

It's back! After several months, **Magic** finally won the HP poll. This chapter has been checked over solely by me with Grammarly. Still, I hope you enjoy this despite the small mistakes I'm sure I missed.

Chapter 29: A Tower Falls as Paths Diverge

Even being near the Dark Side Citadel felt to Plo Koon as if he was on Dor at night, staring out from a window as a storm raged on the other side, separated by a bare inch of all-too fragile glass. He stared up at it through his protective goggles, scanning it from top to bottom. *It feels as if reaching out would cost me my hand and my sanity alike.*

The edifice was built of black stone and matte black metal, though Plo could not say whether that was pain or some kind of metallurgy. It rose dozens of stories above his head, upwards of forty from what their scanner's estimates had said. The tower was not very wide, perhaps covering only about a quarter mile at its base, nothing like the massive towers that an ecumenopolis could boast, and started to taper around ten stories below its current top, which was jagged and half-formed, with fires still visible from some kind of local reaction from construction equipment and materials there.

Despite that tapering effect, there was still more than enough space to be troublesome to clear the tower, Plo knew. *To say nothing about how powerful the Dark Side energies roiling within are. There must be numerous Dark Side users within, like those that Komari and Quinlan slew, but I cannot tell how many... or worse, how many are still sane. The few minds I can truly detect are... are broken in some fashion, cracked mirrors reflecting the Dark Side out in new and horrid ways. And that is to say nothing about how many animal-like minds.*

Animal-like was indeed the term for such. Many, he knew from the earlier battles, came from still more Terentatek. *Horrific to think there are so many of those creatures.* Yet even with that, there were hundreds of what felt like animal minds, but, but only... felt like them. Something about the shape of those minds concerned Plo, but he could not discern more, beyond the fact they were nearly mindless with hatred and rage.

"Madness and the Dark Side both, a sickening amalgamation," he said aloud, his voice as always distorted by the gas mask that, as a Kel Dor, he had to wear and the translator built into it. "We must be cautious, yet decisive, and do not fall into the trap of putting all our efforts into one avenue of assault."

"Sir, those two things are often at odds," Trunn said, the Weequay nearly vibrating with eagerness to volunteer his troops to enter the citadel.

“I would agree with you at any other time. However, not with the Dark Side, the strength of it within the citadel, as I said. But first, is there any way that the Sith within could contrive to explode the citadel on us at the worst possible moment?”

Trunn blinked, then looked over at a sensor specialist that he had brought forward with him to the entrance of the citadel. All around them, two, albeit battered, companies of GDL troopers were fortifying the area at gun range from the entryway, creating overlapping fields of fire, and emplacing a few of their grenade launchers to target the wide, rather ostentatious door.

“Sir. Sensor Specialist Ellie Fain,” the young woman saluted briskly, then gesturing over her back to the massive pack she was carrying. It seemed to have a small grav-lifter embedded in it, but it still weighed quite a bit. “This close, our sensors can punch through the tower from one side to another, and deep into the bedrock underneath. It doesn’t have any detectable power, though we can tell where two small generators are housed. They’re overloaded now, of course.”

She held up her forearm, on which was embedded a holographic device, one matching that Plo knew the Republic’s clone commandoes used. It was linked to the sensors, and soon, a hologram flicked out, showing the citadel as a wire diagram. The interior wasn’t shown much; the construction material caused the sensors trouble even this close, but powerful heat signatures, like the two small generators, would have been visible if there were any.

Ellie continued, pointing at the power generators, then other places higher up the tower where there might have been others if she had designed the tower, adding, “Although honestly, I wouldn’t have built something like this in the first place. It’s way too grandiose, it’s what, sixty stories? And it isn’t even finished. Why build something like that on a planet that is... well, pretty paradisaical? Why not spread everything out, or better, build into the ground rather than upward? It’s weird, and doesn’t make sense either for defensive or aesthetic reasons.”

“Thank you, and I agree, Specialist. There is no real reason to build something like this. None save ego and the need to lord over others, anyway. But then, these are Sith we are talking about. Even without madness involved, which I rather think is a recent development, their ideas of style leave much to be desired,” Plo said drolly.

He looked over at Komari and Quinlan, noting how tired the two still looked. *Despite that, if I asked them to stay behind, they would ignore me. This is more their hunt than anyone else’s, and I well know they both wish to see it through to the end.* “Let us get organized. Komari, call the other Jedi up here, canvas them for those with climbing skills.

You already know who among my Wing to call upon for combat skills. Quinlan, move around the exterior of the tower with specialist Fain. See if you can find any area in the outer wall we can cut through quickly.”

“True, going through the front door doesn’t seem like a wise idea if we can help it,” Quinlan snorted, moving off with Fain and two troopers as Trunn barked a command.

“Indeed,” Plo murmured, watching Quinlan go before staring up towards where the tower disappeared above him. “That would be poor planning and a far too obvious avenue of attack. Yet I also sense more danger to us if we come in from above than from any other angle.”

With Komari and a radar operator going to work, bringing up the rest of the Jedi who had come through the battle unscathed, Plo turned back to Trunn. “I am not as well up on the effect of ion cannons on planetary installations as you might be, Colonel. What exactly was the effect of our barrage on the tower after the shield came down?”

“That would depend on how many physical cutouts there were in the local systems, Master Koon,” Trunn answered instantly. “A normal military installation will have several different sectors built into its construction, physical cutouts so that ion cannon discharges can’t be carried from one portion of the defense’s electronics network into the other. There would also be security cutouts in terms of the interior, segments where computers aren’t allowed to connect to others. Data would need to be carried physically from one layer of security to another.”

“And you think that is not be the case here,” Plo stated.

“No, Master Koon. This place was never designed primarily as a defensive installation, like Specialist Fain stated. It is important, no doubt, or else it wouldn’t be so built up, what with all the other construction projects going on around this planet. It’s more a governmental or ornamental structure, no matter how many defenses were built up around it.”

Trunn frowned, then shook his head. “Although I can’t say what other use it’s been put to, given that those monsters came out of it, and what that might imply about all this, this Dark Side nonsense. Regardless of what is going on inside, though, there’s also the actual construction, to consider. Our ion cannons will have shorted everything out from one side to the other.”

“Define shorted out in this case,” Plo inquired intently as the first of the other Jedi began to arrive under Komari’s instructions. “Will the various computer memory cores be damaged?”

That one Trunn had to think about. “Doubtful, Master Jedi. Unless the memory cores were right by the outer wall, which would be odd but not impossible, they wouldn’t have been the first part of the computer to be struck. The controls and motherboard would have. Any program or file being accessed at that point would have been lost, I think, but anything else will be recoverable. I know that simply rebooting systems after replacing the parts shorted out has worked in the past for ships hit by ion cannons.”

“Good. Very good.” At Trunn’s questioning look, Plo shook his head sadly, flicking a metal-clad pair of fingers towards the tower. “This tower, this planet. For all it is obviously a jewel in the Sith’s network, it is unlikely to house the true Sith Master. It is too far removed, to say nothing of how little defenses and so forth there were for the size of the planet. No, it is a repository, or a training ground, perhaps, as well as a... a test center of the vilest kind. The Sith Lord is still out there somewhere. We need to find him, and any more resources he might have out there.”

“Then why...” Trunn began, his grim, wrinkled face turning mulish for a moment, but Plo waved a sharp, negating hand.

“I have told you already. Against a normal enemy, if we hoped to take the enemy’s computers intact, I would be willing to keep going under your command. Against the Dark Side energies within that tower, and with the computers already, as you described, fried? No. Even those without the ability to feel the Force would be affected by the amount of Dark Side power present, twisted and corrupted, or driven mad by mental images. I will not allow this battle to claim more lives than it must.”

Trunn grunted, not arguing, but looking dubious, and Plo went on. “We might also run into more Terentatek in close combat, or even worse. Even setting aside the impact of the Dark Side on your troops, that would mean death.”

At that, the GDL general had nothing to say, and he turned back to his own men, taking a few reports and looking over the work going on nearby. He then turned back, a thought occurring to him. “Can we at least offer some equipment, Master Jedi? While a lightsaber might be better against Terentatek and what-have-you, sensor drones, explosives, and some other bits of our equipment might be nice to have.”

“That I will not object to at all, Colonel,” Plo said, smirking just a bit behind his helmet. “Thank you.”

Within moments, the Jedi had been assembled into three teams. Quinlan had found two places on the exterior where a lightsaber could cut a way into the tower. One was on the ground floor, where a vent sat, surprisingly unguarded. Quinlan had even entered the vent and found it led to a strange lab where reddish crystals and some heat experiments

were underway. The fumes nearly had him collapsing, something that Plo would have remonstrated with him about most harshly, but Komari did it for him, complete with ear-pulling.

The other entryway was nearly seven floors up but was within the range of a Force-assisted jump. An opening had been built there that looked as if it were for landspeeders. It had collapsed a bit from the impact of a few turbolaser shots before the armed freighters shifted solely to ion cannons, but lightsabers could cut through the debris quickly enough.

“Master Krell, you will lead a team through that landing zone. Quinlan, Komari, you will take another team through the ventilation area. I will lead the group of climbers up the exterior of the building. We will find a third entryway. Our objective is to clear the tower of Dark Side users.”

Pong Krell grunted. A Besalisk, he was a four-armed, lizard-like humanoid from a species routinely given to excess in food and other vices, but showed none of that lack of discipline, being heavily muscled and fit like all Jedi. A Guardian, he wielded two double-bladed lightsabers with extreme skill but had not been selected to join the army command teams due to a certain amount of arrogance and unwillingness to work with the clones. Yoda and Rancisis had both flagged him for that, and it had been decided he'd join Plo's Jedi Wing.

His flying abilities were not the best, but they were adequate, and if they were ever assigned a landbound combat mission, it had been thought that his abilities would come in handy, as they had here. He had slain at least four Terentatek, more than any but Plo and Quinlan could claim. He had also worked well with the troopers, showing none of the lack of concern for them that had gotten him flagged when dealing with the clones.

With him, he took four other Jedi, as there weren't very many Jedi who had a lot of experience with scaling buildings like this. His metal-tipped fingers and greater-than-human strength gave him an advantage. The Gand Jedi Master, Tyffix, would similarly be able to scale the side of the building, as would the Trandosha Eggosh, a Knight, and the human Drunhald. Although in his case, it was because he'd grown up on an ecumenopolis and had a Force-assisted skill in finding handholds and climbing that matched his piloting skill.

Quinlan and Komari would lead a team of nine, including themselves, as they would start on the first floor. Pong would have six him. That was basically all the Jedi that remained from the Jedi Wing that Plo felt could be trusted to fight both the Dark Side pressure waiting within the tower and with a lightsaber.

“Keep communicating with Colonel Trunn, build a map of the tower as we go and share it with everyone else. Be wary of your emotions, as the Dark Side will try to twist them against you in there. If you feel as if you cannot keep going thanks to the pressure of the Dark Side, turn back,” Plo continued, making certain to hold Krell’s eyes. While Plo didn’t have any reason to distrust his self-awareness, Pong’s arrogance was a known issue. “May the Force be with us all.”

With that, Plo turned, and after a second began to climb up the tower, his fingers digging into the rock with some difficulty. His team followed, and with a huff, Pong gestured, and he and his team moved around the tower one way, as Komari and Quinlan went the other.

This left Trunn and his men facing the entrance, and he shook his head, scowling. “Get a flight of starfighters up and moving around the tower. Specialist, I want you moving around the tower as well, keep scanning to make certain they don’t get a power generator back online. Coms, get 4th Company on the line and Captain Pholo of the Culverin. I’ll want him ready to drop 4th Company on the tower from on high if need be. We’ll wait for more information on what to expect first, but be better prepared for anything. Let’s also finish getting the other companies dug in around the entrance. Make certain the freighter captains are all aware of keeping an eye on their scanners. If there’s any hint that they can repair one of their power generators, I want to know about it.”

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Komari and Quinlan’s group were the first to find trouble. Passing through the laboratory with the crystals and odd metallurgy experiments, while feeling Komari’s eyes on him the whole time, the team found themselves at the dead end of a hallway. They moved cautiously, lightsabers up and active, but soon, they came to an intersection. One of the borrowed scout drones was tossed forward, followed by two of the Jedi taking point from Quinlan, their lightsabers off as their hands filled with flashbangs, smoke grenades and regular thermal detonators.

Against a Force user, such things would not have been very useful unless you took the Force user in question by total surprise. But against the Terentatek, indirect fire would still be useful for going around corners. *And if the enemy force users are busy dealing with them, the rest of us might be able to close if we have to. Not that I can tell anything about what is waiting for us here,* Quinlan grimaced. *The pressure of the Dark Side is so much that even I can’t predict what’s around the next corner, let alone anything else, despite my experience fighting those Sith spirits on Ruusan.*

The Jedi shifted forward on the heels of a flash and smoke grenade combo but found nothing, no threat coming from either side hallway or straight ahead. With a gesture, Komari headed down one side hallway, while two other Jedi moved down the other. They found what appeared to be two engineering labs, but they were empty at present. The next intersection had only one offshoot, a doorway leading into a larger workshop, one obviously intended to build parts for a starfighter.

*But not put it together here, Quinlan mused, looking around the workshop. No way to get it out. Odd. Or perhaps efficient if they were working on different parts with different teams at the same time. Like a spread-out assembly line. But then why not just **have** an assembly line? Hmm...whatever they were building here was a one-off, a special craft of some kind...*

Quinlan's thoughts ended abruptly as small hidden apertures opened, dropping monsters down on top of a few of the Jedi. What those had been used for previously Quinlan had no idea, but they had certainly been repurposed now.

Komari barely got a shield up in time to protect himself from one such monster, but another Jedi screamed as his lightsaber was deflected to one side by the falling monster's armor, which slammed the man into the ground, where he was torn apart even as his companion's lightsabers stabbed into weak points, killing what looked like a miniature Terentatek.

Young or deliberately grown to be short, Quinlan didn't care as two more, full-sized ones, roared and came down the hallway towards them. He and one of the other Jedi stepped forward as Komari and the other Jedi came out of the room behind them. As one, the two Jedi struck, but one blow was deflected high as the Terentatek shifted its head, a crystal protrusion on its neck blocking the blow. The beast kept on charging him, impaling the Jedi with a horn that would've done a rancor justice, raising the gagging Jedi up off of the ground, shaking him like a ragdoll before flinging the Jedi to the side. So hard and so violent was the move, the Jedi's neck broke as he slammed into a wall.

With Quinlan's blow not having killed his own enemy, he was forced to raise a shield to defend his side as the monster turned in his direction. Quickly finishing off his first opponent as the horned monster with the crystals growing out of its neck scrabbled at the shield with claws and teeth, he whirled, lashing out as he let his Force Shield fall. The creature's outstretched arms both fell to the ground. The next moment, as it roared in agony, Komari stabbed it with her lightsaber. She and the others had already finished off three more of the monsters who had fallen from the ceiling.

“Two dead already and none of us felt them coming until the hatches above opened,” Komari grumbled. “That is not good.”

“No. But we have to push on, regardless of what the Dark Side is doing to our foresight,” Quinlan said, kneeling down to the dead Jedi and deactivating his lightsaber. *I didn't even know his name*, he thought, the realization hitting him hard for some reason. Reaching out, he closed the man's eyes, placing the dead Jedi's lightsaber on his belt.

Straightening, he glared around at the others. “One on watch on the ceiling from now on. Spread out, in teams of two along the hallway. Do not clump up again. We push on.”

He said nothing more, but he could feel the Jedi's dismay and guilt. None of the other Jedi, save Komari, had ever had to deal with the presence of the Dark Side in anything like this amount.

Komari had to face dark side dabblers and her own torture during her time as a prisoner of the Bando Gorra. Quinlan had faced his own darkness several times and then been involved in cleansing the Ruusan Force Font. Those experiences let them deal with the Dark Side energies here, if only poorly. The other Jedi had gotten used to the feel of the Dark Side from the moment they approached this planet, but it was so much more **condensed** here there really was no comparison.

However, as the Jedi continued, they slowly got used to it, their Force Precognition working better. The next ambush was made of six droid commandoes and several more of the small Terentatek. The droids were dealt with by Komari and Quinlan, and warned by the watcher who had an eeye on the ceiling, the Jedi had fallen back before the Terentatek could hit them from on high. Then they closed from both sides, confusing the monsters and cutting them down quickly.

The next ambush was a bit more serious, as they came out into what was a wider hallway. It was lined with columns and pots for plants, but no plants had been placed there yet. There were alcoves in other places for statues, but no statues had been installed there yet either. If everything hadn't been bathed in the red of glowing crystals that blazed with the Dark Side and reminded Quinlan of both the first lab they'd come from and those which the Terentatek had been fused with, the area would actually be impressive, in an overdone manner, somewhat like the Thoroughfare in the Senate building on Coruscant.

Of course, the sight of more Terentatek and other creatures ruined this. There were only two of the large Jedi killing monsters, but there were others. A few looked like giant praying mantis, and hunched over in small groups of three, hissing at any of the others until

all their heads turned as the Jedi stepped out into the open. At that point, they shrieked like a speeder's engines going into overdrive, launching themselves forward.

If any of the Jedi with Quinlan and Komari came from a species with enhanced hearing, those shrieks might well have disabled them for a moment, but as it was, the Jedi quickly spread out, cutting the mantis-like monsters down before their fellows could join them, none of the creatures having armor enough to stop their lightsabers. Their weapons, the long-sword-like arms, were, but that wasn't enough to make them a threat.

What followed with the Terentatek was worse as a dozen non-human species charged forward. But they weren't Dark Side users themselves, no, they had been experiments. All wore the orange jumpsuits of prisoners but that is where the similarities ended as no two were alike save in that they were all horrible, warped and twisted by Sith Alchemy.

A Devaronian with multiple bone-like protrusions sticking out everywhere. A Twi'lek who might have had one of the most gorgeous faces Quinlan had ever seen, marred by the fact her arms had been fused to her lekku, creating wide, thick tentacles which lashed out at the Jedi as she closed. A Wookiee with an extra set of huge arms with claws far larger than normal for the race.

Madness made flesh. Insanity with screaming mouths and mutated bodies.

As the horde charged, lightning flared from around the corner of another corridor leading into this central hall, somehow tracking in on Komari. She hastily raised her lightsaber, the attack coming too fast for a Force Shield, and found herself held in place, deflecting the lightning into the roof.

"Grenades," Quinlan shouted, rolling his own forward.

A Force Gestalt flickered, fighting hard against the feeling of the Dark Side, the pain, misery, anger and fear that had been forced on these poor folk. The Jedi in the front line, the hallway only wide enough for them to go six side by side, leaped upwards as the grenades from their fellow were tossed forward. Explosions rang out, shredding the poor, tortured monsters, and then they landed, whirling into attacks on the Terentatek and those who remained on their feet. Spreading quickly through the hall, they overwhelmed two of the Jedi-killing monsters before the others could recover from the thermal grenades.

A Sith user appeared from near where the wide doorways leading into the tower stood. He howled as he sent Force Lightning over the monster's heads towards the Jedi.

“Look at his eyes,” a Togorian Jedi grunted as he deflected the lightning. “That isn’t simple fanaticism. Nor even simple devotion to the Dark Side. There is simply madness there.”

“You could have just said he’s crazy, we could have told you that with how he’s screaming!” another Jedi, a human from Chandrila named Ashi, grunted as she jumped to the side, avoiding a strike from a Terentatek. Leaping up from another one, her lightsaber carved into the creature’s head right before one of its crystal horns began. She landed next to one of her fellows, and they whirled around one another, a smaller Force Gestalt connecting the two of them and allowing them to fight against a group of the malformed sentients.

Another grenade was tossed forward underhand, rolling through the monster’s feet to the feet of the Sith user, who, lost in his own madness as he launched force attacks towards the Jedi, didn’t realize it was there. The thermal detonator tore him to shreds as two Jedi on either side of Komari hurled their lightsabers forward. Guiding them around the corner with the Force, the Sith Lightning coming around that corner halted. There was a clang as those lightsabers hit something solid, and then Komari followed them.

The Dark Side user looked up from where he was already holding a Force Shield, the lightsabers having been deflected away. The next second, Komari thrust, her one Force Push, bypassing the shield and slamming him into a wall. The Force Shield he had been holding popped like a balloon, and Komari’s next strike cut the acolyte, another human, in two.

With the Dark Side users both down, dealing with the remaining monsters became far easier, the Jedi overwhelming them all.

In the rubble left after the battle, Komari frowned pensively, staring at the blood-soaked bodies and debris. “Madness. Madness and lack of experience. Sending out the monsters as they did, that was the act of someone who didn’t realize how much more easily they could be dealt with at range, and someone frenzied into madness by our own attack. If so, I wonder if these Sith... Brotherhood, maybe? Certainly not full Sith, not even acolytes as we’ve all been calling them to this point. I wonder if they even remember the simplest of tactics.”

Quinlan hummed. “Cutting our way through from now on, you mean? Both up and around.”

Komari nodded before elaborating. “We clear out the rest of the floor, but keep a line of retreat open by getting that door open and the troops outside ready to receive wounded. Move to meet up with Pong and his crew, hopefully, they are making their way down. You’ll

note, though, that we haven't gotten any updates from the other teams. Master Koon probably hasn't found a way in yet, but..."

The Togorian Jedi interrupted Komari gently, a single clawed finger held up for a moment as he looked to the roof above. "I believe that among the Wing, only myself, Healer Arisha and Master Niamu have had the dubious honor of working with Master Krell before. He is a Master, true, and I would never mock his abilities with the staff-based version of Djem So or his understanding of the Force. Understanding of how to work together with others, or a general empathy, however? Those he does not possess in any great abundance."

The Togorian, Kaantoda, frowned. "I... am more worried about the effect of the Dark Side on our Force Precognition. Its presence is so... profound and dense here its hard to sense anything beyond a few moments past the now."

"A good point. If anyone wants to leave, now that you have felt what we will deal with here, do so now. We also need to grab some more smoke and flashbang grenades and as Komari said, ask Trunn to prepare for wounded," Quinlan stated, before looking over at the door and pulling up his communicator to check in. "This is Master Vos. We've secured the hallway leading out of the citadel. I regret to report the deaths of Jedi Knights Atil and Jurod. Will check in when we clean out the rest of the first floor."

"Roger that," Colonel Trunn's voice answered instantly. "We are able to read you five by five. Be aware, we have discovered a few pockets of resistance out here. Droid commandos have been attacking us behind the defensive lines around the tower. The forces sent to communicate with the locals in that budding city near the shoreline are also reporting trouble with the locals. We're talking them down, and no shots have been fired, but apparently, most of the construction workers and so forth had no idea who they were working for. they Thought we were CIS or Separatists, rather. They didn't even know about the GDL; they've apparently been in communication blackout since their arrival here. I'm not certain I believe them on that score, but Lady Alya's meeting with them."

"Roger," Plo's voice cut in. "I think we can leave that in Ms. Aldrete's communication skills. My team and I have not found a way in yet, but we are above where Master Krell's team penetrated the tower. The Dark Side users within have attempted to release Sith Alchemy-altered mynocks to attack us, but they seem few in number. Master Krell?"

Called out like this, the Besalisk Jedi answered, his voice gruff, almost strained. "Krell here. Three dead. Twelve Dark Side users slain, five Terentatek. We are continuing." He paused, then grumbled. "Some of us are seeing visions and, and those are dangerous. We will continue making our way upward, however."

“Calm,” Plo ordered, while the Togorian grimaced, looking around at the other Jedi. “Clear out the floors you are on; don’t let them get behind you if you can help it. Set traps and so forth to defend your backs. Be calm, be centered in the Force. There is emotion, yet peace. Chaos yet Serenity. Death, yet the Force.”

For a moment, the other Jedi all blinked, then the Togorian looked around at the others. “That is the Old Oath. I didn’t know Master Koon was a follower of the Old Oath.”

“Master Koon has hidden depths,” Quinlan chuckled, looking over at Komari. The two of them had retaken their pledges to the Jedi Order soon after he had returned from the Ruusan Sector in the Old Oath, for reasons that had everything to do with their relationship. “If you all wish to continue on with us, take a few seconds to center yourselves, then we will continue to clear this floor before opening the entrance. If any wish to leave now, we will do that now”

The others all nodded, bar the Togorian, who hummed thoughtfully, then shook his head. “Let us continue.”

In contrast to the series of short, sharp battles so far, clearing out the rest of the tower’s first floor, which was really two stories in one, given how tall the ceilings here were, was easy. The rest of this floor had only a few other rooms, mostly containing various types of construction equipment. They found both an elevator shaft and the staircase, but the elevator was clearly nonfunctional.

With that done, the group of Jedi returned to the hallway and opened the entrance. That door was a throwback to the time of unpowered doors, two slabs of metal that opened inward. It had been welded shut at some point during the battle outside, but a joined Force Push smashed the door open, crumpling it like an eggshell. Luckily, Komari had thought to warn Trunn and the GDL troops that it was going to happen, and there were no friendly-fire incidents. Soon, the Jedi were loaded up with more grenades and so forth and moved on.

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From where he clung to the outside of the tower, Plo Koon looked over at his team. They had ascended to the twentieth floor by this point and had yet to find a way in. *I believe we perhaps should have just jumped from a ship down to the top of the citadel, such as it is, despite the danger I sense there.* At present, however, he had to make a decision, and came to it quickly.

“We will cut in here. Our fellows have taken losses, and we need to start doing our part to draw attention our way from whoever is organizing the defense, if such a thing is actually happening here.”

“I wonder if perhaps we would have been better served staying together. If the defenders are numerous enough to act like the desert sand, absorbing our blows, rather than the wind, which can only blow through the canyons, then facing them all at once, united would have been best,” Tyffix stated. Without the Force, the terms would be somewhat confusing, as they harkened back to how the wind acted on the Gand homeworld, but they all understood the analogy.

“The Sith’s resources cannot be truly bottomless, no matter how much we have already seen here. I do not believe they can keep on absorbing our assaults from different angles,” Plo answered, before activating his lightsaber and beginning to cut into the outer wall of the citadel. Being ferrocrete and granite, it was slow going, but he, the Trandoshan and Gand continued to work at it as the human Drunhald kept watch.

It was well he had because as they continued to cut into the outer wall, another group of corrupted mynockes flew at them from above. The tower was already forty stories tall, but that mattered less than the creatures descending on the group. The mynockes were, oddly, smaller than the full grown variety, being barely two feet across and similarly long, while the normal breed was five feet across and nearly the same in length. However, their skin was thicker, their fangs wider, and their claws dripped something, acid or venom, the four Jedi weren’t sure.

This group was larger than the first band that had attacked the group, and Drunhald halted them with a Force Push, smashing the group apart and splattering one of them against the side of the tower. The rest came on, scattering but slowed. Drunhald conjured up a series of water bullets, pulling the water from the atmosphere around them and hosing a certain level of mastery with the clan Saa techniques. He then sent them out in a wide array like a series of shotgun blasts, devastating many of the mynockes. Even making a few holes in the wings was enough to cause them to start losing altitude.

However, there were too many, and he couldn’t stop them all. Tyffix broke off, creating a Force Shield around the group. The mynockes slammed into it, and Drunhald concentrated on making more water bullets outside the shield, sending them out in groups of four.

Soon, the last of the mynockes fell away. Another moment, and Plo and Eggossh cut through the wall in a big enough area to let the four Jedi enter. Tyffix was last in, placing a companionable hand on Drunhald’s shoulder where the human had gone to his knees, breathing deeply as he got over his exertions. “This one thinks you did well, my friend.”

“Thank you, Master. Concentrating on my grip, pushing away the pain in my muscles, and then conjuring so many water bullets was a bit much. I’d much prefer just the

exertion from the climb,” Drunhald muttered, before pushing himself to his feet, wincing as the cloying feel of the Dark Side hammered into him. “Wh, what... It’s even worse inside.”

“I know. Push through it. We must keep our senses focused and our hands ready.”

Again, the words were not quite coming across correctly, but Drunhald had seen a Terentatek nearly take the Gand’s gas mask off his face and figured something had gone wrong with his translator. So he simply nodded and pushed to his feet, pulling his lightsaber off his belt, the green joining the light of the others’ lightsabers in what looked like an empty office of some kind.

In the center, Plo stood, his lightsaber at his side as he probed the Force, trying to discover what he could. Before he did, several small cylinders flowed into the room.

Before the grenades were even a few inches into the room, Master Koon had grabbed them with the Force, creating Force Shields around the group as they exploded. However, several smoke grenades went off from three places along the hallway on the other side of the unfinished wall. The smoke quickly spread, but Eggossh gestured, and a wave of air slammed into the smoke, dissipating it.

Even as it dissipated, blaster bolts began to come her way from the open area leading deeper into the tower. She deflected two of them, but one bolt hit her arm, causing the trandoshan woman to hiss in pain. Thankfully, it didn’t disable her arm, thanks to the general toughness of the Trandoshan race, which let the race endure far more hits from most other races.

Drunhald and Tyffix leaped forward over the wall, with Plo following only to twist in midair, aiming for the other end of the hallway as the two of them leapt over the small unfinished wall. Instantly, Tyffix’s lightsaber stabbed down, aiming for a commando droid that had been crouching there before the droid could move. It still brought up his blaster and tried to fire at the Gand Jedi, but a hasty, hand-sized Force Shield redirected the bolt back down into the droid, hitting his head as Tyffix’s lightsaber stabbed into the droid’s body.

As Plo had sensed, two of the commando droids that had ambushed them had retreated one way, while two others had retreated in the other. *A full squad*, he noted absently, *would probably have six commando droids*. That meant that they were missing one. Deflecting the blaster bolts coming his way back towards the two droids, he saw they were ducking aside, using cover and shifting position back and away from him, using small versions of the droideka shield to defend themselves from his returned fire.

Plo hooked on a finger, and a Force Grab reached out, holding the two droids in place as he battered aside still more of their blaster bolts. Covered by their shields, both droids reached for their bandoliers, pulling them off and tossing them into the air. A stray bolt from their own blasters caught one, causing a massive roiling explosion, forcing Tyffix to twist around and throw up a Force Shield in front of Plo. The shields around the two droids burst, and the explosion tore them both apart, but on the other side of the hallway, the partially constructed elevator shaft was open.

From within a heavy disruptor-style sniper rifle, fired.

“ARGH!” Drunhald cried out in pain as the attack slammed into and through his Force Shield, the disruptor-style energy of the bolt overcoming his hastily raised shield and severing his arm at the shoulder, disintegrating the bone and tissue it struck. He fell back, his lightsaber flying back up and into his other hand to deflect another blast, before Eggossh bounced off the side of the wall of the hallway, her lightsaber out and flashing. Her strike removed the heads of both droids as she raced past them, deflecting the next blaster bolt up and into the ceiling.

The commando droid in the elevator didn’t wait. Hitting something on a small harness it had been wearing, the sniper droid began to plummet downwards, avoiding being sliced in half by the barest inch.

Before the Jedi could regroup, a wailing, keening sound came from all sides. “EYYYAASSHHH!!!”

From around the hallways and out of the doors of several of the already finished rooms on this floor came a tide of flesh and corruption. These were much like the same Corrupted that had been in the main hall on the first floor, but there were more of them, at least forty of them, rather than the sixteen the Jedi had faced there.

These Corrupted also all looked to be from a different batch of experiments. They wore the same clothing, the orange jumpsuit that was used throughout the Republic for prisoners, but on top of wild eyes, feral, pain-filled expressions and snarling features, these all had similar scale like protrusions and places, as if someone had been trying to modify the various species, human, twi’lek, devaronian and more, to have the same kind of armor as the Terentatek, which made them hard to kill with lightsaber or blaster fire.

The four Jedi rapidly backed away towards one another, with the wounded Drunhald almost slowing Eggossh down to the point where they were caught before they could meet back up with the two masters. A spinning buzzsaw of water from Drunhald sliced into the first group of Corrupted that tried to reach for them, cutting the pair of twi’lek in half, but leaving a Corrupted Bith still alive and moving forward despite the edge of the cutting water

technique catching the side of his head. A head that was completely covered by a new layer of scale-like armor.

The other Jedi did not need to be told at that point to aim for areas that didn't have that kind of armor, and when the Corrupted closed, they went to work quickly, the Force Gestalt flickering around them for a moment. However, neither Eggossh nor Drunhald could sustain it against the wave of Dark Side energies within the tower. They had already been having problems in the fight against the commandos, but with these Corrupted so close, the roiling madness of the Dark Side, the hate, fear and rage that these people had felt as they had been experimented on, hit them like a physical force.

A few of the Corrupted went down, and then the Force Gestalt flickered out of existence around the pair, forcing Plo and Tyffix to compensate. Tyffix did so by leaping up and over to the pair, leaving Plo alone. The next second, though, the Gand pushed the two younger Jedi to their knees, and Plo raised a hand in either direction along the hallway, his lightsaber falling to the ground for a moment.

As his lightsaber hit the floor, Electric Judgment blasted out of Plo's hand, green and gold in color. The equivalent of Sith Lightning, Electric Judgment had long been a semi-forbidden technique among the Jedi, with only those on the High Council or with high seniority on the Council of First Knowledge knowing of it at all, and few of them allowed to study it. Of those alive today, Plo was the only one who had been allowed to do so and had mastered the technique, as it needed a lot of concentration and a desire for justice.

Justice was a cornerstone of Plo's own philosophy of right and wrong. These creatures, these Corrupted had been wronged on such a fundamental and horrific level that the only thing Plo could do for them to bring them justice was to put them down. Then find those who had tortured them so and send them to the afterlife to join their former victims, something he internally vowed to do now as he lashed out at the Corrupted with the technique.

The lightning skittered through the Corrupted, but only a few of them went down fried by the lightning, their scales shielding them somewhat from the attack. More spasmed as the electricity played through their nervous systems. This allowed the Jedi to take advantage, and the four cut into one half of the horde, the ones closest to the Plo, to get away from the other side. In this manner, they were able to make for an area of the hallway that didn't have any open doors to either side and had finished walls between the hallway and the labs where the Corrupted had come from originally.

This forced the Corrupted to attack them from either direction down the hall. They had also been able to shift positions within their group, with Drunhald and Tyffix on one side, and Plo and Eggossh on the other.

The Corrupted slammed into the group of four from both sides, but with the two Knights helping with Force Shields and the Masters using their lightsabers and element-based attacks, they stood firm. Slowly, as their numbers began to dwindle, the pressure faded until it finally ebbed entirely, the last of the Corrupted dying to a swipe from Tyffix's lightsaber that bisected the unfortunate human across the chest.

As the last of the Corrupted collapsed, the four Jedi pulled back even further, their lightsaber slowly deactivating for a moment. When he was assured there were no more Corrupted, Plo turned to Drunhald, as did the others. They all examined his shoulder as he slumped, shaking his head from side to side. "I, I don't think that I can continue masters. I'm sorry."

"Do not be sorry. The effect of the Dark Side on Force Precognition is well-established. You have done well," Plo said, laying a gentle hand on the human's uninjured shoulder.

"I think I am not fit to keep going either, Master," Eggossh said, only now drawing attention to her own injuries. While the blaster bolt to her forearm hadn't bothered her, one of her feet had been ravaged by one of the Corrupted. Her scales had been slashed open along with her boot, and the limb was bleeding profusely from several gashes. "One of the Corrupted I put down wasn't quite as dead as I thought," she supplied, shaking her head. "Although, at least I still have my arms."

"Hah, I don't think this is an even exchange, either," Drunhald said jokingly, despite a grimace of pain from agonies from where his arm had been literally blasted off his shoulder.

"Well, from now on, you can hide your puny human body behind mine for a little bit," Eggossh retorted.

Smiling behind his mask at the fact that the two of them were in such good spirits despite their surroundings, Plo leaned down and helped bandage Eggossh's leg. When that was done, he and Tyffix helped the pair back to the office they had entered from, grabbing a few of the blaster rifles from the droids on their way that hadn't been destroyed in the fighting so far. That would give the pair more of a long-range punch, as would the grenades from the droid that Tyffix had killed near the start of the battle.

That brought to mind that one of the droids had gotten away, and Plo clicked on the communicator built into his gas mask, saying into it, "This is Plo Koon. We have run into the

same Corrupted that the first-floor team reported. There were also commando droids, one of whom got away, heading down the tower's elevator shaft. Be aware of it and perhaps seal all elevator shaft doors as you go to limit its options."

He got two acknowledgements back from Komari and Pong, although he had to frown a little at the growling nature of Pong's words. For a moment, he was tempted to remind Pong of their Oaths to the Order again, to walk him through some meditation practices or even order him out of the tower entirely.

But he knew that doing so would only get the Besalisk's back up further. If they were in person and he could simply pull the man aside, that would be a different story, but Plo shook his head now, wondering if bringing Pong along on this trip has been the best idea. True, he had been one of Plo's squadron commanders, and his skill with the lightsaber was excellent. But now faced with the amount of Dark Side energies accumulated within this tower, it felt as if Pong was close to the edge.

"Are you two certain you will be all right if we leave you here? While this area of woodland seems to have been denuded of predators, there still might be others who moved in once they sense that lack," Tyffix said.

Plo nodded to himself internally. *Yes indeed, my fellow mask-wearer's translation device has indeed been struck by something or other. Tyffix is not nearly so eloquent in common, normally.*

The trandoshan and human blinked, then shrugged. "We'll be fine here, Master Tyffix. If we aren't, I think we've dealt with all the mynocks, so maybe we can call for one of the troop transports to come within jumping range," Eggossh said. "If they lower their ramps, we could retreat in that manner. If we do, we'll communicate with everyone else that we have."

Drunhald just nodded. "Go on, Masters. We're good here."

"Then may we meet after all of this is over in the light of the Force," Tyffix said, touching both of them gently on the chest with his fingers, a Gand gesture of well wishes and respect, before he stood up, and, with a final nod from Plo, the two Jedi Masters left their fellows there.

Clearing out the rest of that floor took them but a few moments, as there were only a few Corrupted left alive, their legs having been fused together by scales and unable to move. Finishing that grim task, the Kel Dor and Gand headed back to the elevator shaft, electing to take it upwards, and could see that the next two floors had open doors leading into the shaft.

Clearing out those two floors was relatively simple as well. They found more office space on both, albeit with more finished walls separating the various inner offices, but no further enemies or workshops. They did find a few traps laid by commando droids here and there, but evidently, the droids had been working with a limited number of resources, so the traps were few and far between.

On the fourth floor up from where they had entered the tower, which they reached via this stairwell rather than the elevator, they ran into more Corrupted almost instantly. They were standing around the elevator in the open. All humans, these Corrupted looked almost until the two Jedi Masters opened the doors leading into the elevator shaft, whereupon all five roared and shrieked, charging towards them only to be cut down by Tyffix's lightsaber.

"I believe that those were but the guards at the door," Tyffix said, shaking his head as he crouched in place, with his lightsaber forward in a Makashi defensive stance. "There will be others. Shall we stand our ground here and let them break upon our trenches or move and take the hunt to them?"

"Move and take the hunt to them," Plo said in return, causing Tyffix to blink, which caused the Kel Dor Jedi to chuckle. "Do remember to get your translator device fixed, my friend. Your eloquence brings a certain sparkle to the day, especially in situations like this, but some of your phrasing does take a bit to parse."

"Well, if all the universe's races were simply one herd, that would make for poor variety in your diet," Tyffix said, the two of them chuckling in somewhat forced humor as the feeling of the Dark Side pressed into them.

They moved forward, cutting through several small groups of Corrupted in the hallways and in two of what appeared to be several more labs. These were more medical-experiment type labs than chemical or engineering workrooms, as each room had several beds. All of them were marked with blood, restraints, and had equipment nearby that made both Jedi recoil.

It was very obvious that it had been these labs, and those like them, which had birthed the Corrupted. The feel of the Dark Side was even worse here, and for the first time, both Masters were nearly overwhelmed by visions from the Dark Side rather than just the feel of it. The Dark Side tried to press the memories of those who had been tortured here into their minds, but the will of the Jedi was too strong, and after reeling for a second, they moved on.

A pair of Corrupted as they boiled out of one of the laboratories. Seeing them, Tyffix shook his head, then tapped his eyes, and where his mouth would be under his gas mask,

before pushing his arms out and then to either side, a Gand way of showing veneration for the dead, their spirits carried by the wind to all corners of the world, free forever. “The minds who performed these atrocities, they must be cleansed from this universe, put down for the good of all.”

“I agree. Such would be the way of justice. Taking one of them alive to further hunt down the Dark Side users and the Sith in general may be necessary, but not pleasant if we can. If we cannot, I will not shed any tears.”

Tyffix nodded at that, also being of the opinion that the Sith Lord was probably not here. The defense of the tower was a bit too haphazard and disorganized for that. Say what you will, but the Sith had certainly shown that they were incredibly organized, given how well they had been able to hide themselves for the past thousand years. This place reeked of madness now as much as darkness, and the defense was even worse.

It was because the Dark Side energies on this floor were even worse than elsewhere that the pair of Jedi suddenly found themselves ambushed. No sooner had another group of images dissipated from their minds than they came to an intersection. There they paused, looking around, wondering which direction to go when several doors opened, and two Dark Side users rolled out from behind them.

Their eyes looked almost normal, as if they were dealing with the fall of the Veil better than most of their fellows, and Sith Lightning raced out from both of them, forcing the two masters to defend, their lightsabers blocking the incoming lightning with difficulty, redirecting it up and into the ceiling or down into the floor, where it slithered and crackled over the ferrocrete before grounding itself.

From the third direction, straight ahead of where they had been coming from, other doors had burst open, and more Corrupted charged towards them. These were different than the others that they had been seeing before, yet another type of experiment. These were all humans, for one thing and looked to have been wearing clothing more akin to that of functionaries or office managers than to the construction workers of the battles before this or the prisoners from the lower floors. They also looked as if they had been badly merged with cyborg parts, giving them more arms, legs or even heads.

Plo noted that they were also a style that was more common on Kuat right before the group closed.

Rolling forward toward the Corrupted to get out of the way of the lightning bolts, the two Jedi held out their hands. Force Pushes crashed into the incoming group of strange cyborg-like monstrosities, while the two Dark Side users scrambled to their feet, either to retreat or try to attack from behind.

The moment the Force Push ended, both Jedi leapt backward, kicking off the floor and then the roof, coming down towards the Dark Side users. These two had been trained well enough in combat to see the move coming, but only one of them was fast enough to raise his hands and shoot Force Lightning up into Tyffix, who deflected it with his lightsaber into the wall even as his other hand raised. A blast of cutting force wind crashed into the Dark Side user, cutting the top of his head off, while Plo's lightsaber cut the other one apart.

The Corrupted had recovered from the dual Force Push by that point and now came on. The two Jedi Masters couldn't link up before the junction was flooded with them and were forced to pull back and away from one another rather than try. While Tyffix held his place in the hallway, forcing the Corrupted to come at him from one direction, Plo retreated into the lab where the Dark Side user he had slain had been taking shelter in previously.

There, Plo had room to maneuver and used it. Ice began to cover the ground, tripping the Corrupted, while eddies of wind washed over them, interrupting their charge further. Plo also began using Ataru with his favored Shien, bouncing around the larger lab as his hands and feet came into play. Each blow killed or crippled.

As his metal-clad nails slashed through one of the arms on a Corrupted though, he blinked and jerked his arm away as a capsule set into the arm exploded, sending bits of acid everywhere. That was most unpleasant and occurred several more times when he struck the body of the cyborg-like Corrupted, the Dark Side users who had experimented on them having created yet one more way to make them into living weapons, although even more than their other changes, the acid was a double-edged sword, as the acid began to cripple the wounded Corrupted quickly, even finishing off a few he had simply wounded.

It does not matter; these Corrupted are already dead. The minds who came up with this insanity will not escape judgment, no matter what they put in my way, Plo thought grimly as he bashed the head off of one of the cyborgs, heightening his strength and speed with the Force with even more ability than most Jedi could thanks to his training with his own people's Baran Do.

Despite the acid canisters embedded into the cyborgs, the threat of the Corrupted was minimal to the two Jedi Masters. Using their different styles of combat, the pair of them were able to cut down the entire horde slowly, and eventually, when the last one died, they met up once more at the junction. Plo was completely uninjured, whereas Tyffix had been splashed a bit by acid on his robes here and there. Plo could feel that the other man was in some pain, but holding it in well enough.

“How many more floors do you think they have of these creations? The fact that they have so many is disturbing to me,” Tyffix said bluntly. “It says something for how long they have been here on this planet, to say nothing of the resources involved.”

“We already knew that the Sith had been able to build up a disturbing amount of resources since the Sith Order went into hiding a thousand years ago. We simply have to trust in the Force that they don’t have too many other planets like this where they have combined so much of their resources,” Plo said philosophically, before both of them staggered eyes flying wide behind their goggles.

Through the Force, they felt it. They felt the deaths of at least four Jedi all at once. Not just dying, but struck down by surprise, by one of their own, as he fell to the Dark Side.

Recovering quickly, Plo sighed. “I feared that this would happen when we heard from Krell earlier. Pong has lost his will to the Dark Side, and those with him have paid the price for my not ordering him to leave the tower. Or better, to never enter.”

“With Master Niamu helping those few of us who have healing abilities with the injured, Pong was the obvious choice to lead the second group of attackers. Do not allow self-doubt to affect your emotions, especially not here,” Tyffix said, cutting through whatever guilt Plo might be feeling. “I believe, however, we should separate. I will head down to help Komari and the others contain or otherwise deal with Pong. Yet I should continue. Letting the Dark Side users have still more time to prepare seems foolish to me.”

Closing his eyes, Plo concentrated for a brief moment, trying to force his mind out into the Force without being overwhelmed by the Dark Side energies. It was even more difficult on this floor than it had been previously, and for a third time, he let his mind be assailed by visions of the blood-soaked past of this place, but he was able to push through it eventually and nodded. “I believe the sole true mind still cognizant within this tower is six floors above us from here. Although between us, there seems to be even more of these defenders.”

“I will send Quinlan and Komari ahead to join you. Their skill with Force Cloak and Force Stealth will allow them to catch up to you at the very least,” Tyffix said, before gesturing back the way they had first come to the junction and the staircase and elevator beyond. “I will be going down the most expedient manner. I recommend you, however, take a more circumspect route.”

“I will do so and will see you outside when all this is over,” Plo agreed. “Go with the Force, my friend. This battle has already cost us too much.”

Plo waited there for a moment, watching as Tyffix disappeared down the elevator shaft, then tossed his lightsaber up to the ceiling, keeping it on with a bit of the Force as he directed it to cut into the ceiling with the rest of his mind.

A Force Jump later, Plo was on the floor above. Landing, he looked around, finding himself in what looked like a long, wide room that might dominate this whole floor. The walls were lined with numerous power cables locked into what Plo, from his time on Kamino, recognized as cloning cylinders. There weren't as many cylinders as there were places for them, but it was still obvious what this area was going to be used for. *Yet another sign that this tower is but a shadow of what it might have become in time. And also the resources of the Sith. Buying these cylinders would be exorbitant. The Kaminoans have no desire to create other cloning masters after all.*

Shaking that thought off, Plo once more turned his communicator on. "This is Plo Koon. I am continuing to ascend, but my fellows have been forced to retreat. We... also sensed that one of our brethren have fallen to the Dark Side. Watch yourselves and stay true to the Force and your Oaths."

Plo felt his words were trite, but there was little he could say now, not without knowing what had pushed Pong Krell into the Dark Side. Nor would he have ever forgiven the man anyway. Justice would not have allowed him to simply try to bring Pong back to the light. Not without him paying for slaying four fellow Jedi. *The Council might well be happy it is Tyffix who has gone down to deal with him rather than I.*

Further, Pong might not have lost himself to the madness that had affected so many of these Dark Side users, and could still be listening in. *The others and Tyffix will need to handle him. My task is to continue on, upward to the heart of madness.*

OOOOOOO

The two Jedi Masters were not the only ones who felt it. All the Jedi with Quinlan and Komari felt it too, as several Jedi died within a hair's breadth of one another, and one of their own fell to the Dark Side.

However, they didn't have any time or inclination to actually concentrate on that at the moment, having been in a fight when it occurred. This had been the second fight since they began to ascend the tower, having gone upwards five more floors before running into more trouble. Those five floors had all been construction, engineering or chemical test center-based. The only living quarters were various types of cells, where the prisoners who had been experimented on so horribly must have been kept.

They seemed to pass a certain point around the ninth floor, a floor directly before where Pong's team had entered the tower, where work on the interior of the tower had begun to lag noticeably behind work on the exterior. Here, there were indeed numerous bedrooms and apartments, along with a few gathering places. Why the tower was designed like that, none of them knew.

Five more levels passed as they chased after Pong's team as it ascended. Evidence of prior fights was everywhere in the form of bodies, mainly droids and what the Jedi had taken to call Corrupted, with most of the Corrupted in this area not looking nearly as grotesque or mutated as the prisoners below, wearing worker overalls and even belts with tools on them still.

At first, it looked like Pong and his team had made a clean sweep, complete with melted elevator doors. They had even demolished what looked like a series of automated defenses, some half-finished, others not, that had been put in place. But then they ran into another group of Terentatek.

Whether Pong's team missed them, or they had also been chasing after his team from below, no one knew, nor did it matter. Thankfully, there weren't many of them, something that again made the Jedi hopeful that they were finally reaching the bottom of the barrel for that particular monster. Yet there were enough to cause trouble, accompanied as they were by a squad of droid commandos, who almost certainly had been avoiding the Jedi up to this point. The droids attacked on the heels of the Terentatek, then retreated, drawing one of the Jedi into a trap as he chased after them.

Barely discerning a whisper of danger in time via his Force Precognition, the younger Jedi was able to shift his part himself to the side and conjure up a weak Force Shield in time to avoid the worst of the blast of shrapnel, but one still caught him in the jaw, nearly removing his lower jaw entirely. "AIEGG!!" Even Jedi training wasn't enough to push through the pain of that, and he fell back, his hands going up to the ruin of his face, as his lightsaber fell to the floor,

Kaantoda charged forward, a blast of air doing away with the smoke the commandos had used to mask their movements as he Force Grabbed the man's lightsaber. Hurling it to one side, the blade bisected the droid that had prepared the trap, while Kaantoda deflected fire from three more blasters, destroying the other three droids and swift succession with their own bolts.

With the others finishing off the monsters, Kaantoda closed and sliced through a half-built wall, getting behind the droids even as they tried to retreat. One of them died with his first strike, while the others raised their blasters, but Kaantoda's Force Shield sprang in

front of them, deflecting and absorbing the strikes barely a few inches away from the tip of their barrels. The shield fell, and a Force Grab pulled the two commandos into the air, where Kaantoda sliced the pair into.

The wounded Jedi was sent back to the first floor, and the group pressed on, heading higher into the tower, and running into their second fight when Pong fell to the Dark Side. Two of their own were already having difficulty with the pressure of the Dark Side against their Force Precognition, and when Pong fell, both of them nearly fell too.

“RAGGHH!!” Ber Soruni, a Bothan, howled, pushed over the edge at seeing two of his own race having been turned into monsters. And as he gave in to anger, the Dark Side flowed in, driving him mad, twisting him as it had Pong Krell a moment before. Suddenly, he wasn’t surrounded by allies; he was instead surrounded by those who had tortured and mutated two of his fellow Bothans.

As the two Corrupted Bothans fell, Ber brought his lightsaber around to attack one of his fellow Jedi. That Jedi, a young Human woman named Saleria, fell into a Soresu stance, deflecting his next two strikes, before nearly being gutted by the monster she had been fighting. She fell back along the hallway towards their fellows, and Komari twisted around from where she had been blocking incoming Sith lightning from another Dark Side user. “Duck!”

The Soresu user obeyed instantly, and a blast of Force Stun rocked into the Bothan Knight, knocking him out entirely. He slumped to the floor and would have been killed by a Terentatek if Saleria hadn’t lashed out with her lightsaber, cutting the creature’s legs off right below the creature’s waist. It still tried to crawl forward, but a stab through its eye finally killed the monster even as it slashed at the down Jedi’s chest.

Quinlan was able to finish the Corrupted charging at him while two of the other Jedi reached and slew a pair of Dark Side users who had accompanied them, lashing out with fire and water attacks. They hadn’t bothered trying to retreat, simply lashing out with Force techniques, but were too slow to keep up with two Jedi’s movements in an enclosed space.

The two Komari and I slew outside near the shield generator were much more trouble than these were, he mused, as Plo’s call came in. That hardened their thinking about what to do now. “Onnat, check Ber.”

Onnat was a Nothoiin, who, while not a healer, had the foresight to ask for a large pack of medical supplies from the troopers outside of the tower when they had cleared the entry hall. Her golden skin reflected the small Force Lights they had all created to light the way, along with their lightsabers, as there was still no power in the tower, and this floor didn’t have many windows. “He’ll live. Jux will need to spend a long time in the bacta tank,

and I imagine, even with bacta, there will be a limit to what it can do for his hand. He's lost three fingers there."

"I'll go with him," one of the others, a human Knight from Chandrila, said, grimacing. "I twisted something in my foot, and I might have broken a rib. I'm definitely having trouble breathing, and I shouldn't be."

Komari and Quinlan exchanged a glance, then nodded. "Fine. As he didn't kill anyone, I think there might be some hope to bring him back to the Force after this, but that's not our call." Quinlan moved over to the downed Bothan. His hands hovered over the man, and visible ropes of Force energy appeared wrapping around him, a trick Quinlan had learned from Aayla and Harry.

Standing up, Quinlan looked around at the other Jedi with him. A thought to ask for more of the Jedi Wing to join them occurred then, but he knew that Plo had already picked out the best lightsaber fighters among them. In the enclosed space of the tower, blasters and such were helpful, but none of the remaining Jedi had much ability with them, either. *If the Jedi Wing is supposed to be a special-missions unit, we're going to need to correct that in the future.*

"Kaantoda, Onnat, Luta, Saleria, with us. We press on and upward. We'll keep together for now, but keep a lookout all around, including upward, just like we had to do on the first floor. And if... if you see Pong Krell, prepare to defend yourself with lethal force."

"Why not try to Force Stun him?" Luta, a human Knight asked. "Combined, the four of us should be able to overwhelm him."

"Only if we get lucky. Ber had newly fallen to the Dark Side and didn't have any kind of defense ready. If Pong is cognizant enough to fight us as a Jedi or Sith would, a strong enough will can avoid being overcome by a Force Stun, even from four people. I'm not willing to risk any of our lives on such a chance."

Kaantoda nodded thoughtfully, while Saleria stayed silent, inwardly shaken by the attack from someone who had, a mere heartbeat before, been an ally. Seeing that, and that Komari also agreed with Quinlan, Luta subsided, well again, heading upwards. At the next landing, Quinlan and Komari set a series of traps: one obvious, the other not at all easy to find, both tied to a pair of shaped, camouflaged charges. Then they were off again, ascending still further.

They were able to clear out two more floors that had only a few mutated individuals. These looked as if they had simply wandered off at some point, their eyes and ears

completely covered by strange bulbous growths that dripped poison of some kind. Killing them was even more for mercy than the other Corrupted.

“Why are there so many? The Veil of the Dark Side didn’t fall all that long ago. Did they have so many experiments running at that time?” Saleria questioned, repulsed as she stared down at the dead.

“Some of the Corrupted are more bestial yet... viable, I suppose you could say, as combat units than the others. I think what we’re seeing here is a lot of failed projects, not just those projects that had been infected with the madness we assume gripped all of the Dark Side users here when the Veil fell,” Kaantoda said thoughtfully. He seemed to do a lot of things thoughtfully, despite his race being known more for berserk fury and combative attitudes than anything else. “Regardless, I don’t think we should look for any rhyme or reason among the Corrupted. Or indeed anything we run into here.”

Another two floors passed by, with Komari and Quinlan laying out another trap, making certain that their fellows saw them do it so they knew where they were. Just in case the group had to retreat down the stairs in the future for whatever reason.

It was on the floor directly after that where they ran into another battle in the form of several mutated Terentatek. These had the same kind of crystals poking out of their armor that gave those who possessed them outside a long-range attack, but unlike those monsters, these were malformed. The crystal protrusions stuck out in odd places, and as they charged forward, only a few of the crystals seemed able to launch weak blasts of air or fire rather than Sith Lightning.

Luka and Saleria fell into Soresu as Quinlan and the others spread out, shifting up and over the unfinished inner walls of this floor. Before the monsters could try to spread their limited fire, the other Jedi had come in and surrounded them, attacking over the half-finished walls, cutting several of them down.

However, as they were doing so, a lightsaber cut into the ceiling above, and then a Force Push slammed into the portion of the ceiling cut out as it dropped. This attack was so strong that the bit of ferrocrete shattered, sending bits of shrapnel everywhere. Saleria gasped as one of them slammed into her forehead hard enough to cause her to fall unconscious, and one of the monsters roared as it charged towards her, fire blasting at Luka and keeping him from trying to go to her aid.

Similarly, Onnat was struck in the back of her head and fell over the body of her former opponent, groaning in pain. Thankfully, that had been the only monster near her at the time, and the Mirialan was hidden from the other monsters thanks to a half-completed wall.

Only the fact that the fire cut off allowed Luka to step in front of the monster, dealing with it quickly as the others, having had to duck and cover from the shrapnel, watched as Pong dropped down from on high. He landed in a junction of different hallways, where Quinlan and Komari had just finished off two of the mutated Terentatek. His double-bladed lightsabers flashed out, but Komari and Quinlan both blocked them, backing away rapidly.

Pong leaped away, lashing out and as he jumped over one of the walls to close harder with Komari, who ducked and rolled, her single lightsaber working overtime as she was forced to block and deflect several strikes from his double-bladed lightsabers, which the four-armed alien could wield with incredible dexterity.

A kick almost caught Quinlan as he darted in, but he dodged around it. When he tried to lash out at the man's leg, Pong was able to twist around, his lightsaber blocking and then hitting the other end of the lightsaber, the tip coming up in a blow that would have bisected Quinlan's chin at the very least if he hadn't ducked aside.

Kaantoda charged in, but Pong jumped away, forcing Komari and Quinlan to jump with him, the two of them deflecting, trying to pin him in place, but unable to get through the man's double-ended lightsabers. He came down near Luka, charging forward, a force blast of air racing ahead of him to crash into the younger Jedi. "UGH!"

Luke rolled with the strike, but this left Saleria unconscious on the ground, and before anyone could stop them, one of Pong's blades stabbed down, ending her life even as he twisted around to batter Kaantoda aside, then his lightsaber whirling in again, removing the Togorian's leg at the hip.

Only Quinlan deflecting a second blow saved Kaantoda's life, and then Kaantoda was falling before Komari arrived, cutting in from on high and to the side, forcing the turned Jedi in that direction. He then grunted as Kaantoda stabbed upwards, his lightsaber almost catching Pong in the side if not for a last-second dodge, letting the blade sear across his hip rather than stab deeper.

This allowed Quinlan to slice into the emitter of one side of his double-bladed lightsaber, causing the blade to short out. The other end still worked, but Pong was suddenly a little off balance, as Luka charged back into the fight.

For several minutes, as Pong danced away from Kaantoda, he fought all three to a standstill, battering their blades aside. Then, Luka fell, unable to keep up with Pong's double-ended lightsaber technique, cut in half. This cost him one of his forearms as Komari's blade sliced in, and he screamed, then screamed louder as a bolt of fire hit him from the side, nearly setting him on fire even as he hastily raised a Force Shield just barely an inch above his skin to block the fire.

It was coming from Onnat. She surged to her feet, both hands raised as they lashed out with fire towards him, forcing him to both deflect the fire away with his Force Shield, and deal with Komari and Quinlan at the same time.

This was why he didn't even sense the arrival of Tyffix from above. The first thing he knew of the Gand's being there was when his lightsaber flashed down right in front of Pong's face, slicing into his raised arms from on high, removing all three of his remaining limbs. "AIEEEEE!!!!"

Landing, Tyffix raised a hand, thrusting it into Pong's and releasing a Force Stun. If he hadn't already been dealing with the agony of having all of his limbs amputated in less than a minute, Pong could probably have pushed through that. Yet with that pain breaking his already fractured mind still further, Pong Krell simply couldn't, and stumbled away, his eyes rolling up in his head as he slumped unconscious.

Onnat's fire flickered for a moment and then went out as she gasped, reaching to the back of her head, before saying with manifest understatement. "That was unpleasant."

"It always is when one succumbs to one's baser urges. This one will answer to the Council for his actions, although I do not know what they will decide to do with him. He is not worth a name, or any of our consideration from now on." With that, Tyffix gestured, and the Force lifted Pong's body off the ground, while Quinlan hid a very small, jaundiced smirk at the very Gand insult there.

"I will transport this one as well as Kaantoda and Onnat down to our fellows, as neither of them seems up to more combat today. Komari and Quinlan, continue your ascent upwards. I would suggest doing so clandestinely from now on, as I left behind a few Dark Side users and a scattering of the Corrupted, although I did kill a few, including a droid commando. It was the last of a group that ambushed the climbing team. Either join Plo or bypass him and head for the heart of darkness. That is your choice."

Breathing deeply, Quinlan nodded, feeling quite tired from the day's exertions, but knowing they weren't quite done yet, as Quinlan knelt down next to Pong's body and wrapped him with force energy as he had Ber. "That sounds like a good idea to me. Just be sure to listen to Kaantoda as you go down the steps. We left a few traps behind us."

Tyffix nodded assent, and Onnat leaned down, grunting as she helped the larger Kaantoda to his one remaining foot, his removed limb hovering behind her. With that in hand, the bacta tank would hopefully be able to reconnect the tissue once the seared edges were removed, which would make his stay in said bacta tank much shorter.

With Tyffix in the lead and Pong's unconscious form hovering behind them, the pair of battered Jedi headed towards the stairwell.

As their fellow Jedi retreated down the tower, Quinlan and Komari leaped up through the same hole that Pong and Tyffix had used. From there, they headed to the elevator shaft, using it to ascend a dozen floors quickly. They were about halfway up to where Tyffix had begun his journey down when they began to see monsters and corrupted alike shifting around the floors. Looking closely, each of these Corrupted wore a control collar and appeared to have been subjected to experimentation over time. Quinlan wondered why the rest of the monsters hadn't had those, but decided after a moment that it was because these monsters were being trained to play nice with others, as there were a few Dark Side users near them.

Coming out of their cloak when one of the Dark Side users entered a side room, the Jedi cut down the monsters there before they realized there was a threat. The Dark Side user similarly was stabbed through the halfway open door, even as Sith Lightning appeared around his hand.

Two more small groups like this were similarly ambushed, but Komari decided the pair would not attack a third on the floor above. It consisted of many mutated, discarded Terentatek, and she didn't want them to get bogged down in a fight against the beasts if they didn't need to.

From then on, Komari and Quinlan bypassed several other floors that contained a scattering of monsters. They took note of them, then moved on, radioing down when they got a chance. Eventually, Trunn asked for them to mark out the floors on the outer wall of the tower, and, moments later, Komari blinked as she cocked her head. "Someone's firing something, somewhere."

Quinlan closed his eyes, listening rather than reaching out to the Force. The Dark Side in this tower was hard even for him to push through. "I can't... wait... yes. Someone is firing outside."

The pair looked at one another, then retraced their steps a bit until they could look out through the ruins of a window, shattered by the ion pulse cannon assault earlier. Twisting and looking down, Quinlan blinked as he watched one of the GDL ships hover below them quite close to the tower. "What..."

The Dropship was open, and a group of GDL troops was aiming their rifles into the windows of a floor below the two Jedi's current position. Drones flew into the building, and then, there was a roar, followed by the GDL troopers opening fire. One of the short

Terentatek appeared, hurling itself over the divide, but it was hit with a thermal detonator and exploded midair.

“Are, are they baiting the monsters and corrupted to come out where the GDL troops can shoot them?” Komari muttered.

“Looks like it. And the beasts are so insane they can’t stop themselves. It won’t work on the Dark Side users themselves or any group led by them, but it will still kill a lot of the remaining monsters.” Quinlan shook his head grimly. “How much worse would this portion of the battle have been if the defenders had kept back the majority of their Terentatek? The whole place would be crawling with them.”

Komari shrugged at that, but within a few floors, they stopped seeing as many monsters. A few floors later, the pair bypassed Plo Koon, who was bogged down on a floor where the squat Terentatek and seven saner-than-normal Dark Side Users had created a genuine defensive area. Mindful of the Jedi Master’s orders, though, they kept going.

Two floors above that defensive point, the two reached what was obviously a makeshift command center, perhaps one made to coordinate the ongoing construction of the tower. It also had what looked like a Hypercom communications system, not a full relay, of course, but one that a Senator or the Jedi Order would have access to that could link to the local tower and then out to the nearest relay. Quinlan made a note of it, wondering which Hypercom Relay Center had been taking in signals from this planet and its unknown address, and what other secrets that might lead to.

There were several Dark Side users within. Two of them were working controls, another fidgeting in the center of the room, while another paced at the other side of the command room. He was a human, short for his race, with a full beard and a face that might once have looked erudite, but which now was twisted into a visage of madness, complete with a bit of drool dripping from the corner of his face. He also had yellow eyes without any kind of pupil to speak of, much like Pong Krell had shown in his madness.

It was to that one that both Jedi gave their attention as they peered into the room, trusting in their Force Cloak and Stealth to hide them. For this man was not only roiling in the Dark Side, but easily more powerful than any of the other Sith they had thus far discovered. Indeed, the others had felt more like dabblers, barely above padawans in skill. This one was something else altogether, though precisely how dangerous that made him, the pair didn’t yet know.

“Damn Dominus, damn him, faulty, yes, faulty defenses, faulty AI programs on those vultures, those bases, all of them,” the bearded man snarled as the two Jedi watched.

“None of, none of them could stop such a small, small attack? Just a handful of Jedi, weakness! Weakness!”

“Sidious, he, the Great Lord, he will save us, will he not?” one of the others muttered. Another human, his face scrunched up as if he was pushing through his madness with extreme difficulty.

“Silence! You are not fit to speak his name!” the bearded one nearly shrieked, before descending into cackling. “Always hidden, hidden away, but the Veil, broken, cracked. The Great Plan, gone, gone, what will he doo.... **NO**. Must, I must trust, he was, no, he **is** the Chosen of the Dark Side.”

Suddenly, the man whirled, staring in their direction, seemingly now aware of their presence, something Quinlan would have thought impossible even for someone like Grand Master Yoda. Before he or Komari could defend themselves, a spout of water powerful enough to gouge through metal lashed out from his hand as he roared, “You think to use a Sith technique to sneak up on a Prophet, fools!? **DIE!**”

Komari raised a Force Shield, but the incoming battering ram of water shattered her Force Shield like glass. It still slowed the water down enough to make the attack less of an instant kill technique, and instead, both Quinlan and Komari found themselves slamming into a wall with bone-breaking force, and then along the hallway before they could stop themselves. Quinlan found himself actually tumbling further than Komari as the water continued to blast into them like a torrent.

Perhaps if they had expected it, the two of them could have stopped it or diverted the water with their own Force powers, but the ‘Prophet’s ability to detect them caught both of them by surprise.

As the water assault finally ended, Komari, grimacing at the feel of a few broken ribs and a badly bruised hip pushed herself to her feet. Her Force Precognition wailed a warning, and she looked up only to find Sith Lightning traveling her way. Not just through the air, either. No, the man was using Force Lightning with both hands, one touching the water that was now soaking the corridor's floor.

“KRIFF!” Komari leapt into the air, then activated her Force Shield, clinging to the ceiling with a Force technique that made her hands almost magnetic. She held there for a few seconds, while Quinlan pushed himself to his feet, and then lashed down into the water with his own Force powers, shattering the floor of the hallway.

“Hah, you fools. Do you think I have exhausted all my defenses on the floors below? Now!”

The fourth Dark Side user, the one who had been pacing, rushed forward, and, ducking around the Prophet, he drew a lightsaber, one of very few they'd seen so far. He lashed out at a door near the makeshift command room, revealing another lab and a third kind of horror, one different from the others Komari and Quinlan had seen up to this point.

Others saw either side of the hallway, the doors blew open, and what came out was horror. Not the shambling monsters that the pair of Jedi had feared. No, what came out instead were bugs, bugs the size of hands with stingers the size of fingers, dripping with dark green acid, much like the mynockes that the climbers had run into outside.

They swarmed towards the Jedi, who hastily backed away, even as the other two Sith brotherhood members turned from their controls. They joined the Prophet and their fellow, and all four began to launch cutting and burning attacks towards them. Several of the bugs were hit by those attacks, but the rest came on towards the Jedi.

Stunners flashed out from Komari as Quinlan lashed out with bolts of earth and shattering Force Pushes. Retreating let them keep the bugs at bay, and their powers and the Dark Side user's own attacks cut down their numbers, yet the bugs came on. A Force Shield rose, and then, united by a Force Gestalt, Komari summoned up a blast of air as Quinlan lashed out with a bolt of flame.

While both preferred to use the fire element, the pair had learned that wind and fire attacks multiplied one another rather than simply adding like two fire attacks together. Komari's wind attacks weren't all that powerful, but a large wall of flame filled the hallway as the bugs came on, frying them.

A moment later, the fire was snuffed out by another massive water attack. The pair's shields failed under the same attack, but then grenades with timers exploded in midair further down the corridor, filling it with smoke and fog.

A moment later, Plo flowed up and over the pair of embattled Jedi. Electrical Judgment once more arced from his hand, slamming one of the Dark Side users, causing him to scream even as his body protected his fellow from the attack. The other two raised their blades, but the other acolyte fell, his arm gone from a single strike. The Prophet, though, blocked the attack coming his way.

For several seconds, he had Plo Koon exchanged blows, but a sudden Force Push on the man's wrist brought his lightsaber out of position, and Plo Koon's other hand came up. He chopped into the man's throat, but was blocked, and then Plo twirled around, slamming his palm into one of the acolyte members, shattering nose and neck alike. A kick since the last one down to his knees, but he raised his hands, sending force lightning up into Plo Koon, forcing himself to defend himself with his lightsaber and redirected it down into the

man. Before he could divert it elsewhere, the man screamed, spasmed, and died from his own attack.

This left only the Prophet fighting, and he laughed wildly as his lightsaber nearly cut Plo's leg off, then almost took the Kel Dor Master in the throat. But this left him open to a strike from Plo's metal-clad fingers, which sliced at the Prophet's chest.

"You, you will never find him, never find the true Sith, the chosen of the Dark Side!" the Prophet hissed, before screaming. "For the Sith, and the True Power!" With that scream, his whole body lit up with lightning and Dark Side energies, trying to draw Plo and the others toward him as he began to cackle.

Plo brought up a Force Shield, but the Dark Side energies acted like a gravity well, trying to pull him off his feet. After attempting to fight it for a few seconds, Plo compressed his shield so that the hand wielding his lightsaber was outside the shield. Then stopped fighting the pull of the strange gravity technique.

The Prophet's voice cut off abruptly as Plo's lightsaber point took him through the chest. His Force Lightning and the other technique cut off similarly, and he stared with yellow, mad eyes at the Kel Dor, a grin still on his lips, before Plo pulled his lightsaber out of the man's chest and sliced his head from his shoulders.

It took the GDL forces and the Jedi several more hours to finally clear out the rest of the citadel, and as they went, the Dark Side energies showed no signs of dissipating. Worse, occasionally a small group of mynocks or a Sith acolyte was able to attack the GDL troop transports, causing more deaths. Yet without their bait-and-switch tactics, it would have taken even longer to deal with the sheer amount of horrors that had been created in the tower.

Some of those had been highly placed members of House Knylenn and Andrim from Kuat. They had not been seen by the workers who had begun to make a home elsewhere on the planet for quite some time, but the sight of their twisted, corrupted corpses was a thing of horror. If the locals had been leery of the Jedi and others before, their attitude changed dramatically when Lady Alya presented the bodies to their people.

The Jedi two had paid for the victory with nineteen dead and a dozen more wounded. Yet even that was a small price to pay for conquering a planet so steeped in the Dark Side, and Quinlan pointed that out to the rest of the officers as they gathered at the foot of the citadel.

"This citadel was dangerous, but it was only one position. Finite in comparison to a planet's normal size. We might need to send out scouting expeditions to those military

bases that launched starfighters, but I think this one will be the place where we find any information going forward.”

“This was a tremendous victory, although I repeat, these Dark Side users were true Sith. None of them had that kind of training that even a Sith assassin like that red and black-skinned Zabrak did. Even the so-called prophet was but a dabbler, and worse, I think I might recognize him. He was once a Jedi, a philosopher who left the temple before the war on Naboo,” Plo added. “Although I believe that this place might have been the source of the clones and other creations that we have seen over the past decade.”

“You might not have been impressed by your opposite numbers, Master Koon, but the monster hordes more than made up for that lack in my eyes. Those monsters cost us dearly,” Colonel Trunn grumbled.

“Indeed, and our victory here might well have been impossible without your efforts, Colonel. Thank you, and please pass on our thanks to your men as well,” Plo said simply and sincerely.

The Weequay nodded, but his face remained stone cold. The combat droids had been no match for his people, not even the super droids. With their equipment and armor, they would’ve won the day relatively easily against regular CIS troops. But the monsters had proven something else altogether. “Thank you for your words, Master Jedi, but we should move on now.”

“We at least know two names now for the hidden Sith. Dominus and Sidious, thanks to the ravings of these Dark Side users. Who the real master is, I think, has to be Sidious, given how much veneration they used in his name. Dominus...” Quinlan shrugged.

“Master C’baoth, it must be,” Komari said, shaking her head firmly. “We’ve known for a long while that he was a Sith. Not the only master, simply the visible one. But all of this was set up by the other one, Sidious.”

“Well then, how do we continue our search? Is the Dark Side settling down enough to let our computer specialists into the tower?” Trunn asked.

None of the Jedi felt that was the case, but there were enough Jedi who understood how to at least take apart and preserve the computer memory core to bring them out. As night began to fall over the planet, the Kuati called Byss, the GDL troops had pulled well back from the tower, leaving one of Lady Alya’s freighters to transport the Jedi when they were done.

When the Jedi returned, the computer experts of the Aldrete Smuggler Fleet and the GDL went to work. Amusingly, in the morning, it was the group from Lady Alya’s group that

had discovered something. "I think I've got something here, sirs. It's going to take a while to repair most of the fragmented data on these hard drives, but we've already pulled some communication logs. At least... well... not the audio recording, but the visual."

The Jedi, Plo, Master Tyffix and Komari all moved over to look at the screen the man was using. Quinlan was off with a few others to talk to some of the workers and their families. "Show us."

Moments later, an image of a face appeared. Most of him was hidden in the shadows of a hood, but what could be seen was the man's lower jaw. It was a thin face, with no beard; thus, it was clear that whoever this was was neither Dominus nor the man who had been in charge of this installation. He looked perhaps younger than either. Komari admitted he seemed to be so, but not by much. "Maybe in his late fifties, early sixties. The Prophet is a few years older, and C'baoth is younger."

A second later, the two computer techs, who had kept working on this particular file, whooped, and a second later, words came out. "---Wayland. I regret to inform you that you will be without his services for some time. Still, your work on Byss pleases me. I will accept the transfer of one of the cloning cylinders to you there early in this coming year. It will take some time to prepare that transfer, but I look forward to what you can create, Kadann."

"I am certain you will enjoy what we have come up with here, Master. When you will it, there will be a plague of Sith beasts, ready to ravage and hunt the Jedi wherever they might hide." This was the voice of the Madison Plo Koon he had fought, although he sounded far saner than he had during their confrontation.

That told Plo Koon and the other Jedi that this had probably been a communique made before the destruction of the Veil of the Dark Side. It also told Plo that he had been correct. Kadann had been a Jedi at one point, a known philosopher and researcher, with little other accolades to his name.

"However--- after--- concerned," Kadann continued, the recording flickering on and off. "The Great Plan is still moving, but slowly, while our opposition seems to be moving ever more quickly. You have needed to shift and shift more, to react rather than act. Is the Great Plan still workable in its current form? You realize that with the creation of this--- station..."

Whatever had been hinted there seemed to take the Sith Lord aback, or perhaps simply caused him to lose control of his temper. "No! We will continue with the Great Plan. The Jedi still have no notion of what is being prepared. Nor do they have any notion of my presence. They are looking for a Sith to be sure. I will show them more. I will get them off our real trail, never fear."

The communication cut out then, and the techs shook their heads with one of them speaking up. “That’s about the only one of the communication logs we’ve been able to discover so far. Most of the others were erased before the ion cannon assault. Luckily, we might be able to pull more from the local computers, a basic log of all of the experiments and everything here. But I don’t know we’ll be able to find any more communications like that.”

“There was most certainly a voice amplifier and filter of some kind. Used on both ends to boot,” one of the communication specialists muttered, shaking his head. “But Wayland... that’s a clue, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. Most likely another planet of some kind. Continue your work, good sirs. This might only have been one of the Sith’s bolt holes, but hopefully, we will be able to find enough information to hunt down many of the others. And perhaps, perhaps eventually, if we hit enough of those bolt holes, we will find the hidden Sith Lord. The noose is tightening, ladies and gentlemen; it is only a matter of time,” Plo said, smiling grimly behind his gas mask.

OOOOOOO

The night before the *Tyrant’s Bane* was due to leave Taanab and thus the night before the two of them would need to separate, Harry and Aayla had a night out on the planet. It might have surprised many who didn’t know them and who saw the pair as simply the two leaders of the GDL, the leading Count of Serenno and his lady, but they didn’t go to a big restaurant or even to a fancy place at all. Instead, they had gone to a simple noodle place.

Aayla loved noodles, and there were a number of spices that came through Taanab that Harry had only rarely had the opportunity to use in his cooking. The fact that this meant that Aayla’s noodle dish would probably have burned his mouth severely was beside the point.

And of course, they had gone out of disguise. While Force Cloak would have allowed the pair to pass by unnoticed, it was extremely difficult to get service if you had to pop in and out of people’s senses. To say nothing of the fact that in a packed enough crowd, even a Force Cloak could not stop someone from being jostled.

Aayla had been in charge of their disguises. A color-changing technique applied to her own body turned her into an orange-skinned Tolian twi’lek rather than a blue-skinned Rutian, while Harry became blue with white hair. This made Harry resemble a pantoran, though one without any golden tattoos indicating familial rank. Pantorans were not a normal sight in this area of space, but no one recognized him, aided by Harry covering his lightning bolt scar, which no Color Change technique or even body shifting could cover up.

Beyond the food, the two of them danced the night away, moving from one dance club to another. Once on the dance floor, Aayla obviously pulled in her own amount of glances, but she ignored them all, staying glued to Harry's side or front, or back the entire time. The two of them were almost as lost in their mental realm as they were close in the physical. Then, they had returned to the Tyrant's Bane for a night of lovemaking.

The next morning, however, was a sober one. The pair had reaffirmed their love with one another, they had reaffirmed their connection, and now, now it was time for their mental realm, the mental part of that connection, to be severed.

They had been preparing for this, of course. Hours of meditation every night, copying memories as much as possible, shifting their mental realm's construction as best they could. Now, the airlock in the outer defensive shield, which encompassed their mental realm that signified Harry and Ahsoka's padawan bond, was as far away from the ship that Aayla kept her own memories and thoughts in as possible. This would hopefully save Ahsoka from any backlash created once the two lovers were too far away for their bond to continue connecting them.

Now, the two of them began to create walls. Several serried walls of glass appeared around the dark side of Ryloth, which was his portion of the mental plane, and an energy shield around Aayla's rock starship. The two shields tried to create a buffer between their minds. Yet the shields barely appeared between them before fading out, as if they couldn't fit into the reality of their mental plane. Copying the memories had worked to a certain degree, but not this.

As the pair's mental avatars stared at one another from between the rapidly disappearing shields, Harry had only one thing to say. *"Well, kriff. So much for softening the blow in here."*

"It was a long shot anyway. We've tried similar things before, mainly to hide surprises from one another, admittedly, but still, we have tried to separate our mental domains previously, and it never worked. This harder, more encompassing approach was probably doomed to fail from the start. We'll just have to deal with it, I suppose," Aayla said philosophically.

Of course, Harry knew how worried she truly was, and his mental avatar snorted. *"You mean Zule and Padme will need to deal with it. Although at least Padme will have the rest of the Bane's crew to help Padme look after me, along with Ahsoka. Zule is going to be all on her own. I doubt the Verpine and astromech droid assigned to you is going to be much help there."*

*"I'll make certain I'm strapped in so I don't convulse and hurt myself or anything when...when **it** happens,"* Aayla said, allowing her concerns to show now.

In an instant, her avatar crossed into Harry's portion of their mental realm, and the two of them hugged once more. How long they simply held each other, letting their emotions flow between them in an unending loop, neither knew. But sensing movement in the real world around their physical bodies, the two eventually separated.

In the bed they shared in their quarters on the Tyrant's Bane, the two of them opened their eyes to find Zule and Padme there looking down at them with worry and concern on their faces. "A part of me wants to ask if you two are alright, but with what is going to be happening shortly, I'll just ask what you two were up to in there," Zule said, gently tapping Harry's head, her finger resting lightly on his lightning bolt scar. I could feel the roiling of the Force within you. Whatever it was, did it work?"

"Yes and no. We were trying to put up blocks between the portions of our mental realms again, that part failed... badly. I'm afraid we're going to need to go with the whole restraints idea just in case. Still, we 'moved' so to speak the padawan-master connection away from where our minds join, and that seems to have stuck at least, as did copying some specific memories," Harry answered wryly, staring up at Zule, taking in the arch of her neck, the dark red of her lips on her orange skin, the concern in her eyes.

After a second, he reached up and gently stroked a finger down Zule's chin for a moment, his thoughts aligned with Aayla's. "Has anyone told you you have a gorgeous face to wake up to?"

While Padme giggled beside her, there was something so intimate and caring in that compliment that it took Zule's breath away a little bit. "I, I can't say I've ever been in a position where such a compliment could be given..." She practically stammered, her normal Jedi composure fraying. It had happened a few times before this when Aayla, Padme or Harry turned the tables on her in the realm of flirting, but it was still cute to see.

"Then I look forward to telling you the same thing every day we're together on this trip of ours," Aayla said, stretching languidly beside Harry. That this completely dispelled any illusion the two other women might have had that she or Harry were wearing clothing underneath their blanket was not lost on her. In fact, Aayla preened as both women stared at her for a few moments.

When Harry joined them, she laughed and pushed his shoulder lightly. "Come on, lover. We can't simply lie here in bed all day, or else we will both miss our scheduled departure window and never build up the courage to actually leave one another's company."

That reminder sobered the group for a few seconds, but Padme pushed through it, reaching over Harry to cup Aayla's face in both hands, staring into her eyes. "Don't think for a moment that Harry is the only one who will miss you when you're gone!" She said fiercely.

“You’re not just leaving; you’re also going to be completely out of communication. That is something we haven’t had to deal with since before we actually became involved with one another. I can’t remember a time since you returned from Ruusan when we haven’t talked at least once a week.”

“True, that is going to be tough to deal with on top of everything else, and I would never think that, Padme,” Aayla said softly, her own hands coming up to grab Padme’s face, pulling Padme over Harry for a moment to give her a kiss. That left Padme basically pressing into Harry’s chest and upper body, and Padme giggled into Aayla’s lips as Harry’s arms went around her for a moment as she and Aayla kissed.

Padme pulled away only slowly, letting Harry and Zule kiss, before the two ladies moved back, with Zule shaking her head and stating briskly, “Come on, we’ve only got an hour and a half before we need to leave. We got breakfast for you, a last meal just the four of us here in your quarters before you and I get changed into our new alter egos.”

Seeing the spread laid out nearby, Harry nodded at the only other cook among the quartet and rolled out of bed, ignoring the fact that both Padme and Zule didn’t even bother trying to look bashful as they took in his body for a moment. While he hadn’t slept with either of his other two lovers, it was a near certainty that he and Padme would be taking that plunge while Aayla and Zule were away, who would do so similarly. Harry and Aayla had talked about it, and while Aayla would’ve preferred to be there with Harry as he and Padme had their first time and vice versa with Zule, both had agreed they were fine with it.

It wasn’t ideal, but this was the universe they lived in, and neither was jealous of the idea. Indeed, both were happy that one another would have such support.

Aayla followed Harry out of bed, but unlike Harry, who at least had reached down to grab a pair of his discarded underwear, she made no move whatsoever to get dressed, simply moving over to sit at the small table that had folded out of one of the walls of their quarters. When the others looked at her, she shrugged. “What? The two of you aren’t going to be seeing me for a while, so I figured I’d give you something to remember me by.”

“On top of the night you gave Harry, of course,” Padme teased even as her eyes trailed up and down Aayla’s body. Gone were the days when Padme felt embarrassed about her interest in Aayla or Zule, and now, given express permission, she was going to ogle all she could, searing the image of her blue-skinned lover into her mind for the weeks, or perhaps even months, they would be separated.

Harry didn’t need to look. He already had hundreds of memories of similar moments with Aayla. He still did, though, as did Zule, her thoughts alone tinged with anticipation and desire, so strong that Aayla could nearly taste it. Combined, the arousal she could feel in the air

thanks to her empathic abilities caused Aayla to second-guess her notion even as the others settled into chairs around her. “Never mind, you’re all too, too horny for me to concentrate on anything else!”

“Do you expect us to apologize?” Zule asked, while Padme and Harry simply laughed.

His laughter, however, did not stop Harry from helping to clip Aayla’s bra into place, though. And if he had copped a final feel of her rear, neither of the others was going to say anything.

Breakfast passed uneventfully for a while, with none of them talking about anything personal for a time, concentrating more on news of the war and so forth for a while. It then shifted to training ideas for Ahsoka, and, oddly, pranks and other ways to just take a step back from the seriousness of the war and their overall lives. Padme enjoyed 3-D puzzles and hikes whenever she could get time for the second. That, and sappy romance movies. Zule enjoyed romance and slapstick comedies, while Aayla was there with Padme in terms of puzzles, and Harry liked cooking and cook shows on top of the three Jedi using painting and other means of calming their minds down and helping them to remain centered in the Force.

Eventually, the meal had to end, and Aayla and Zule stood up, heading over to the wardrobe that had been filled with the clothing for their alter egos over the past few days. As they went, Padme watched them, cocking her head thoughtfully to one side. “So did you decide to go with the white skin version of your new identity?”

White-skinned twi’lek were one of the more normal colors of Twi’leks, although unlike the other colors, they couldn’t trace their white skin to a single area on Ryloth. Thus, they didn’t have a name for their skin color, unlike other colors like red, Lathans, or Blue, Rutians.

“I did, yes. Unlike young Ahsoka and her ability to change her body to a certain degree, I need to rely on a different skin color and a few other, clothing-based changes to make certain my new identity can’t be connected to Aayla Secura or indeed any other famous Twi’lek. I wouldn’t have bothered to do even that much if not for Master Yaddle’s reports about CIS activity in Hutt space, drat it all,” Aayla grumbled, before moving to stand in the middle of the room for a moment.

That had come as something of a nasty surprise when she and Zule had begun to plan their trip to Nar Shadda. The CIS had sent a large delegation into Hutt space to try to convince them to enter the war on the CIS side, though so far they hadn’t made much progress. But they were there, led by a Dark Side user of some kind, although that was speculation at this point, based on a very few reports from sources who sold information to the highest bidder rather than dedicated Specter agents. That added to many other reasons why simply using Force Cloak all the time they were on the Smuggler’s Moon wasn’t advisable.

As the others watched, her skin slowly changed to a nearly pasty white. Once that change was done, she moved over to the closet, where she and Zule had gathered items for their disguises over the past few days. *"Admittedly, we don't need to change into them just yet, but I suppose getting everyone's opinion on them is a good idea. That, and having time for us to get used to them, is a good idea, particularly in Zule's case,"* she sent to Harry, who agreed. And only half because he just liked watching her get dressed.

After a few seconds, though, Harry's pleasure in watching Aayla shifted to a glum sort of sadness as she turned back to them. Seeing her wear a compression shirt that pressed Aayla's chest down to the point it looked like she was at least a size smaller than normal, Harry could not stop himself from wincing, shaking his head sadly. "The Force itself weeps, truly."

"Oh, hush you!" Padme said, shaking her head. "That was such a man comment. There is more to a woman than her chest, lover, and you should know that."

"And you're not going to miss laying your head on those particular pillows?" Harry questioned loftily. His humor was just a little bit forced, but real for all of that, just like his sorrow at how much pain that part of her outfit was going to put Aayla in.

"I never said that," Padme said, shrugging her shoulders and winking at Aayla, continuing her efforts to keep the conversation somewhat upbeat. "We ladies do have a certain inbuilt leg up in the cuddle department. Don't we?"

"You certainly won't hear me complain," Harry snickered, waving expansively at all three of his lady loves.

Aayla grinned as she felt the happy flush of embarrassment Zule was feeling at that moment, then finished pulling up her pants and a shirt. When she was finished, she was wearing a typical spacer's outfit, complete with jacket, a wide belt on which a lot of tools hung, as well as a datapad and a blaster. Her lightsaber was stored in a smaller pouch at the small of her back, hidden under the compression shirt, a technique she had used several times during undercover missions with Master Vos.

The last bit of her disguise was covering her lekku from where they emerged from her head to their tips in leather wraps, then deliberately putting them over her shoulders rather than down her chest. This was a move that only those with lekku would understand, and combined with everything else, made for a very conservative outfit for a Twi'lek.

When she was done, she posed for a moment, looking over at her other lovers. "May I present Fane Donot. Mechanic, gunfighter, extremely limited slicer, and all-around handywoman. So long as it isn't dealing with men, or the public in general, I am your woman."

Padme looked Aayla over for a moment, then suggested some more eyeliner and lip gloss. "Beyond that, if you're worried about facial recognition, maybe a change to your eye color? Your eyes are almost as striking as Harry's, my dear. That and a voice change."

"The voice changer will probably be necessary if the CIS really are there in some force, although I still have to wonder if going so conservative is a good idea," Zule mused. "That might bring more attention our way, especially with the whole man-hater thing you put into your bio. I'm not arguing with that aspect, but looking at it now, the outfit might be a little too conservative for a Twi'lek on Nar Shadda, sorry."

"Well, I think it's fine. If I'm a mechanic, one who has worked on a lot of tramp freighters and down-on-their-luck smuggler ships, I'm used to being around electronics that might suddenly decide to explode at any moment. Going for clothing like this that covers my body entirely is a good idea. Besides, the only people I want to look at me sexually are right here in this room, already know what I look like in my real body," Aayla answered, trying out different accents as she went, frowning a little, as she mentally acknowledged she'd have to keep working on those.

She smirked as Zule leaned over and gave her a kiss on the neck. A second later, Padme hopped to her feet and hugged her from behind, humming happy agreement. Only Harry didn't move to hug her; rather, he sent a wave of affection and love down their shared link.

With Aayla fully dressed, the others all looked at Zule, and she sighed, but agreed, pushing at the human woman's face with one hand with mock-severity to make her let go. "What are you doing, hugging my lover, huh? Gosuu don't take that kind kriff from anyone."

"Oh, I do apologize, oh might Gosuu," Padme snickered as she stepped back, shaking her head.

"And don't you forget it," Zule growled, acting the part of an angry, standoffish woman for a moment before getting to work.

To start with, Zule began to change her skin color too, though since she had been wearing more than just a bra and panties, it wasn't as dramatic. As a half-falleen, there was very little she could do in that area, as that was a known and somewhat common pairing in the Outer Rim thanks to the Falleen race's pheromones and how much joy many of their race took in using them to manipulate the men or women around them, depending.

Her skin color slowly shifted, becoming several shades greener, showing her Falleen heritage more. Similarly, her hair turned an even darker green. Combined, Zule no longer looked like herself to an even greater degree than Aayla somehow, despite not having done anything more.

With Aayla's help, Zule had changed a little bit, too. While Aayla's compression shirt removed, Zule's padded bra added. Once it was on, she looked over at Harry, one eyebrow rising as if daring him to comment.

Snorting, Harry shook his head. "I wasn't born yesterday, Zule. And frankly, I like the real thing a lot more than the fake ones. Don't let anyone tell you different."

Zule smirked, moving over and leaning down to kiss Harry languidly on the lips, complete with a little bit of tongue. *Kriff, but I'm going to miss him and Padme!*

"Good answer," she whispered aloud as she pulled away, before heading over to quickly pull on a skirt that barely came down to mid-thigh. Combined with several knives and a bandolier that had a few blasters in it, paired with two thermal detonators, she looked incredibly deadly, more of a mercenary and pirate than a ship's crewman.

Padme laughed. "Darling, your outfit is too busy! You look more like someone who plays the part of a pirate in a Holovid." She hopped to her feet, and Zule mock-whined in protest as Padme began to grab at her various weapons, tossing them aside to be caught by Harry via the Force. "One blaster and one rifle, another holdout blaster hidden under your shirt, or your lightsaber. Bandolier of vibro-knives, sure. Add two smoke grenades and EMP grenades rather than thermal detonators. More useful and less damaging. Take it from someone who routinely trains with guns and so forth, a rifle is far better than having several blasters."

Soon, Padme stepped away, satisfied. "That's better. What is your assumed name, again?"

When Zule spoke, unlike Aayla, she had no trouble slipping into a kind of brogue, her mouth opening just a little wider than would be normal for her as she smiled. "I's be Gosuu Gred. I's be the only reason that Fane is alive, and the reason why we's headin' to sell a full load of purloined bacta to the Hutts on Nar Shadda."

Unlike Aayla, who had gone for surprisingly low-key and docile for her personality, Zule had gone the entirely opposite direction. The idea was that Zule would grab people's attention as Aayla moved in the background, using her Force Empathy and a few other tricks to ferret out information or outright secrets alike.

Although honestly, of course, if it had been anywhere but the moon of Nar Shadda, such disguises would've been completely unnecessary. Both Jedi could use Force Cloak and Force Stealth to hide from other Force users and from normal people. However, keeping Force Cloak up for long periods drained. Only specialists like Aayla and her master trained in it to that degree. But given the vision that the two ladies had seen, both Aayla and Zule were deeply

concerned that they'd run into other force users, as well as possible trouble with the local rulers.

Hutts were notoriously difficult to manipulate, completely immune to mind tricks, and, Aayla knew, could see through Force Cloak, something that had led to her master being captured during their attempt to infiltrate Jabba's activities on Tatooine all those years ago. Worse, she knew that killing Jabba all those years ago had forced the Hutts across the galaxy to take their security more seriously, particularly against Force-assisted threats. It wasn't enough for the CIS diplomats to make much headway with them since the war began, thankfully, but still.

Thus, the two disguises, and even the paper trail they would leave behind as they headed towards Hutt Space.

At that point, the intercom rang, reminding the quartet they were working under something of a time crunch here, and that their fashion show hadn't been just for their own edification. "Count Potter, this is the bridge. We're receiving a communique from the Hapan diplomatic ship. They are ready to go when we are, and we are approaching our scheduled time. All crewmembers are aboard. We are good to go."

Harry moved over to the intercom, pressed the button, and answered quickly. "Roger that. I'll head to the Hypercom communications room to talk to the hapans. You have the com. Take us out of orbit and head for the outer system along the prepared route."

"Acknowledged." The Jedi on the other end answered, and the connection closed.

Harry looked over at his three lovers regretfully. "Well, it's nearly time, I guess. I'll meet you all down at the hangar bay after I'm done talking to Ta'a Chume."

The three ladies all nodded, and Harry headed for the door. He noticed that they didn't follow him right away, and a few yards later, Aayla sent him the sensation of kissing Padme, then Zule, then the sight of the two of them kissing. *"The universe is a cruel, cruel place sometimes,"* he sent back along with a tinge of regret. Yet neither he nor Aayla was going to argue with the very Light Side of the Force when it sent them visions. If Aayla and Zule were needed on Nar Shadda, that was all there was to it. *And I'm needed here, with the war and everything else going on.*

When he opened the coms, Harry was surprised slightly to see the princess herself there. She was wearing a semi-formal outfit rather than her full formal gown and looked past Harry and around him before settling on his face, a wry twist crossing her lips. "My word, should I be flattered or annoyed that your minders think that you can talk to me without them around?"

I'm almost tempted to tempt you in turn in some fashion, but alas, communication is so boorish in terms of what flirtation it allows for."

Harry snorted that, shaking his head. "Neither my lover nor my friends would ever insult me to think that I am so lacking in self-control that I can't have a conversation with a beautiful woman on my own. I will admit that you are attractive enough and intelligent enough that perhaps, were I not already in a relationship, I might have been tempted. But could you truly see us as equals in any relationship?"

"Equals?" Ta'a tasted the word as if it felt odd in her mouth, before shaking her head. "Probably not. I know myself all too well and my societal upbringing for such. However, it would still have been quite fun, regardless of whether or not it would be a permanent relationship or a temporary liaison."

Harry chuckled at that, nodding his head slightly in agreement, but went on more seriously. "While she isn't here, Padme did want me to warn you. Coruscant might be shiny, but the Senate is full of people who have made doublespeak an art form. Get any agreement in writing, read it through extremely carefully, and be wary of any questions asked about you or to you directed to you in a public forum. Such moments do not just occur. They are most often orchestrated to suit some long-term goal."

"Harry Potter, I am a scion of the Hapan royal house. We don't just go into **character** assassinations. I have had a dedicated poison tester before I could literally walk, and I am fully aware of the need to watch what other people say where they say it and vice versa," Ta'a answered, shaking her head once more. "I will thank you for the heads up, but it truly isn't necessary."

"Did you know that the news agencies on Coruscant will pick and choose what aspects of whatever you're saying will air, even if it is supposedly going out live? Many of them are simply up for the highest bidder, but others have their own political stances that they follow like religious gospel. Padme has lamented about the sheer number of lawsuits about such things are still moving through the court system despite the Chancellor's best efforts to streamline the process."

That brought Ta'a up short, frowning a little. While the Hapes Cluster didn't exactly have free press beyond a certain degree, given how seemingly balanced the coverage of the war and the Senate seemed to be from her perspective, she hadn't anticipated that. "I thought that the Senate was mostly united behind the Centrist position. Is that not the case?" She asked, more to buy time to mull over what it could mean for people to be able to simply splice together whatever she was saying to indicate something she didn't want than anything else.

“The Senate is indeed united to a certain degree, but there is still the Peace Party to consider, and the centrists are not, according to Padme, as entirely united as they like other people to think. The Rim Faction is still a strong presence, with its own axe to grind, as is the Corporate Interest Group, the Agri-world Affairs, and so forth. The Liturgists are at war with the Reformers, and so forth. How they view you is going to be interesting, especially considering that the Centrists will have had time to get over the effect of Padme’s stand on Thyferra, and your agreement is coming in with her endorsement.”

Harry shrugged. “The Committee of Extrasolar Body Agreements might have already ratified it, and Padme being behind it helped push it through, but don’t anticipate that the agreement to move some vratrix into the Hapes Cluster will go smoothly. Padme created a packet for you to go over before you meet with the Senate. I’ll send it across now.”

Ta’a glanced aside, blinking as a package came across, copying it to her datapad. “Well then, thank Amidala for that. I would’ve assumed that you and she would’ve simply told me to trust the Jedi Temple and its representative on the Senate, though.”

“I’m not part of the Senate, and while the GDL is working closely with the Republic in terms of the war effort, I also know how the Senate views the Jedi and us for splitting its efforts across both polities. If I did tell you to go to the Jedi Temple, I’d be making you some enemies with that very act,” Harry said dryly. “I think you’ll find that Padme gave you a few names on the Peace Party that you could perhaps trust, as well as some of the Centrist senators who are at least known for their moral fiber as well, but that is all I can offer.”

“Moral fiber, what would that be exactly? It sounds more like something I would eat than assume I would find in any kind of political figure,” Ta’a drawled, shaking her head. Then she smiled, holding up her hand into the pickup. “I cannot say that our meeting has been as delightful as I had hoped it would be, but you and your allies hit on ways to make my position stronger and the Consortium as a whole. I will not forget, and I may even go so far as to invite you and your lover to my coronation as Empress in the future. For now, I will sign off. I believe this is what you Jedi say to one another when parting? May the Force be with you?”

“May the Force be with you as well, Ta’a Chume. And keep that diadem on you at all times. The true Sith Lord is still out there, and while the Senate has already been cleared by the Jedi, the whole of Coruscant could never be. Keep it on, and keep your bodyguards close, and hopefully, in a decade or two, that invitation will indeed arrive,” Harry answered, his tone formal at first before shifting.

Ta’a smiled like a shark then, her eyes hard. “I will take your advice, but don’t anticipate it being that long before that invitation does indeed arrive.”

With that rather ominous statement, Ta'a signed off, leaving Harry staring into the pickup for a moment, contemplating whether or not the princess had just admitted that she was going to commit matricide, either in self-defense or not. He relayed that thought to Aayla, but she also wasn't certain what that implied, although she could tell that Ta'a and her mother's relationship was poisonous at **best** after their past few meetings with the woman. A large portion of that had to do with how politics in the Hapes Consortium went, but some of it was even more personal than that.

Shaking his head, Harry exited the secure coms room and headed down to join his lovers in the rune-expanded hanger bay. There, he found Aayla and Zule arguing with one of the Verpine leaders Saas, who was gesturing wildly towards the ship, which was still crawling with Verpine and astromech droids, along with Chewbacca for some reason. Although the Wookiee was chuffing in humor as he helped remove the astromech droids from the hull, wagging his other hand at the Verpine.

It looked like they were in the middle of an argument, while Padme stood nearby, her face holding an expression of amusement. Harry sidled over to her, looking at the ship for a moment.

It was a small Type 440 freighter from Ghtroc Industries, a small-time shipbuilding conglomerate in the Outer Rim, which was part of the CIS now. It was an old model and not very well thought of. Built to house a crew of two, the 440s often needed more than that due to some issues in construction and design. From above, it looked almost like the head of a mace, with the bridge in the slightly longer area made to connect the head to the mace's shaft. It had a hundred metric tons of cargo capacity in the center of the mace, which was currently filled with crates full of bacta canisters, and was normally armed with two laser cannons.

Those had been replaced with two quad laser cannons, better for shooting at smaller targets, a change that was common for warships on the Outer Rim, smuggler or not. Harry knew there had also been some other additions, although the only one visible at present, despite the sheer number of open panels, the Verpine were only slowly closing on the outer hull, was an upgrade in the ship's engines. It wouldn't be very mobile, but its straight-ahead speed would be much better than other ships of the same type.

"Is the Saas still arguing for more time?" Harry asked quietly.

"He is, and the astromechs aren't exactly happy about not being able to toughen the outer hole with runic arrays. For some reason, those little droids think it is their job to look after you all. I can't imagine why," Padme drawled.

"Well, I don't think they have that attitude towards me, so much as Aayla. Even before she started to spend so much time choosing which one of them to go with her, she liked to

spend a few hours in the engineering area with them and with the Verpines.” Raising his voice, Harry addressed the Saas, asking politely, “Has the hive chosen one of your fellows to go with Aayla and Zule? We are running out of time, gentle beings, and we need to make our jump out of hyperspace at the appropriate moment.”

The crew of the *Tyrant’s Bane* knew it was being watched. They had been washed since the moment the Lucrehulk had come out of hyperspace in the Taanab System. But there were still ways to spoof sensors, and with the Hapan battle dragon, its nova cruisers and the Lucrehulk all jumping to hyperspace at the same time, they would be able to cover the fact that another ship had jumped out at the same moment from the same area. Better, their chosen time and the area of the outer system where they would be jumping from meant there wouldn’t be any ship or sensor close enough to detect that the Lucrehulk had opened its hangar bay. “And did you two choose a name for it yet? Aayla told me you hadn’t last night.”

While Aayla and Zule shook their heads, the leader of the Verpines spoke up, pointing to one of his fellows. He was completely indiscernible from any of the others until he wrapped an orange sash around his upper arm. “I will be going with Lady Aayla and Knight Zule. But, but surely we could postpone our departure. But a few hours more, we could get some more speed out of the hyperspace engines, at the very least. The issue with the proton torpedo launcher will remain, but we could also work on installing a third shield generator and—”

“We can’t wait for that, I’m afraid. Events are moving elsewhere, and we all need to be a part of many of them. I’m sorry, but that is just the way it has to be,” Harry said, shaking his head while Aayla moved over to gently touch the Verpine’s shoulder, then flicking a finger up towards its jaw, a conciliatory motion among their species that she had learned while interacting with them. “You have already done wonders with the ship, and it will surprise anyone who thinks to mess with it, but that is all we can do.”

“He’s right, I’m afraid. I’m still astonished you were able to put a proton torpedo launcher in there at all, especially without using any runic arrays to enlarge areas of the interior. The fact that it can only cover a certain area around the ship is inconsequential to having such a heavy punch in the first place,” Aayla soothed. “To say nothing about having a second shield generator hidden behind a sliding panel.”

The Saas still looked a little crestfallen, as did most of his brethren. The Verpine **loved** to tinker. It wasn’t just second nature to them; tinkering was second nature combined with a healthy dose of fixation that might well have been unhealthy in a human. For the bug-like aliens, though, it was simply normal. Thankfully, aboard the ship, there was always a lot to be done: streamlining the factories, working on the hydroponics gardens, various equipment, going over the plans for the starfighters and their actual maintenance, and so forth.

Seeing the alien start to move away from the ship, close panels and so forth, with Chewbacca actually entering the ship and rousting several of the other Verpines from inside, Aayla knelt down next to one of the droids, patting its dome for a moment. “Now comes the hard part for you, Arki. You know I’m going to have to erase part of your memory banks, right?”

The R2 unit shifted from one foot to another as it let out a doleful, keening noise, before bobbing forward in a nod of agreement or the closest equivalent the astromech droid could make. When it did, one of the Verpines spoke up. “We’ve already downloaded all of Arki’s memories aboard the Tyrant’s Bane. He can get them back when you return. But we can do nothing about the fact that he will know it is gone.”

“We’ll deal with that, together,” Zule said, coming over and resting her own hand on top of the little droid’s head. Astromech droids were always full of personality, and she was looking forward to getting to know this one.

As the droid once again bowed its body forward on its legs, Aayla pulled out a small datapad and connected it to a port along the right side of the droid’s can-like body. She then went to work, racing the memory of the past few years spent on the Tyrant’s Bane. If the droid were captured or invaded by malware designed to download its memories for whatever reason, those memories would no longer have anything incriminating in them. Such was the security the Jedi put on the runic arrays.

Once she was done, the astromech droid was carried into the ship by Chewbacca, set into its place on the bridge, which had been remodeled slightly, and then woken up again. Originally, there had been only space for an astromech droid and one chair, but now there was enough room for what amounted to a loveseat if two people sat close together. Given that Zule and Aayla were lovers, that was not exactly something they objected to.

With that, the moment had come. Harry did not need the call from the bridge saying they were nearing the point of the outer system where they were going to jump out to know they were, and pushing down his own anxiety, he held out his hands. He leaned in as Aayla took his hands, the pair sharing a brief, sweet kiss, ignoring the Verpines and the droids, neither of which had any interest whatsoever in the copulation or romance of other species. Pulling away, he said, “I love you. You and Zule, please watch out for one another, and come back to us in one piece. May the Force be with you both.”

The amount of love and ‘dependence’ in Harry’s voice was very decidedly un-Jedi-like, but none of his listeners cared, and Aayla softly nodded, repeating his words back to Harry. “You’re the one who’s going to be active in an actual war, after all.”

“Bah, I’ll mostly have the Bane around me,” Harry grumbled, even as Aayla shifted over to Padme, exchanging a loving kiss with her. A moment later, Harry did the same with Zule.

Harry would miss Zule as well as Aayla, although not to the same depth. The two of them had spent several nights aboard the Bane on dates, reaffirming their affection and love for one another on the way to Taanab after they had gotten together originally over Thyferra. Thus, Harry knew that neither she nor Padme felt slighted by his concern for what being separated from Aayla might mean.

Padme's thoughts were a little more nuanced. She knew she would never have the mental connection with Harry that Aayla had, but she had felt all along that having her own independence was worth it, something she had only become more certain about as this moment approached. She would miss Aayla as well, but she would also miss Zule, having built a friendship with Zule that even her previous relationships with her handmaidens back when she had been Queen of Naboo paled in comparison to. Yet some part of her had to admit that having Harry's affections all to herself would be very nice.

Padme and Zule exchanged their own kiss, and then, it was time for them to go. The twi'lek and half-falleen headed up into the freighter, with Aayla waving a final farewell to Harry. Their minds were still linked, of course, and they continued to exchange mental kisses via their avatars, along with well-wishes and raw emotion, even as Harry pulled Padme into a sideways hug, leaning down to kiss her, only for her to turn her head away.

Within moments, the two of them had headed up to his room, where they found Ahsoka. She had been making herself scarce that entire day, knowing what was going to happen, and that she couldn't really help one way or another. Now, though, the young togrutan looked at Harry, worry playing across her expression. Harry smiled wanly at her, shaking his head. "Do not look at me like that, padawan. The Force itself sent us those images. Aayla is needed on Nar Shadda to find whatever is hidden there. I'm not about to question that, especially now that the Veil of the Dark Side is gone. What will be, will be, no matter how painful."

"I could've done without that last bit, master," Ahsoka said, shaking her head. "Why don't you lie down just in case?"

Harry moved over to his bed and, trying hard not to remember the night before, knowing that doing so would only make this more difficult, he sat in a meditation pose. Instead, he centered himself in the Force, building up the mental shields inside their shared mental plane as Aayla was doing from the other side. The two avatars exchanged brief waves once more, before going about their business, although Harry could still feel Aayla's worry and humor, as Zule did her best to take Aayla's mind entirely awful was going to happen when the two vessels jumped to hyperspace.

“Look, all I’m saying is we could really act out the part of the Dirty Duo well. I’d be willing to do a little pole dancing. All we would have to do is get you to act out the part of an explosion maniac,” Zule said as she and Aayla started the freighter up and moved it out of the large hangar bay. At the same time, Alti, who had already been awakened, was checking over the series of hyperspace jumps they would need to make to get to Nar Shadda.

She was talking about a relatively popular sitcom aimed at young adults and particularly dirty-minded older gentlemen, featuring two troubleshooters of an intergalactic counter-crime unit who solved their cases through extreme violence and property damage. Well, that, and being extremely attractive and losing articles of clothing the longer a case went on.

“I’d rather not accidentally cause billions of credits in damages while chasing a small-time shyster or something similar. While I know that many a military officer might disagree with me, there is such a thing as overkill,” Aayla drawled, pulling Zule into a sideways hug to show her appreciation for the woman’s actions.

Zule returned it, shaking her head. “Aw, but can’t you see yourself as Keio or me as Lia? We even have a sidekick. Admittedly, Arki and our Verpine crewman aren’t nearly as big or dangerous as Mugli, but still... wait, we could ask Chewbacca to come with us. Surely Padme would be safe without him around for a little while.”

Aayla laughed and was still laughing when Zule reached over and hit the button to jump them along the pre-approved hyperspace jump just as the battle cruiser and the Tyrant’s Bane did. The reaction was immediate.

In his quarters, Harry, who had settled into a meditation pose on the bed, fell forward, his whole body going limp, as if all tension, or perhaps bones, had been removed from his body, his eyes rolling up in his head, his brain just shutting down.

Watching this, Ahsoka reeled. To her senses, it felt as if there had been a band of Light Side power that had suddenly become visible to her as it was pulled taut, before suddenly snapping. She winced, but the feeling faded quickly, and as Padme grabbed Harry to make certain he didn’t fall off the bed, she breathed a sigh of relief. *Oh, thank the Force. I won’t ever admit it to Master Harry, but I was really, really worried that when his mental bond with Aayla was broken, Harry’s mind would somehow try to latch onto me via our existing padawan bond.* UGH.

She stared at Harry for a few seconds, as Padme checked him for a pulse, lifting one of his eyelids, before shaking her head. “He’s completely unconscious. Did you feel anything in the Force?”

“Um, kind of,” Ahsoka explained what she had felt, keeping her fears to herself. “As for right now, I can tell Master Potter’s mind is still there, but it’s roiling and broiling like a storm. His and Aayla’s minds were kind of conjoined, and now his mind needs to unconsciously mend itself. For more than that, you’ll have to ask a healer.”

While there were still a hundred and forty Jedi aboard the Tyrant’s Bane, along with the rest of the crew, mostly Verpine, astromechs and Serrenoans that had volunteered and then been vetted, there were no healers. There had been at one point, but Shila Vor’oanik, a Nautolan Master, had left along with a great majority of the Agri-corps Jedi to join the Specters.

“So, pretty much what they both predicted would happen. Not exactly pleasant to watch, but I’ve seen worse,” Padme said, shaking her head. “Can I trust you to watch over him? I know that a few of the other Jedi have volunteered to teach you a few things, but I’d rather one of us at least is here as often as possible, and the rest of the galaxy won’t let it be me. Unless you want to take over acting as Harry?”

The Tyrant’s Bane and its crew had a while to figure out how to deal with the possibility that Harry and Aayla would both be unconscious and unable to deal with their duties for a while, or at least that Harry would, as Aayla would no longer be on the ship. To that end, Oliver, the young padawan who hailed from a slicer clan, had come up with a program that would overlay someone else’s features with those of Harry’s to anyone he had to communicate with via Hypercom.

It wasn’t perfect, and probably wouldn’t fool a Jedi at all or someone who knew Harry particularly well. But it was the best they could do, and many things were happening daily for the GDL that Harry would need to have input on. He and Padme had talked about that at length, and she had agreed to step in and act out the part for a time, with the help of Ahsoka and a few of the other Jedi aboard.

“I don’t think so. Oliver and I will help as best we can to take some of the work off your shoulders, as well as some of the other Jedi. But when it comes down to it, you know Harry best, and you know how he will act. Even better than me,” Ahsoka admitted. “Besides, you know most of the agreements and stuff already.”

Padme pouted just a little bit, knowing that it was indeed true. Despite the fact that she was only supposed to be on the Tyrant’s Bane as an official political liaison with the GDL, she had indeed been roped into quite a few conversations and meetings to do with the running of the GDL and its military. Far more than she was comfortable with, really, as it meant that keeping a necessary distance between herself and the GDL’s government was all the harder.

Still, I can’t complain about the fact that it also gave me the ability to literally whisper things into Harry’s ear, and not all of them have been sweet nothings, she thought, shaking her

head. With a sigh, she leaned down and briefly kissed Harry on his lightning bolt scar, unwilling to kiss his lips at the moment, given how frankly lifeless he looked, worried it would feel almost as if she was kissing a corpse of some kind. "You just concentrate on putting your mind back together, love. The galaxy will still be here when you recover."

Turning away, she nodded over at the younger togrutan, who now looked a little lost, her eye locked on Harry. She reached over and patted her shoulder before heading for the door.

Moments later, Padme slid into place in front of the Hypercom array as the Tyrant's Bane came out of the first jump on its journey. As it did, several communiqués came in for Harry, several of which the bridge crew handled, but one of which was a military update that Harry had specifically flagged as wanting to sit in on. Datapad open to one side to take notes for Harry for later. Padme powered up the Facial Overlay Program.

Having come in soon after Harry had finished speaking to Chume to work on the program further, Oliver looked over at her, watching a simulation of the program on his own screen for a few moments before nodding his head at the former princess. "Everything is working. You're good to go, milady."

She nodded, steeping her fingers in a manner that she had seen Harry do occasionally, before nodding towards the coms. "In that case, let the call through," she said, hearing Harry's voice over her own for a moment. "And the show begin."

At the same time, Zule sighed, slumping back against the controls, reaching out to smack Arki's dome. "Shush up already! I was able to stop her from biting her own tongue, and the keening stopped, Force curse it. Aayla's vitals are steady, and I can sense the Force whirling inside her head, even if I can't make out any actual thoughts there. We're, we're going to be fine."

Aayla's reaction to her Light Side bond with Harry being broken had not been anywhere near as peaceful as Harry's. Perhaps because it had been Aayla who had initiated the bond back when they were both young and too foolish to know better, or perhaps because it was based on her Empathic skills. Regardless, Aayla had not just collapsed. No. She had spasmed, flailed, twisted and might well have bitten her tongue off if not for Zule using the force to hold her mouth open. Hence the keening that had so distressed Arki... and Zule herself.

Shifting, Zule slumped against Aayla on the loveseat, grateful for the idea that had spawned it. Reaching over, Zule pulled a safety belt into place around the twi'lek woman all the tighter, before kissing Aayla's cheek briefly. "You just fix yourself, love. I'll be here when you wake up. And Harry and Padme will be out there waiting for us to return. At least I don't have to fool anyone like Padme does. Although this might get a little lonely—"

Arti's hooting and whistling interrupted her, and Zule looked over at it, pleased, now that she had time to think about it, that the R2 unit seemed to be just as alive and interactive as it had been before, despite having its memories of the past few years erased. *I knew Aayla was careful to just erase the memories and not anything to do with personality, but still.*

"Sorry, Arki. I know you're still here. Let me check our course, then maybe we'll boot up a game to play. I don't feel like meditating just yet, and I know you've got a lot of questions, what with us having erased your memory of the past few years."

The hooting, whistling and twirling of the droid's dome was enough of an answer to that, and Zule left even as she looked over the next leg of their jump. Within seconds, the small tramp freighter, which Zule decided was now named Wandering Love, jumped for hyperspace again. This one would be longer, at least a few hours, and Zule leaned back, propping her feet up on the console in front of her. "So, strategy, chance, or some kind of versus game? We've got some time to kill before we get to where we're going."

This obviously became the droid's first question, and Zule smirked just a little bit as she answered it. "We're heading into the den of darkness, Arki. Or at least, we're heading for one of them. We're heading for Nar Shadda. While my companion here tries to rebuild her mind from having essentially had her other half torn away from her by distance. Until she's back online, heh, it's just you, me, and our Verpine tech."

The low, despondent tone the droid released at that point needed no translation, and she chuckled ruefully. "Yeah, that just about sums it up."

Scene break

Thanks to prior planning, Oliver, Ahsoka and Padme were able to hold down the fort for Harry with relatively few hiccups for the next four days. Padme almost gave the game away at one point when an update on the military side of things near Rendili shifted into a discussion of a fighter design that had just passed testing. The ARC 170 heavy starfighter was a beast of a starfighter, and looking at the designs and what the producers, Incom, based on Valahari had written about it, she had no hesitation in asking them to start rolling them out across the GDL to replace the Arrows already in use.

At that point, they needed to figure out where to start the production, and with Corellia busy defending its own sector, that had not been an easy question, although thankfully, Harry's earlier edict in the war about how few local industries should be working on heavy capital ships had come into play here. Essentially, every Core World in the GDL had already begun to build massive manufactories to roll out starfighters, along with frigates and even, in some systems, destroyers. Those factories would now be able to churn out the new starfighter.

Nowhere near as fast or in the same numbers as some of the worlds in the Republic or CIS, which concentrated wholly on starfighter production, but there were dozens of those star systems. To say nothing of places like Serenno or elsewhere that had the logistics and factories to spare. Indeed, bringing in training cadres for the new starfighter squadrons as they worked up was going to be the biggest issue, and what dominated the conversation after Padme got over her surprise at how good a design the ARC 170 was.

Beyond that was one discussion that Padme hadn't been warned about, a push by the still coming together House of the Stars, which thankfully was not yet its formal name... but was the one currently being used in all official documents, something that Padme lamented as "two steps forward, one step back. Worse, it is beginning to take on the momentum of inevitability among the growing GDL bureaucracy."

The mutual meeting in question concerned the GDL funding itself, above and beyond what it was already receiving from its constituent planets. The Galactic Defense League still wanted to remain a league of equals rather than a true overarching governing body, and wanted to keep its overhead small to allow that.

Padme honestly thought that that was quite naïve, and that the House of the Stars would almost certainly move in that direction eventually, becoming a permanent congress of representatives. However, so long as they could keep one star system or one political group from dominating, they would probably be ahead of the game there. The fact that they were also already acting as if remaining separate from the Republic was still somewhat worrisome for her, but Padme knew she couldn't fight that concept.

On the military side of things, there was another discussion a day and a half after Harry collapsed in which she, as Harry, agreed to restart Operation Trident. That was the original campaign which had called to use the Tyrant's Bane as the spearhead of an operation into the Rendili Sector to claim the planets of Deltro and Mular, which had been conquered by the Confederacy shortly after the war began. This would, perforce, also push further back any timeframe for Harry to join the ongoing process of creating the House of the Stars, but that was a necessary sacrifice anyway.

Or so it would appear to everyone, anyway. Hidden in their orders for that operation was a shift in priority: a new meeting place where the Tyrant's Bane would join a large-scale infantry force and various naval units. But they weren't going to go after the two CIS planets in the Rendili Sector. No, by the time that Harry and the others were ready to leave Taanab, Jorj Car'das and Talon Karrde had already been transported into GDL territory, clandestinely meeting with Master Yaddle on a planet she had been scheduled to visit and passing on to her the information they had given Harry and the others with him already.

Information about where in the deep space between star systems the Confederacy's secret shipyards were. Or, at least, several of them. True, **strategic** targets, whose loss would devastate the Confederacy's long-term warmaking efforts.

That was possibly the most important decision that Padme had made while standing in for Harry, but it wasn't the only one. A few concerned agreements with the Republic, mostly regarding information sharing, ship movements and so forth. She made certain those agreements seemed fair to both parties, but it was clear to at least the Chancellor when he called back after one such that, in his own words, "You're being able to meet and press our concerns with the young Count directly seems to have created numerous advantages for us, and I am exceptionally happy to see it. Yet I hope that your duties to the Senate have not harmed your friendship with young Harry."

"It has occasionally been quite difficult, yes," Padme said, shrugging her shoulders as she spoke to the man, while *Tyrant's Bane* continued deeper into a GDL-held star system. And there've been several instances where I have probed against information that is held more tightly than the rest. Still, we haven't let our political differences blind us to the fact that we are both attempting to do what we see as the right thing."

"That's always good to hear. This war has devastated whole planets and societies, yet for some reason, I always think that it is the fact that it has broken up friendships that is the most damning. Although I suppose saying it aloud, it sounds silly," Sidious said, playing his part as the friendly Chancellor to the young senator of Naboo, growling internally at his inability to get a read on her through the Force.

With a physical face to lock onto, he should have been able to do so. But that was before the Veil of the Dark Side had been destroyed. *Still, I would have thought that I could feel something from her. Force blast it all, I can barely tell if she is lying to me now.* "But where is young Harry now? I had hoped to catch both of you. And what are your plans going forward?"

"I can't tell you specific plans going forward due to operational security... that, and I don't even know much. I might be a friend, but I'm also the legal rep of another interstellar polity." Padme admitted ruefully. "Suffice it to say that a certain issue that we all were concerned about when the GDL took the offensive, and what would occur when it did, might be occurring soon enough. I will be acting as senatorial liaison then, and I hope to smooth over things before any feathers can be ruffled."

That caused Sidious's eyes to narrow. *So, they plan to attack a conquered world, rather than a planet that willingly joined the Confederacy. Which would be an act of war against the Republic, regardless of who owns the planet now. Even if the planet then turns around and votes*

to join the GDL, it will be an act of war. That fat oaf of a Twi'lek was a useful tool there. Yet, which planets, I wonder? Still, I can use it for propaganda either way.

Better, perhaps I can release some information to see if the Confederacy can ambush it? Perhaps in such a way that it makes it easier for the Republic on another front? Something to look into. I will need to look over where the Confederacy is vulnerable near GDL space.

"I see," the Chancellor said aloud. "I won't ask for details on that score, but I do hope that you are indeed able to smooth things over and continue to do what you have in order to keep relations between the GDL and the Republic on an even keel. And young Harry's current whereabouts?"

"Currently training with his padawan. After that, he has a military-only meeting that, again, I am not going to be involved in. I'm afraid that he won't be up for any kind of discussion with you for at least two days, Chancellor," Padme said apologetically, hoping that Harry would be up and about before then. "He's completely swamped with work, to the point that Aayla and Harry alike have complained to me vociferously about it."

They had done so several times, although not exactly in relation to what was going on right now, so there was actually a kernel of truth in Padme's words. Not that this actually fooled the Lord of the Sith for a moment. Sidious could tell that Padme was lying, but about what precisely he wasn't certain. Still, he knew that Harry was on the *Tyrant's Bane*, of course. That would do until he could do some research.

"I suggest you also get some sleep yourself at some point, senator, it isn't only absolute military dictators..." Sidious paused, letting Padme make a face at that, as that had indeed been a name attributed to Harry on certain news networks prior to the events in the Polith System. "who are overworked."

"I will take that under advisement, Chancellor. I have one more meeting of my own to get to with Senator Antilles now, but perhaps after that, I will be able to get some rest. Although I would say perhaps you need to take your own advice?" Padme asked jokingly.

"Ah, but there is no real rest for the wicked, my dear," Sidious replied, a far truer answer than Padme, who laughed, could ever know as he signed off. He had plans to make, not least of which was dealing with the investigation the Jedi had begun to conduct on Coruscant. *Dark Side take them all; it truly feels as if the noose is tightening. I may indeed need to cut and run.*

Unaware of how much her old friend and teacher had betrayed her and the Republic, Padme continued to do what she could to cover Harry's absence. The next day, once more wearing Harry's face, Padme attempted to hold a meeting with Master Yoda and Master Rancisis, but the moment that they began, both of them had narrowed their eyes at her,

seemingly able to see right through the illusion. Padme still kept on going, though, and after a few moments, Yoda began to snicker quietly to himself.

That was intensely frustrating, but at least neither of them attempted to order her to stop acting in Harry's stead or anything similar. The same happened when Padme, again in Harry's place, took part in a military review in which Master Yaddle also took part. Like her fellow wrinkled gnome, she didn't give the game away, though, so Padme counted it as a win.

Another two days passed in this manner before, in the middle of the night, Harry began to rouse.

Groaning in entirely spiritual agony, Harry found himself staring around at the shattered, broken remains of his mental realm from above, his mental avatar barely forming as pain racked his head. As Harry began to use his Jedi training to push through the pain, he shuddered at what he was sensing in his occlumentic realm.

Ever since he started to use Occlumency under his mother's tutelage, the basis for Harry's realm had been the space side of Ryloth, the half of the planet that was always turned away from the sun. He had used it because, despite how harsh living there quickly proved, he'd had his mother with him and been in an entirely new place, away from the Dursleys and the people who wanted Harry to stay with them. The dark side of Ryloth had therefore meant hope and safety to him, even before he had met Aayla on that planet.

Now, it looked as if something had struck the planet from above. The underlying structure was cracked and in the process of coming apart. Worse, the planet looked like it was derezing almost at the edges, with the effect slowly spreading. The crystal garden, each growth containing different memories, color-coded to match the emotions of the memories within, was shattered, with bits and pieces of the memory towers lying around or hovering in the air.

Coupled with the visual his mind was supplying of his Occlumentic realm, Harry could feel his emotions and thoughts all jumbled in a way that no Jedi should ever feel. Even the outer defenses of his mind were warped and twisted, and Harry shivered, quickly latching onto that aspect first as he pushed through his pain.

Harry was in no position to realize that shiver had carried over to his physical body and woken up his current bed partner.

Padme had decided to sleep in the same bed with Harry that night. Luckily, her initial assumption that Harry's body would be somewhat corpse-like or pasty to the touch had proven completely incorrect over the past few days of her watching him. His physical health seemed fine, despite the fact that he needed an intravenous tube set up to give him nutrients. Indeed, Padme had even fed actual food at one point from the ship's commissary, jokingly telling the

unconscious man that it paled in comparison to his or Tracy's food. Harry's chest rose and fell, and she could even hear his heartbeat at night, which had been remarkably soothing, something she hadn't actually been prepared for.

Now, as his body began to twitch and shake, Padme woke. Leaning against his collarbone for a moment, Padme laid a gentle kiss on his neck before turning away to click on the cabin lights.

Pushing through his scattered, fragmented psyche was incredibly difficult, and more than once Harry had to fight down an urge to scream or shout in anger at how much damage had been done, to shrink away from the task of reorganizing his mind, his emotions all over the place in a way that they had never been since he started training to become a Jedi. Flashes of memory, from his childhood, from hard points in his life, came to Harry suddenly, hitting his conscious self with the force of a hammer, as if those moments were happening again.

Pushing through those moments and the underlying pain, Harry closed his mind off, rebuilding his outer defenses for the moment. Once that was done, and Harry could be certain that his scattered, fragmented psyche could not be influenced from beyond, if the Sith were in a position to do so, Harry looked around at the shattered mindscape in despair for a few moments, realizing that he could not rebuild it. The underlying structure had been too badly damaged.

Trying to hold onto all of his memories, particularly those memories that he had shared with Aayla, those precious, scintillating jewels, along with trying to control his emotions as various memories hit him like random bits of crystal hail and rebuild the ground as it continued to come apart was an impossibility. *Better to re-create it, rather than rebuild. I need a new occlumentic structure to house them, and quickly.*

With an effort of will that would've astonished any non-Jedi Master, Harry's avatar raised his hand, and, taking a page from Aayla's books, began to create an Occlumentic foundation in the form of the *Titan's Bane*. The ship that had been his and Aayla's home for years, where a lot of Harry's memories with Aayla had occurred. That imagery, that connection, allowed him to create it more easily and then start transferring memories, while the ground beneath them continued to fray.

As each of them slotted into a chosen place, the turmoil in Harry's mind started to recede, although the pain was still there. His emotions quickly began to settle down, and Harry's mental avatar even began to smile at some of his recent memories: Padme, Aayla, teaching Ahsoka, flirting, sparring, and then making out with Zule by the river in the hydroponics area.

Slowly, the work picked up, determination to see this through pushing Harry on despite the ongoing pain he was in. To rebuild his mind, and, in the long term, to be there when Aayla

and Tracy returned. *I, I realize that our bond, it won't come back from this. Not like it did when we separated when we were younger. Our Force bond lost its flexibility somewhere along the way. But our love was not based on that bond alone, Aayla Secura. No matter how long you are away, I will still love you, Aayla, and when we see one another, I will prove it.*

While his body shook and quaked, Harry recreated his mental plane, the old construct breaking apart as he worked around him. Finally, the last bits of that construction were gone, and Harry's mental avatar disappeared from where the final vestiges of his original mental realm had been, shifting into, becoming part of and then once more separate from the new Occlumentic construction.

Inside, Harry walked through various cabins and hangar bays. Soon, each of them was labeled, and Harry's various memories were placed in their new homes. As the last memory, the night of dancing with Aayla, slid into place as a book in an ornate, rosewood bookshelf, the pain Harry was feeling began to recede slightly.

With his mind once more in order, Harry turned his attention back to the outer defenses again. They had quivered, quaked, and cracked in various places, but with a wave, Harry started to rebuild them, idly noting the fact that his connection to Ahsoka was still there. It was unharmed, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. It was a very good sign, and he took several more moments to make certain that his outer defenses were finished before slowly pushing himself up and out of his mental realm back to his body.

That was always an odd transition when Harry spent so long in his mental realm, but this time, it was oddly smoother than it had been before, and, after dispelling the mother of all migraines. Harry opened his eyes, finding himself blearily gazing up into Padme's face. A light was on nearby, but thanks to her hair falling down from her face found his own, it wasn't quite as bright as it would have been otherwise, something that Harry was very thankful for.

"Padme..." He whispered, smiling happily up at her. "You're here."

Padme shivered a little at the amount of love Harry was able to put into her name. It was the first time he'd done that, but for some reason it hit deeper now. "Of course I'm here, you, you boob. I love you, Harry, of course I wanted to be part of watching over you."

"Thank you," Harry breathed.

Padme chuckled, her hair sliding across Harry's face, causing him to shiver as she had a moment before. "You started quaking and spasming around three hours ago. That was enough time for me to get up, make myself a drink of water, read a few reports, and then decide to get back into bed," she joked, before going on more seriously. "How, how are you? I thought about

sending for one of the other Jedi, but when I last asked them about what was happening, none of the Jedi still aboard had the skillset necessary to help you.”

“I... My mind is whole, but not the same. When the bond broke, it shattered my mental organization, making it impossible to salvage. I had to rebuild it from scratch,” Harry admitted even as he took stock of how his mind was running and feeling. “I am... I am missing a part of me, but the rest is still here. I can still feel the Force flowing through me, the Force beyond my mind. It will take a lot of time, I think, to stop myself from reaching out to Aayla, from assuming that someone else can look through my eyes, and from thinking that I can just reach out mentally, share emotions and thoughts with Aayla. But I am still whole.”

He leaned up, kissing her lightly. “I will be all right. I will get used to it. Having you here, it helps.” He said, his other hand coming up to gently caress her face. “Although I’m afraid you will have to put up with me being touchy-feely for a while. Without being able to mentally reach out and touch someone, I’m going to have to use the next best thing.”

“Oh, I think I can handle that~” Padme hummed, leaning down to give him a kiss, before rolling over him, causing Harry to grunt even as she hugged his side. “Now, it is precisely oh three thirty in the morning. Your waking up wasn’t well timed. We still have three hours before we need to wake up and you need to take over your duties again.”

Suddenly realizing how very tired he felt, Harry simply chuckled, turning, pulling Padme against him, leaning down to nuzzle the top of her head, then blinked as he received a face full of hair for his troubles. The two of them had slept together before this, but before, Aayla or Zule had always been the one to cuddle with Padme. Both enjoyed the sensation of hair rubbing against their faces more than Harry did.

This, he thought, might take some getting used to. Right now, though, he was far too tired to care about it one way or another. Soon, he found himself drifting off to sleep, so exhausted he didn’t even dream, let alone return to his mental realm.

The next day, perhaps because of his Jedi training, Harry woke up before Padme could, silencing the alarm and exited the cabin quickly. He made his way to the seating area the officers used, where he quickly began making food, feeling a bit tired and out of sorts, which made sense given that he hadn’t been moving it in days. His balance was the same, though, and his Force powers, which he tried occasionally as he cooked, seemed to work pretty well as well, although his sense of the world around him had taken a hit.

This came to the fore when he nearly jumped as the door opened. Ahsoka came in grinning happily at him. “Good to see you finally up and about, Master. It’s been kind of boring without your lessons.”

“Good to see you too, Ahsoka, although perhaps in a universe racked with war, perhaps one should always be grateful for moments of boredom. The Bane will be heading into the storm soon, if everything went according to plan, anyway,” Harry retorted, his tone rueful. “Admittedly, that would be a first.”

“Well, we know that Master Yaddle passed on information to the high command about what actual targets we were going to go for. We haven’t received any information back from them, at least I don’t think so. There’s been a complete communications blackout on this mission, like you ordered, beyond the change of meeting point,” Ahsoka reeled off. She then grinned, sliding into a booth seat as she watched Harry work, her attention shifting to more personal matters of training and several force techniques that she had been trained in by the other Jedi aboard.

Padme arrived soon after, and Ahsoka made a face as the two of them kissed eagerly, rolling her eyes. Her master’s various romantic assignations didn’t interest her at all, particularly after the scare she’d had that night aboard ship when she had gotten the feedback of Harry and Aayla’s lovemaking.

After a few moments of kissing and other flirtations in the kitchen, Padme retreated, simply watching Harry cook like Ahsoka did, as she filled him in on the various meetings she had taken part in on Harry’s name. The new starfighter design took Harry a bit aback, as he hadn’t anticipated the new starfighter design, as different from the bomber design, would be finished so quickly and look so good. Still, he was fine with her approval. He jokingly argued about a few of the other decisions she’d made, but in the main, it seemed as if Padme had acted as well as she could standing in for him.

The lack of Aayla was a bit more telling, as there had been a few social and welfare projects she’d been involved in throughout the GDL that Padme hadn’t done as good a job with keeping up with. Thankfully, Ahsoka cut in at that point, saying that the other Jedi had picked up the slack there.

The conversation wound back to current events on the warfront, and Padme reiterated what Ahsoka had said with more depth. That Garm had agreed to re-target Operation Trident under Harry’s discretion, and that the operation against the Confederacy’s hidden shipyards would be under Harry’s discretion from start to finish. “So I suppose the question is, how many of those hidden shipyards are you going to hit?”

Feeling the pull of the Force subtly, Harry hummed thoughtfully as he finished a dish of small silver dollar pancakes, along with several varieties of sauce and fruit, setting them down in front of the other two before pulling out a chair for himself. He took the time to think about that question, then said the answer he felt was the right one.

"As far as we can. Tyrant's Bane will hit each one after another with overwhelming force. I'd like to use our infantry to take those shipyards. At least some of them have to be mobile in some fashion, even though I doubt they are fully mobile like the Rendili-made mobile shipyards are. But the main thing will be to destroy them and any ships that are in the process of being constructed there. Hit one, hit another, take them at a run. Once word gets out that we are doing so, and the Confederacy is forced to redeploy to meet us, that too will be a victory, even if we pull back at that point, which I might not do."

Padme blinked at that. "Truly, all of them? That's ambitious..." She then frowned, reaching over and taking Harry's hand in hers. "But speaking of the war, and specifically something that might make you think twice, the report I read last night indicates that the Specters think that the Grand Fleet the Confederacy has created to push through to Corellia is ready to move under C'baoth. Some of your analysts still wonder whether or not they'll hit some other place, since the CIS knows that they'll be running into a buzzsaw."

"No. They'll hit Corellia," Harry said, somewhat rattled by that, but not enough to lose his cool for the moment. "C'baoth is a Sith, and the Green Jedi are based there. That makes Corellia important on its own, and we both know there's several other reasons why Corellia is important." He breathed in, like a man facing bad news that he had anticipated but still dreaded now that it came. "There's nothing we can do about that now. We've prepared as best we can to face them on that front. All we can do is complete our own mission."

"...Master, are you sure we shouldn't postpone our attacks on the shipyards? I mean, if we tried, maybe we could get to—" Ahsoka began, before breaking off as Harry shook his head.

"No. We **might** be able to get there in time, sure, yet a defensive victory like that would, while important, only be one move in terms of the ongoing war. Destroying those hidden shipyards that the Confederacy used to create their fleets before the war began, and is using to resupply their fleets now? That kind of victory can truly shift the entire strategy of the war, for all three parties."

"Master, I've seen the enemy force projections. The First Grand Fleet that C'baoth has gathered outnumbers any two of our own. Even with the two Lucrehulks that are close to combat effectiveness, that's going to be a tall order. If we lose Corellia the GDL's industrial capacity would be crippled." This time, Ahsoka's voice trailed off, and she shook her head. "To say nothing of the political side of things, all of the dignitaries and so forth that are there. Are those shipyards really worth the chance?"

Harry stared back at his padawan thoughtfully, nodding his head to show he indicated and approved of both her analysis of things and her continuing to question his decisions. "In many ways, Ahsoka, no. If I thought that this ship would be the difference between retaining

Corellia or losing it, I would be setting course for there right this moment. If doing so could cut down on the lives lost in that campaign to a significant degree, and that was the only issue we had to think about, I'd do it in an instant."

He tapped the table between them for a moment, counting out his points. "But while we could make a difference, for certain, there is the distinct possibility that Jorj's flight from the CIS has already been discovered. Their intelligence apparatus is incredibly good, and also very paranoid about those shipyards. We could be giving up a chance to shorten how long this war can last by years."

He then shook his head, hiding his own worry for a moment, a worry far more personal than just wondering about the Five Brothers. *I know this is the right thing to do, the Force sang to me about it the moment Padme asked how far I would take our assault on the shipyards. But what will the personal cost be, I wonder? Still, I must put my trust in the Force, as always.*

"Besides, even setting aside the fact that we already have put the best people we possibly could in charge of the fleets there, I trust our Rock to halt them, one way or another." *I just hope that Alecto's still intact after the storm subsides...*

End Chapter

So, yeah, the segment of the chapter I wanted to show but couldn't was the Corellia front. My bad. But on the other hand, it will let me post a poll, to see whether or not people are interested in the small battles leading up to the complex or just the final clash.