it was really a small part of why Sidious wanted Padme to remain near Harry Potter. This would remove Padme from the Senate and allow Sidious to attack her on those very points by his puppets within the Senate and various news agencies, i.e., her loyalty to the Senate and the Republic. It would also allow a few of the news agencies out there who were more skill than actual news networks to start to attack Amidala's integrity in other ways. The fact he would also hopefully ignite still more jealousy in Anakin Skywalker was also a part of his thinking, a large one. *I did not like how composed and, ugh, Jedi-like he was earlier. Perhaps I need to start being more proactive about influencing him. Yes... tomorrow I will start to reach out to him again. With Windu out of the way it should be easy to help him once more discover the glory of anger.*

"I will have to speak to Harry about that when he is released from his bacta tank, Chancellor, and I do have other demands on my time. This mission to Thyferra was only one

such stop, after all. Although come to think of it, that might not be as big a deal,” Padme mused. “The Tyrant’s Bane was heavily damaged in the battle here, and although the dock workers are doing their best, it will be several weeks until it’s repaired. That might mean that Harry is also stuck here for a time.”

Making a mental note to try to infiltrate some covert espionage agents into the Polith system armed with as many slicer programs as they could contrive, Sidious nodded judiciously. “Of course. Give Harry my best when he comes to. The entire galaxy owes him and his crew a debt of gratitude. So much so that I am willing to not even question the capabilities of that ship of his.”

Padme laughed at that and agreed to do so before the two of them both signed off. As he leaned back in his chair, Sidious reflected, *And I owe him a debt of anger. Jerec was a useful tool, if far too certain of his own intelligence. To say nothing of all the other myriad ways that Potter and his GDL have inhibited the great plan. The escape of the younglings alone would be enough for me to cheerfully torture him about for the next hundred years.*

Sith Lords occasionally felt more call to one emotion or another among those that fed into the Dark Side. Causing fear, lording your power over others and using it to control them. Feeling anger, the rush of using your raw fury to conquer your enemies. Sidious had always felt himself more inclined to hatred. An icy, formless hatred for everything connected to the Jedi and in his way of becoming the eternal Emperor of the galaxy. And Count Potter was rapidly coming to be the being he hated most in the galaxy, despite the fact that Sidious could not shift all his plans around to target Dooku’s ‘final kriff’ you to his plans.

And I noticed that Padme did not tell me anything about that ship either. She knows its secrets. I can tell that much. If she returns to Coruscant, I might need to take it from her mind. I have not interfered with her mind since Xiss started to follow her around like a guard dog, but there have been times when I could have done so. Something has always held me back, some sense from the Dark Side, but to discover how the Tyrant’s Bane is so dangerous is enough of a reason to take a bit of a risk.

Yet even setting aside Potter and everything involving him, something was bothering Sidious as he leaned back in his chair. It wasn’t about the Jedi in general, or the war, or even about his so-called apprentice. No, it was as if the Dark Side was telling him some danger was out there, something he was utterly unaware of, hence why the Dark Side could not tell him more.

Even as he bent his mind to some work as Chancellor, then composed some messages to be sent through hundreds of cutouts out to his agents across the galaxy, that feeling niggled at

the back of his mind. It continued for several hours until, with a scowl on his face, Sidious pushed himself to his feet.

Pasting on his Palpatine expression for a few moments, he sent a message to his Sly that he was going to turn in for the night, then marched over to his doors, opening them to see the Senate security guards outside informing them of the same thing. "I hope I can at least get a few hours of sleep before the next emergency."

The droll tone caused the clone troopers there to chuckle a bit, and Fox, the clone trooper in charge of his guard detail, saluted crisply. "Yes, sir."

With that seen to, Sidious turned aside and headed over to the secret entrance to the ladder leading down to the hidden room directly underneath the Chancellor's office. He had some meditation he needed to do.

Scene break

Scene break

Harry woke up and instantly felt his connection to Aayla buzzing in his head. Within a moment, he was not staring out through reddish green gunk into a utilitarian vratrix-style hospital room but rather across the crystals of the night side of Ryloth as Aayla's mental projection bounded into his arms. *"That was most unpleasant!"* She shouted right before her lips found his.

After that, entire words were a little too difficult for either of them to create. Instead, raw emotions conveyed meaning across their link as the two of them reveled in their connection for time. How long that was, Harry didn't know, but soon, he was pulled back to his body by Ahsoka tapping on the outside of his bacta tank.

He looked at his apprentice as Aayla raced into the room behind her, her eyes locking on his over the younger Togrutan's head. Ahsoka gestured upwards, and Harry began to move his arms, swimming up towards the top of the bacta tank, which released with a **hiss**.

A vratrix stood there to help him out while the umbilical cord connected to the air mask that Harry had been wearing slowly began to pull itself upwards as well mimicking his movements. But it was not the vratrix who reached down to help Harry remove the mask. That was Aayla, who had crossed the intervening distance and raced up the stairs leading to the top of the bacta tank in the time it took Harry to swim high enough to stick his head out, even as she began to explain mentally what had been going on.

She interrupted herself now by saying, *"But before all that, I want to feel your physical lips on mine, beloved! And let neither of us have to go through that again!"*

"Agreed, Aayla! I think I'd go mad if I had to hold up like you did," Harry replied, pride in his mental tone for his lady having done so well in very trying circumstances. He had felt it all, the moments when Aayla had reached down their bond only to find the silence of his mind. How she had often felt fear at that, sadness and anger, but pushed past them all to do her duty as a Jedi every time. Even the moment when Harry had half-awoke and been able to funnel Force energy into her to fight Andeddu had been a blessing in disguise in comparison to that nothingness.

Smiling at the amount of pride and love Harry felt for her as he saw her memories of the past two days, Aayla leaned over the top of the bacta tube, helping to push off Harry's mask with one hand while the other cup his head from behind, pulling her him upwards to meet her lips, and action Harry enthusiastically returned. Mental was fine, physical was better.

While the vratrix simply looked on, completely uncaring of the human mating ritual, Ahsoka shook her head and very dramatically sighed. *"Kriff, get a room, you two!"* She then blushed a bit. *"And you might want to renew the defenses keeping our connection from interfering with you and Aayla's master, I'm getting a little too much of your emotions right now."*

That acted like a cold bucket of water being poured over their heads, and Aayla quickly pulled back, helping Harry up out of the bacta tube. She inspected his wounds for a moment, wincing at the new scars going up his side. The red bacta worked very well, but slugs left nasty wounds, to say nothing of where his leg had been cut off by one of the nameless Acolyte's lightsabers. It was that wound, and making certain it healed well, that kept Harry in the bacta tank for a full day and a half longer than the bare five hours Zule had needed to be healed of her wounds.

As for keeping him unconscious, that was simply something the vratrix did. Apparently, the mixture that made the bacta red while making it work even faster also made it incredibly itchy within the wounds. So much so it was enough to cause most people to go crazy trying to get at the wound.

"I feel fine, love," Harry sent, putting a bit more than normal weight on the wounded leg. It nearly gave out, but he still nodded. *"I will need to do some exercises to rebuild that segment of muscle, but I should be able to move normally within a few days with that and the two of us using the Force to help things along."*

"Better believe I will help," Aayla chortled inside their shared mental space, delighted at once more having the color and sound of Harry's mind merging with her own rather than the cold, silent landscape it had been. *"I have plans for you, Harry Potter, and they definitely involve your legs. Or at least your hips."*

That caused Harry to surprisingly blush a bit, but he nodded, sending back a feeling of love and desire that nearly had Aayla joining him in doing so before Harry, leaning just a bit on Aayla's shoulder, headed down the stairs to the floor below, where he found some clothing waiting for him. Smiling at Ahsoka as he put his arm around Aayla, he shook his head with a chuckle. "We'll both see to that issue in a moment, Ahsoka. How are you doing? You weren't injured in any way after I went down, were you?"

"No. Zule...er, that is Knight Xiss was. But she wasn't as badly hurt as you were, Master. You're lucky you didn't lose that limb. Heck, even with Force Healing, if we didn't have so much bacta around here, I doubt even Aayla would have been able to save it."

"So long as it wasn't my head, I suppose I can only be thankful," Harry answered drolly before reaching out and rubbing her small montrals, the equivalent of ruffling a child's hair. "But I trust that you have been keeping yourself busy."

"Kind of. There's not been any time to spar the past two days, considering how busy we all are, but I've been keeping on my toes with helping Senator Amidala and have gotten a lot of flying in, too. That's been nice."

Ahsoka, Aayla, and Harry made small talk as the three of them left the vratic hive and ascended into the sky on a shuttle, heading for Warm Welcome. Aayla and Harry even allowed Ahsoka to fly it, which she was pleased by until she realized it wasn't because they trusted her. They did, but they also wanted to cuddle, which kind of annoyed her a little.

It was evening local time, and thanks to the earlier meeting with the Senate going so well, Padme had been able to convince herself to take the evening off. She, her party, and Anakin met up with Harry and the girls at the same hotel where Padme was staying. Padme even had enough time to actually prepare food. Well, call out for the best takeout she could find on the station, anyway. Food, at least was not in short supply even if living space was.

Harry ate like a ravenous animal, listening to what everyone else had been up to since his injury, all the time while Aayla filled him in on the personal discussion that she and Padme had had with Zule, something she had put off until they were all sitting down together. Instead, Aayla had gone into detail about the repairs going on with the *Tyrant's Bane*, and the conflict with Darth Andeddu and the discovery of Nomi Sunrider's holocron. That fascinated Harry, and he was determined to ask the spirit of the ancient Jedi Master some questions, although Aayla refused to let him concentrate on such now. This evening and tonight was about them and their relationship with Padme and Zule, not exploration into the nature of Light Walls, the ability to cut someone off from the Force, or anything else.

As for that topic, well, while Harry couldn't say he was as attracted to Zule as he was to Padme, she **was** a dear friend. Harry knew that such feelings could easily segue into more. That

wasn't to say that he wasn't attracted to her at all, quite the opposite, in fact. And he had seen Zule go down to defend Aayla from certain death. That carried a black hole's worth of weight in his mind.

He also learned that Anakin had been assigned to command the defense of the system until a clone commander could be sent out to relieve him with an entirely new fleet. While ostensibly in the Sixth Fleet's territory, it had been decided that Thyferra was important enough to warrant its own full fleet to defend it, like Kuat, Coruscant and a few other systems. That fleet would be composed of several hundred ships and their accompanying fighters, although it was more than likely, that number would decrease over time as the insistent defenses were rebuilt.

However, putting that fleet together would take the better part of a month and a half, if that, so Anakin was looking to get some downtime here on Thyferra come what may. "One of the high Council members is also going to be coming out here in a few weeks. Apparently, the report that Zule sent in after our brush with that Sith spirit was enough to convince them that I was ready to face my knighthood trials once it was coupled with my relaying the last message from Master Windu."

Even as short a time as a year ago, if anyone had told Anakin that he would be able to take his knighthood trials before he hit twenty, he would be ecstatic, even perhaps feeling justifiably prideful, even arrogant. Recent events had hammered such feelings out of him, and all that he felt now was that becoming a knight was simply the next step on his journey. Wherever that would take him, he didn't know yet, something he said to Harry now.

"I mean to stay in command of the 501st. Thankfully, Rex survived since he was leading the detached troopers we had sent into Warm Welcome and the other stations to help maintain order. But we still lost a large number of our brethren, and those numbers will need to be made up while I'm still here on Thyferra."

Harry nodded and asked Anakin a few questions about training with the clones and leading them in battle, then shifted the topic to what Anakin wanted to do in the future. Anakin told him the same thing he'd told Aayla a few days ago: that after the war ended, he would become a wandering Jedi, going wherever the Force willed him to go. Harry smiled at that, and agreed it sounded like a fine idea.

And, of course, they had to fill Harry in on what had been going on in terms of the war over the past two days. The answer, despite the attack on Oulanne was not much. The Republic had lost a few systems and was still losing badly out near Sluis Van. The Confederacy had lost not only in Oulanne, but in a few other small skirmishes, but in the main, were still pushing the

Republic and GDL hard. Several Hypercom Uplink Systems had been attacked in the GDL, but those attacks had been repulsed with losses.

The GDL had called off Operation Trident entirely. Without the Tyrant's Bane, it wouldn't work. And knowing now that the enemy had devised a tactic against the overwhelming power of the battleship, they had to rethink certain basic assumptions.

Instead, more effort had been shifted towards the Corellia front. The Confederacy was pushing hard, and there were now daily skirmishes and battles as the Confederacy admiral pushed his way through the hundreds of hyperspace ambush points and minefields defending the sector. "However, he might be in for a very nasty shock. Work on refitting the two Lucrehulks sent there under Wulo's command is nearly finished. And with the industrial capacity of Corellia to fill up the interior and everything else, it'll be but another week after that before they're back on line and as tough as the Tyrant's Bane. Frankly, the Bane will still be getting repaired at that time, even if we concentrate on just the exterior damages."

Soon, the meal started to come to an end. Anakin left to meet up with Rex and the rest of his clone troopers at their temporary quarters while Ahsoka departed to her own room. Chewbacca and his wife had long since headed to bed. Sabe, who seemed to know something was up between her mistress, Harry and Aayla, and Zule had not even shown up. What that could be, she wasn't going to speculate, but she was diplomatic enough to know when her mistress wanted to be alone with someone without her around.

The moment that the door closed behind Ahsoka, Padme was off of her chair and lunging towards Harry, who was already moving in her direction. He caught her half out of his chair, falling back as the two of them began to kiss hungrily, their mouths open, tongues questing.

"Oh my, it has been a while, hasn't it," Zule said wickedly, watching this and biting her lip a bit.

"And it hasn't been for you?" Aayla asked.

"For anything beyond kissing, it hasn't been, period," Zule answered tartly, not taking her eyes off the sexy image of one of her three crushes kissing the only male among that number.

That shocked Aayla, but she said nothing, just putting an arm around Zule, hugging her to her side as they watched the two kissing across from them.

The two of them eventually parted, gasping in air, staring into one another's eyes soulfully. Harry whispered, "We have been apart for far too damn long, Padme! Kriff this war, and everyone who is profiting from it, both Sith and otherwise!"

"Here, here!" Padme murmured. "Although on that score, my loves, I have some good news. Although I will only share that..." And here, she looked over at Zule, who sat up straight, staring back at her with hopeful eyes that were far younger than her normal Jedi Knight poise would normally allow for. "After we finish our discussion about Zule. I trust you know what I am talking about."

"Aayla filled me in on that topic, yes, and on the discussion, you three've already had on it." He also turned to look at Zule for a moment. Then smiled faintly at her. "I have to admit that I had wondered for some time if you had feelings towards Aayla, Zule. Although I only began to realize you might have feelings with me after we started talking so often over the Hypercom with you and Padme alike."

He looked back at Padme, holding her tenderly in his lap, thankful she knew his lower half wasn't up for anything strenuous just yet with the way his leg was. In fact, just her weight on his. "But how do you feel about this? I want to hear it from you, not simply relayed to me from Aayla. Are you certain that you are okay with this, that you are certain that you are okay with Zule joining our relationship, Padme?"

Harry looked back over at Zule, his eyes searching hers. "And are really you all right with this? With permanently joining a relationship with three other people? You are just as gorgeous as Padme and you are one of the most level-headed and skilled Jedi of our Clan Saa, Zule. If you're interested in finding a permanent relationship, I'm certain you could convince the High Council that you're mentally experienced and centered enough to be allowed to form a relationship with someone."

"Silly Harry, I passed that test months ago," Zule said, waving it off airily, although, just like the previous night's discussion, she was looking more vulnerable and nervous than confident despite her words. "A girl had to do something while on Coruscant while Padme was stuck in Senate meetings."

She became serious then, staring first at him, then at Aayla beside her, letting Padme have her own woman with Harry for now. "And I'm certain. I've been, as you said, attracted to Aayla for years, but that attraction grew to include you when you returned from the Ruusan Sector. And my feelings for Padme grew as I got to know her since I began to live with her. I love Aayla, and I've come to love Padme. And I think I can learn to love you too, if you're willing to try in turn, Harry."

Harry stared at her, then slowly nodded, turning back to Padme, who had been nuzzling into his neck as she watched Zule as well, a warm, almost shyly welcoming smile on her face. "And you? What about you, my Queen?"

Padme laughed at that, pulling away to smile at Harry sunnily. "Is that going to be your nickname for me now? I could get used to that, so long as you only use it when we're alone. As for Zule, this is an entirely different situation from that Chume girl. I've had the better part of a year to get to know Zule, living with her day in and day out, and I think... I think I've come to love her as well." She said with a little laugh, admitting for the first time she wasn't just attracted to Zule, as she had admitted that morning.

No, Padme's emotions for the half-falleen had built up over time, just as Zule's had for her. "I hadn't really realized what kind of love it was until recently myself, although Zule had, I believe, been flirting with me for... two months?"

"Around six weeks, yes. Give or take," Zule said dryly. "I was trying to be subtle about it."

"Right up until you walked out of the refresher on the Adamantine naked, I presume? Because if that is your idea of subtle, your understanding of the term certainly degraded over time," Padme shot back with a laugh. A laugh that did very interesting things to her hips and chest, which was currently slowly brushing up and down Harry's own but which Harry tried to ignore.

"Say rather that I had slowly begun to up my flirtations until they reached that point," Zule answered in a mock-snooty tone of voice.

That had all of them chuckling, but Harry kept his eyes on Padme until she finally smiled, leaned in, and kissed him before slowly pulling away. "Yes, Harry, I'm fine with Zule joining our little relationship, so long as she is the only one, and so long as you and Aayla do not try to forge the same bond that lies between you with her. I'm not a Force adept. I know I wouldn't be able to sustain that kind of connection, and being the only one without it would be horrendous."

Harry instantly agreed, repeating what Aayla had told Padme that morning: that neither of them really understood how they had formed such a permanent bond and were very much not willing to experiment. That was particularly true given the fact that Ahsoka's padawan bond with Harry had been interfered with on occasion by his and Aayla's connection.

That startled Padme as she hadn't heard about that story before, but she refused to let thoughts of Ahsoka cloud the current romantic mood in the air. "In that case, yes. My final word on this is **yes**. Zule can join us. In fact, considering my recent orders from the Senate, we four will have all the time in the world to get to know one another more on the romantic level than ever before and see if it works. You see..."

Needless to say, all of her listeners were very happy about what Padme told them. "by the Force, yes!" Harry hissed, pulling Padme into a hug as Aayla did the same with Zule. He then looked over at the half-falleen. "If Padme is alright with it, I, I am willing to also give this a

chance, Zule. I can't say I'm in love with you yet, my friend, but I can see that coming along quickly. And you saved Aayla. That alone would make me want to make you happy if nothing else."

"Well, if you want me to be happy, Harry, we, we could kiss?" Zule looked at Aayla, then Harry. "Er, both of you?"

Zule's normal confidence had completely eroded now, but her eyes were shining with hope, and after receiving a mental okay from Harry, Aayla obliged. Padme and Harry watched as the two nonhuman girls kissed, with Harry shuddering a bit at the feeling coming through his link with Aayla. *Wow. Okay, so that love thing's going to be coming along quicker than I expected.*

Unfortunately for any more evolved shenanigans, Harry's leg chose that moment to remind him that he needed some more healing and time to get over his wound before he could keep svelte, sexy young women in his lap. "As... arousing as that sight is, you three, I need to lay out."

That caused the two women to pull away from one another and look back at him. "My leg is bothering me, and I'm still tired for some reason. Let's turn in for the night and see where this all takes us in the morning."

"Cuddling sounds amazing right now," Padme agreed, although Zule looked a bit grumpy until Harry laughed quietly, then gestured her over.

Padme's eyes widened a bit, and she bit her lip as she watched her other lover kiss Zule, shivering a bit at the sight going on a matter of inches away from her. *Okay, that is not jealousy I'm feeling for certain. Good grief.* And then Zule was kissing her too, and any thought of jealousy or second thoughts left her mind.

And if the bed in Padme's bedroom suite was a bit crowded with four people a few moments later, none of the newly formed quartet complained.

Scene break

While on a personal level, things were going particularly good for Harry and his companions, two other Jedi had not been having an easy time of it since leaving their friends behind. Mak Lotor and Kass Todd stared at the city below them from the open hatch of the freighter that had been their home since leaving the Tyrant's Bane.

The two lovers, a human man and a Zabrak woman, had felt called to start this journey by the Force during a group meditation guarded by Harry and Aayla's Light Constructs. It had shown the pair finding some kind of obelisk made of Dark Side energies and destroying it, that it

was far and away the most important thing they could do to ensure the future of their friends and the Jedi Order.

Since starting out, it had taken them a long while to narrow their search to Vjun. This was a planet whose people had been turned into beasts by a sudden influx of Dark Side energies, the origins of which no one knew. The whole planet was as seeped in the Dark Side as the planets that had been controlled by the Sith for centuries, thousands of years ago, like Korriban.

Searching the planet had proven about as tough as finding a needle in a haystack without the use of the Force. First were the creatures, the previous inhabitants of the planet, warped and mutilated by the Dark Side energies and the need to keep their Force Stealth up at all times. Then was the feeling of the Dark Side battering into their minds every hour of every waking day they remained on the planet or in its atmosphere.

That had been so bad they'd basically had to retreat into space away from the planet every few days, and even so, their nerves were badly frayed after weeks of searching. Using their senses to feel out the planet through the miasma of dark side energies that covered it from pole to pole was a horrific and slow process. To say nothing of the... detritus that they had discovered at the same time. The bodies of those people who had not been turned into mindless creatures by the sudden influx of Dark Side energies. The signs of fighting, of hasty and terrified fleeing people, of skeletons, parents and children alike torn apart by loved ones or as they fled, scraps of their clothing all that remained to identify them. It had all added up to more pressure on the two lover's minds, and both knew that if they had been alone, neither would have been able to survive.

But finally, they had narrowed their search to the point that whatever they were searching for could only be in this one city. It was a semi-large oceanside city, the kind of place local tourists would probably come to for the beaches if, of course, the locals hadn't been entirely turned into creatures of the Dark Side that preyed on one another and anyone else that attempted to come to this world. The ocean had claimed a significant portion of the city, but this seemed to have forced the creatures away. Or drowned them. Mak wasn't certain which.

Regardless, somewhere down there, either beneath the waves or in some other part of the city, they would find the thing holding the veil of the Dark Side in place. "I feel it, but I can't localize at any further."

"It's a miracle we can localize it at all," Kass answered gruffly. Both of their nerves were frayed from their search of this planet for whatever had been placed here to help create the veil of the Dark Side, but she breathed out a sigh of relief as Mak's hand found hers, his tanned

white skin showing off starkly against her own light brown skin. "I don't suppose we could just bombard it from orbit right?" She asked plaintively.

"I'm afraid not. We might just end up burying the thing rather than destroying it, whatever it is. No, we'll have to move down and explore on foot. Again." Mak shook his head, then pulled his lover into his arms. "Let's retreat for now, back up to orbit. Take an entire day off, rest and recuperate, then come down here and search that place from top to bottom, from side to side, everywhere. We know it's there. We just have to find it!"

End Chapter

So, Harry and Aayla will be free soon to move without the Tyrant's Bane. Sort of. I wonder what they, Padme and Zule will do? And, should I have Mace come back as a Force Ghost?

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this guys, even if Harry didn't appear until right near the end. As always leave a review!