

Hey all. This was the winner of the HP poll. Nothing much to say. Didn't cover all I wanted it to, as I only had basically five days to work on this, but what is here is very good and has even been Grammarlied!

Oh, and for all of you who enjoy this kind of thing: Superior Tactical Droid, abbreviated, becomes STD...

I have Stallion back from Hiryo as well. After a break to eat something, I will be posting that here and over on fanfic in turn. After that, I will have a... call it an emergency poll, since my time this month is going to be very topsy turvy outside certain time frames, and I want to jump to the first fic of June as quickly as possible. That, and I STILLLLLLLLLL haven't had time to work on FILFy... or much motivation. *SIGH*

Chapter 30: The Universe Tilts

Dominus smiled thinly as he sat in the admiral's chair on his flag bridge, the humming of the various systems around him rising as the dreadnought *Malevolence* took its position in its division. The whole fleet was doing a series of final checks, mainly on the electronic countermeasures, while the various Lieutenant commanders of frigates checked in. Once all the ships had submitted readiness reports, the First Grand Fleet would be ready to begin its campaign of conquest.

It'd taken longer than Dominus had initially expected to truly mold his fleet into a single unit, into his mailed fist. Indeed, it had taken so long that he had recently received a report that his young apprentice had finished with the Morgukai cloning project. Soon, legions of the death cultists would join the CIS military apparatus across the front with the Republic, working to slay Jedi and overwhelm the Republic's clone armies.

Bok, the original template for the clones, would stay behind to keep training his fellows along with a few Anzati that Ventress had brought in for that purpose. He would be allowed to take part in a real campaign after Ventress returned to take over from him. Dominus already had a few ideas about where to send Bok when the time came.

When it came to Dominus's own effort, the work on the Grand Fleet was done. The ships were drilled, their captains puppets on strings that he could send in any direction with a twitch. Better, the overall spirit of the fleet was held in his hand just as much. To anyone without Battle Meditation, their ability to work together, their coordination, and teamwork would seem superlative. The men and women who manned the capital ships of this fleet would dance to his tune, would obey his will as if they had none of their own.

Because many of their commanding officers no longer do. Of course, there is only so much I can do, as the vast majority of crews and all our starfighters are droids. Yet even so, the enemy will find our coordination and skill well beyond the norm. Nor will any of my officers or ship captains break, or question my orders. They will act almost droid-like, yet will have that intuitive ability to take hunches or see patterns faster than droids would. Such is the power of the Dark Side, above and beyond the sheer size of this fleet, Dominus mused. For this fleet was truly massive now.

Eighteen divisions of four dreadnoughts each. All of them manned from top to bottom by living crew members, unlike in most GDL fleets. That meant that they, more than any other formation within the fleet, would act like an extension of Dominus's mind, would act as his will and the Dark Side dictated. The other ships all had living bridge officers, but that was all.

Twenty-two divisions of Lucrehulks, with twelve more divisions on duty to ferry vultures forward and replace losses, along with thirty divisions of Captor-class carriers for the same purpose and to hold the corridor open once they started to push through. Those defensive forces would be backed up by ten Munificent-class cruiser divisions. A favorite tactic of the GDL was to allow a large CIS force to overreach while clearing the tangled, entrapped hyperspace around their territory, then come in behind them to take out nodal points or completely cut them off from resupply. *There will be no chance of that happening here.*

Forty more heavy cruiser divisions were with the fleet itself. They and a hundred and two Diamond-class frigates would form the outer defensive ring of the fleet, yet there, Dominus had to fight back a flash of irritation. The Confederacy had yet to come up with a real workable design in terms of destroyers or frigates, let alone gunboats. The Diamond-class was an older design, made for peacetime operation, and wasn't a match for even the Braha'tok gunboats the GDL used so extensively.

Worse, the Confederacy simply hadn't figured out a destroyer variant of their own. While the GDL didn't have a set design in that area just yet, the upsized Archers still not having replaced every other design, almost all of the designs they did use had proven effective. It was more than a little frustrating, as most shipyards could build ships of that size, and do so in an eighth of the time it took to build even a Munificent-class cruiser. The smallest of the CIS capital ships could be built in eighty-five percent of their shipyards. The dreadnoughts and Lucrehulks could only be built in thirty-seven percent. Worse, in most of those, the work would be incredibly slow. It was only the vast reserves of Lucrehulks and other ships that allowed the CIS to still field their overwhelming numbers in that ship range.

Even those Diamond-class frigates, though, had sentient bridge officers rather than droids and Dominus. They, too, would act as extensions of his own will. However, only the various ship captains had been fully subsumed, like the admirals of the Confederacy before them, their will and minds drained, empowering Dominus further. Thus, he knew a speech was necessary at a moment like this. It would also let him control their minds even more easily.

Raising a hand, Dominus looked over at the droid manning the communications station. "Open a channel, all hands across the fleet."

He waited until he received an acknowledgment, then Dominus spoke, his voice settling into the deep, almost paternal yet commanding tone he had taken as his own since becoming the leader of the Confederacy. *And soon, soon perhaps the leader of the Sith as well! With the veil of the Dark Side gone, so too is your advantage over me, Sidious*, he thought gleefully, before banishing such thoughts and concentrating both on the Dark Side and his words, reaching out to the thousands of minds across the fleet.

"This is Master C'baoth. Ladies and gentlemen, sentients of all races. I thank you for being here today. Being here on this, the moment where we take the fight to the patsies of the Republic. Where we free their people from the oppression of leaders who, despite seemingly knowing the perfidy and self-serving nature of the Republic, have refused to go against them as we have, refused to take up arms against the Senate, and are even now in the process of becoming much like the Republic in truth, ruled by a cabal of the rich and powerful."

That line was taken straight from the Confederacy's anti-GDL propaganda. The idea that the House of the Stars would be simply another type of Senate, with planets like Corellia and others like it having more say in the policy of the GDL than weaker planets was one the propaganda people had hit on easily. It hadn't really taken as well as Dominus, or they had hoped, simply because of how popular Knight Secura and Count Potter were before the outbreak of hostilities, and since events in the Polith System that had gotten even worse. Thankfully, the total control of information within the Confederacy had allowed them to paint the GDL as patsies to their own people to a certain degree still, especially to those who served in the navy.

"We begin on this campaign to excise the corrupt heart from the GDL, the system that has, with others like it, turned the GDL from its lofty goals, from its supposed purpose. I am not just talking about the Corellia system itself, but also the Order which has forever been the mouthpiece of the Senate and the real powerbrokers in the galaxy therein: the Jedi."

Here, Dominus allowed grief to enter his voice. “I say this not with rage or fury in my heart, but with sadness and pity. The Jedi, raised into the service of the Republic, do not know good from evil; they only know how to obey. And even those Jedi who have stated that they do not work for the Republic are still its truest servants, its truest tools. But one cannot accept that a living being is without recourse as you would a tool. I walked away; I took up this cause, as did several others. But the majority... the majority of my former brethren, having seen the righteousness of our cause, chose to continue in their ways, to continue to serve the Republic. They have chosen the way of the tyrant, the tyrant of taxation, the tyrant of a bureaucracy that cannot be changed, the unfeeling machine which serves only those in power. And so they must fall.”

Through the Force Sidious could feel the response, could feel the upswelling of morale. The men and women of the fleet straightened their shoulders, girded their loins for the trials to come, and gave themselves still more to Dominus’s domination. *This is power Sidious! This is true strength. Not just hatred, not just anger and violence, not just secrets in the dark, but domination. Domination of the mind, of the spirit and will of others! Only like this can we truly stand above the rabble!*

“We will overcome the defenders of Corellia. We will break whatever Jedi forces are put in front of us, send them screaming back to the Republic, as we break the tool of the Republic, the GDL, so that their grateful citizens can join our cause. Only then, when our brethren among the GDL are freed of the yoke of tyranny, can we finally face the true enemy beyond it with the full might of our arms. That process begins here, in our victory campaign!”

With a nod to the communications officer, Dominus signaled that he wanted to hear the response to his speech coming in from the hundreds of ships around him. A moment later he smiled as the cheers reached him, the roars, showing once more that Dominus had them, that his control of this fleet was absolute.

Meanwhile, the droids worked in the background, not responding to the speech at all, doing nothing, simply going about their duties. *Which itself is another strength. The Force user in me might dislike admitting that, but the war leader in me must acknowledge and, more, make use of that.*

Setting aside that thought, Dominus ended his small speech simply. “All captains, prepare to jump to hyperspace.” With that, and a final signal to the communications officer, Dominus cut the line.

Within ten minutes the vanguard was off, swiftly followed by the second echelon as the first flotilla emerged from hyperspace and sent back telemetry data. The assault on Corellia had begun.

The first two battles that day showed that the GDL had made use of the time it had taken Dominus to mold his fleet as he had been warned they would. The first two hyperspace traps that they should have hit were much smaller than they should've been, most of the mines and the one-shot turbolaser or ion cannon satellites gone. The vanguard of the fleet was pulled out of hyperspace, the warning klaxons going off in the background to signal an emergency hyperspace exit, but the only thing that waited for them were simple mines.

The Lucrehulks were built to take emergency hyperspace exits along routes that had not been mapped or cleared and thus made up the majority of the ships in the vanguard. Pulled out of hyperspace by the large asteroids pulled into the hyperspace lane, they came out into those mine fields and instantly took hundreds of hits from the mines within seconds, even as they shot more out of space and launched their vultures with orders to destroy still more. Five Lucrehulks reeled out of formation from the first such ambush point, showing precisely how many mines there were in that comparatively small space.

Two of those Lucrehulks retained their position in the formation. Their onboard systems quickly brought their shields back up to 100% after they stopped taking hits, and the damage to their hyperspace engines and weapons was minimal. The other three rotated back to rear-echelon duty for now.

But even as all that happened almost automatically, Dominus frowned as he realized that, while the Lucrehulks had been able to launch vultures to help clear out the mines, they had lost hundreds of them to those mines. Worse, there hadn't been any sign of any actual defender just yet. *I had not realized how well the mines would work to clear out vultures. That's not pleasant.*

With that in mind, Dominus sent back orders for even more Vultures to be prepped and shipped to his fleet from the nearest Confederacy holdings. Luckily, here in the core those weren't all that far away, even if no planet in the Corellia Sector itself had joined the CIS, instead marching in lockstep with Corellia into the GDL.

To the surprise of both Dominus and the Superior Tactical Droid that served as his second in command (of the fleet, not the CIS), there wasn't any follow-on response. The GDL had proven before this point that the hyperspace traps were but one issue. The quick, and often brutal, multi-pronged assaults that followed on from hitting one such was a far

greater problem, and the losses, of both momentum and ships, to such had been why the original admiral assigned to the Corellian front was caused by such.

Yet this time, there was no large-scale response. The STD could not come up with a reason why. “It makes no logical sense for the GDL to cede even a single such ambush point to us. We’ve already scanned the asteroids, and they are not rigged to explode either. This is worrisome.”

“The enemy is doing something we didn’t expect.” Dominus mused. “We will take this as a warning.”

The next point was similarly unmanned, although here, at least, the asteroids which had made up the gravitic trap were honeycombed with explosives enough to make them act like giant shrapnel. Only Dominus warning them and ordering the ships to take very precise headings away from the asteroids allowed the majority of the Lucrehulks to escape the blast radius.

Even so, the two most damaged Lucrehulks were almost complete write-offs this time. Yet this allowed their onboard vultures to be directly transferred to their undamaged sisters, so it was not as much of a problem.

Again, the STD, which Dominus had never bothered to give a name to, could not explain the passivity of the enemy. Despite that, he warned Dominus that it was likely to end abruptly. Not that Dominus needed the droid to do so. The Dark Side flowing through him warned Dominus of danger to come.

With that, he made the decision to shift things up a bit as the fleet came together again in the wreckage of the second minefield. Instead of the typical four vanguard divisions of Lucrehulks, he upped that number to six. Those six divisions were chosen from among the best divisions when it came to launching their vulture fighters quickly, shown in fleet exercises up to this point. Beyond that, Dominus shifted the priorities afterward, moving up the dreadnought divisions, all of them into a second echelon along with a significant number of the Diamond-class frigates.

In this manner, Dominus felt that whatever kind of ambush they were going to be hit by, his fleet would be ready to deal with it.

It was well he did, because even as that first echelon transited up to hyperspace, the Dark Side flared in his mind, and he barked out an order. “The moment they are out of hyperspace I want to make certain our command-and-control network is up and running as fast as possible. The Lucrehulks will need my help quickly.”

Within moments, those six divisions had hit the next ambush, being pulled out of hyperspace by the gravity of several large asteroids pulled into what had once been the Corellian Run. And this time, as they came out, they came under attack instantly. Not only simple mines or one-shot turbolasers and ion cannons, but proton torpedoes coming in at them almost instantly from every direction. Even as the first vultures were launched from their hangars, those proton torpedoes crashed in, and on their heels came more, then more.

This minefield was not only denser than the two that had come before, but it was being backed up by at least five divisions of the Archer-class destroyers that the GDL was so fond of. Even as the second echelon of capital ships jumped to hyperspace, one of the Lucrehulks already engaged exploded, its shields flickering for just a second, long enough for several proton torpedoes to find its engines.

Those destroyers were unprepared for the dreadnoughts that jumped in a moment later, armed with all the tactical data that their Lucrehulks compatriots had been able to send them. They fought back hard, as Dominus commanded the dreadnoughts in a dance of death that was almost beautiful. It became even more so as more attackers came in, divisions of Gozanti light cruisers and other types slashing in, only to meet the dreadnoughts rather than the Lucrehulks and Munificentes they had thought to meet. Their accompanying Archers were met in battle by the Confederacy's vultures.

With Dominus there to direct the living sentients of the capital ships, and the STD controlling vultures, the GDL ran right into a buzzsaw. Even destroying the asteroids was not enough to greatly damage his fleet, as he had moved the battle away from them.

Not a single one of the destroyers lasted long enough to get away. They did, however, empty their racks into the Confederacy forces.

By the time the battle was done, one of the dreadnoughts was reporting a shield malfunction on its starboard side and had lost dozens of its weapon systems. Two of the Lucrehulks from the vanguard had been destroyed outright, and dozens of other ships were reporting damage to their shielding. The Diamonds had also taken a pounding, but the third wave that came in soon after the second helped ensure that very few of the GDL ships survived.

That, despite a group of Mon Calamari cruisers had attempted to join the battle, trying to shield their weaker brethren. They escaped with a few squadrons of the archers, and a group of the Munificentes had followed them, attempting to track them. But once more, Dominus's Dark Side powers let him pull them back before they could be ambushed in turn.

Dominus allowed his logistics officers to spend several hours going over the data, redistributing ships and vultures, and bringing up Captor-class fleet colliers and so forth to solidify their control of the former ambush point, making it their own. Once that was done, though, he ordered the fleet to continue, using the same formation as before.

There were two more sharp battles that day, yet to Dominus's mild surprise, the GDL had seemingly decided to seed the next two points just as they had the first two. The destroyers waiting for them at each point did launch their habitually massive amounts of proton torpedoes that the Archer-class was known for, but then they had simply hypered out after a single fusillade. Almost as if they were spooked.

His capital ships still took losses in terms of shielding and anything else, but that was all. The First Grand Fleet didn't even lose a single Lucrehulk in either battle, let alone a dreadnought in the second wave.

Unfortunately, the GDL had already begun to attack his baggage train. Fighting behind the main fleet was actually more dangerous than at the front. Six Captor carriers along with three Munificents, and two of the damaged Lucrehulks that had been rotated out from the front line had been attacked by GDL forces, slain with all hands.

Still, the GDL could not hope to stop his advance by attacking his baggage train alone. All of those attacks had been beaten off, and the GDL had lost Arrowheads and several destroyers in the doing.

The next day started much the same, as if, once more, the GDL were picking and choosing which gravitic trap to turn into an ambush. Perhaps if Dominus didn't have the Force, what happened when the first trap had been cleared of mines would have come as a severe shock.

But as his flagship had jumped in with the second echelon, and he did have the Force, it didn't. "All ships to remain at battle readiness! This fight is not over. Assume Formation Gamma, all carriers to continue to launch vulture fighters."

Dominus had barely moments to allow himself a spurt of amusement at his own wording. After all, the Confederacy didn't have any other fighters other than vultures. Then, suddenly, the main holographic plot bloomed with red all around the hyperspace trap. Hundreds, then hundreds of thousands of proton torpedoes came in from all sectors.

Almost instantly, the STD realized the horde of capital-grade proton torpedoes were not being aimed via their onboard targeting system or their mothership's. Rather, they were being fed targeting data from something else. The ECM specialist droids were quick to realize that, quick to understand that there were still satellites out there that they hadn't

found, but even as that assessment was passed between various ships, the formation lit up with defensive fire, and vultures went to work.

Thousands of proton torpedoes were destroyed before they could even impact a single ship, but there were thousands still more. Those first proton torpedoes weren't actually aimed at the fleet either, and Dominus scowled as he felt the consternation and shock reverberate through his living puppets. Only his own greater will kept some from freezing as radar and targeting systems the fleet over went haywire.

"STD, analyze this tactic, and find a countermeasure. I will continue to guide the fleet. Communications, two can play that game. Order the ships who have lost sensors to use the sensors of ships who have not. The Lucrehulks are not affected by this whatever it is, and they have the computational power to share such with the rest of the fleet."

While whatever payload that first round of proton torpedoes had carried, it had only blinded the technological tools of the outer shell of his fleet. That was nothing to the Force, and he clamped down hard on the minds of his fleet, keeping them in position, tightening their interlocking firing lanes and coordination as a second round of proton torpedoes came their way.

While this group, too, kept using the targeting data from the hidden satellites, the proton torpedoes were not coming in alone this time.

"Sir! We are getting scanning data relayed to us from the *Austere Wager*," the sensor officer reported, using the name of a Lucrehulk. "Eight thousand plus capital-grade proton torpedoes incoming along with Starfighters. Analysis indicates those starfighters are brand-new designs. Gunboats detected as well. Twenty, eighteen, thirty-two, fifty-two and counting."

Dominus frowned for a second, wondering what these new fighter designs would be like, only to watch as the outer defensive shell of vulture fighters began to simply disintegrate. "Were the vultures also affected by whatever scrambler the GDL hit us with?"

"78% chance that at least 90% of the vultures lost in the last minute were not impacted by such. The payloads of those torpedoes seem to have a range limitation."

Dominus's eyes narrowed, and he didn't need the STD's next observation to know what was going on. "21% of the torpedoes in the second wave weren't aimed at any of our capital ships; they were proximity-targeted. They are destroying our vulture CAP and those starfighters."

For a normal Republic or GDL fleet, the CAP, or Combat Air Patrol, would serve as an outer layer of defense, with only the most disciplined of troops pulling them into the

defensive envelope deeper, fearing friendly fire incidents. For the CIS, it was more a series of rings or a cloud around their fleets. The attackers tore chunks out of the cloud with the capital-sized proton torpedoes – which acted almost like flak in ancient wars, spreading thousands of tiny filaments everywhere to shred vultures at tremendous speed – the cloud was still there.

Yet for several seconds, Dominus could only frown deeper as the enemy starfighters began to cut through that cloud. “Whatever they are, they’re making mincemeat out of our vultures, just as much as those gunboats are.”

This was the first time the Confederacy had seen the ARC-170 heavy starfighter in use, and they quickly proved to be a vast upgrade of the Arrowheads of the GDL. Designed by the Subpro Corp’s branch on Valahari, it had been rushed into service with the help of Heren and his design team far faster than even it’s parent company would have been able to otherwise.

The fact that the main Subpro Corp was a Republic company, and the design had been slowly making it’s way through their design team before this was going to cause legal trouble down the line. But the middle of a war was not the place to consider such. At least not to the starfighter-mad Valahari.

Like most of Subpro’s and Heren’s own designs, the ARC-170 had a narrow spaceframe flanked by large engines and an S-foil system. These wings helped to radiate heat. There were three to each side, one large main one on which weapons were mounted, and two smaller wings above and below that, connected to and helping to cool the engines.

It wasn’t as maneuverable as the Falcons or the Republic’s latest Actis starfighters, but it made up for that in shielding and offensive firepower, a pair of ion cannons fit for gunboats in size with two normal starfighter-sized laser cannons paired with them, and a laser cannon on a pivot to the rear operated by a gunner. Already, every GDL pilot who was chosen to switch over had fallen in love with the survivability of the ARC-170.

And better, for this battle, they came in with the gunboats, the Braha’tok design which had proven itself so well up to this point.

Soon, even as the Lucrehulks continued to send out vultures, a lane had been blasted open through the vulture screen. Behind the heavily armed starfighters came another type of fighter. This time, the wreckage of the battlefield shielded them right up until they were within striking distance of their targets, the capital ships. If not for Dominus and his senses, the fleet might well have been taken entirely by surprise. As it was, this second starfighter found themselves facing an almost unbroken defensive line.

These were a new bomber type that had been seen occasionally before this, the Manta bomber. While Heren had not liked the design because they were a bit too blocky and made for straight-ahead speed rather than agility, the Dorneans and the rest of the GDL had embraced them and begun to build them in large numbers once the designers on Valahari had finished them up.

The Manta starfighters were named that because they looked a bit like a manta ray, although manta rays didn't have two large engines sticking out of their wings aft. The mouth of the manta ray held the bombers four proton torpedo launchers. Lacking the rune-enhanced magazines, the majority of the Mantas only held twenty starfighter-sized proton torpedoes.

The manta's shields were not quite as powerful as the new Y-wings currently under review in the Republic, as they did not have the Chempat miniaturized shield generator design, which was more powerful than normal starfighter-sized shield generators at this point. They were also not large enough to make use of shield generators normally destined for gunboats like the ARC-170.

They were also missing secondary weapons the Y-Wings were being designed to have, that of twin laser cannons and another laser on a turret manned by a gunner. However, the Manta class did have a small ion cannon on a turret, and it carried more proton torpedoes and was able to fire them faster.

Now, as the Manta bombers began to be fired upon by enemy capital ships, those smaller proton torpedoes were launched, and not just from the Mantas, either. The ARC-170 starfighters also husbanded their proton torpedoes, and now they crashed into the Diamond-class frigates and the Munificents that formed the outer edge of the capital ship's defensive envelope.

Shields failed, the frigates started to just disintegrate, and even the Munificents reeled. The ARC-170s closed, firing away at the capital ships with abandon as the Mantas twisted around. They headed back out the way they came, using their ion cannons to finish off two Munificents that had lost their shielding, causing their engines to explode.

Dozens of the Mantas were bounced by the vultures as the cloud closed on them. Yet their accompanying gunboats were able to keep the majority of them off, allowing many of the Mantas to get away even as the buzzsaw attack of the fighters kept on coming, slamming into the same place again and again.

Dominus barked orders, reformed his fleet, shifted ships in every direction, and slowly but surely brought more power to the point, but in the end he wasn't very happy about the results of the battle. Eight Munificent class had been destroyed outright, along

with thirty-two of the Diamond-class frigates. True, he had only lost one Lucrehulk, and his dreadnoughts had only lost shielding and a few weapons blisters. Yet they had lost a lot of vulture fighters, enough that the attack arm of his fleet truly felt the losses.

On the other hand, thanks to the Force, he was able to not only concentrate on the battle in front of him but also on the reports coming in from the logistics train's nodal points set up behind the fleet, directing the defense there. Two of those attacks had been crushed outright, costing the GDL hundreds of starfighters, mostly Arrowheads unfortunately, and more than a few dozen destroyers. Another two had gotten away but had not done much damage in turn. From those four skirmishes, the fleet had only lost two Captors and another Munificent. Both Captors had even been empty when they had been destroyed.

Thus, the day still belonged to the Confederacy. Yet the use of bombers and this new starfighter frustrated Dominus, showing once again that the GDL seemed to have innovated faster than the CIS or the Republic. Dominus did not like that at all.

Both the STD and many of his captains agreed. Worse, many of them felt that the GDL had made a mistake despite the losses they had sustained. If they had enveloped the fleet with sufficient numbers of those starfighters and attacked from every direction rather than just one angle, they would have been able to do even more damage. It felt like the GDL was still working these new designs into their tactical doctrine, and might well be concerned with friendly fire incidents even more than usual, considering that they had waited until most of the mines had been cleared before sending the starfighters in.

This would also allow the Confederacy to work out how to deal with them in turn.

Thus, after consulting with the STD and the Force, Dominus decided once more to change up his assault flotillas. The vanguard lost two of the Lucrehulk divisions he had tacked onto the original four, replacing them with two divisions of Munificents, seven of the Diamond-class frigates, and two of the dreadnoughts.

The Munificent class and the Diamond-class would not do very well with the impact of the hyperspace trap itself, but their anti-fighter defenses would be necessary if the vanguard got jumped by a larger starfighter presence, particularly if it happened before the Lucrehulks could start launching their vultures or were still dealing with the mines.

Furthermore, the order of combat would be left up in the air until the first assault force reported back on what they were facing. One echelon would be completely made up of Munificent-class and Diamond-class ships that would be able to instantly start taking out starfighters, even if they would be far more susceptible to damage from mines and proton torpedoes. The Munificent class also had its own starfighter complement, although

it wasn't well known for it, considering how small that complement was compared to its larger brethren.

The other group would be comprised entirely of his dreadnoughts. If there was a large-scale capital ship component to the next GDL response, they would hopefully catch any such in close combat and keep them from retreating.

Once more, Dominus's prior planning and the Force served him well. For this fourth battle, the GDL had thrown caution to the wind when it came to friendly fire in a way they hadn't before.

Several wings of bombers and these new heavy starfighters were waiting within the envelope of the actual hyperspace trap and its accompanying minefield. They instantly began to target the capital ships as they came out of hyperspace. The heavier shielding and offensive firepower of the two dreadnought divisions, coupled with the sheer number of capital ships coming in that first assault flotilla, threw the defenders off, but there were still a lot of them.

Further out, beyond the hyperspace trap, more destroyers waited, more destroyers and even larger ships. Light cruisers, Gozanti-class out of Corellia, and several other light cruisers and even Mon Cal cruisers charged in from all around, attacking the fleet in coordinated strikes, here and there, trying to push and pull it out of formation.

When they did, Dominus ordered his dreadnoughts in. Within seconds, their ship-to-ship weapons lanced out as the enemy came into range. The Mon Cal cruisers responded by closing in, while the Gozanti and other light cruisers went high or low, trying to avoid getting close to the massive dreadnoughts.

The GDL starfighters, at some signal, started to retreat, pulling out of the trap Dominus had turned against them to jump to hyperspace themselves. The Mon Cal cruisers and others did their best to shield them, activating still more single-shot satellites which had apparently been on standby, dead in space. This further muddied the waters, something that Dominus again wasn't pleased to see, and which, even with the Force helping him, allowed most of those starfighters to get away.

For the CIS, the outcome of this battle was just as in his favor as in others, but still, Dominus could not help but snarl. Thanks to a series of lucky strikes from the enemy bombers, and then a squadron of the ARC-170 staying to finish the job, three Lucrehulks had also been destroyed, with five others taking damage. More than two dozen Diamond-class frigates had been destroyed as well, once more showing the deficiency in that class. Nine Munificent-class had also been destroyed by the mines, with six more that would need to shift to the supply points as they had all taken damage to their jump drives.

Still, in return, the mix of cruisers built before the war by several systems that later joined the GDL hadn't fared well. Two whole divisions of the mixed cruisers and four Gozanti cruisers all died. Five of the Mon Cal Cruisers had been battered almost to wreckage, even if they had also been able to retreat. Five divisions of mixed destroyers, none from the Archer-class, had also been mauled, with only a handful being able to retreat.

And even then, only because the Mon Calamari cruisers seemed so set on holding in place I could not ignore them, Dominus acknowledged his own mistake there. *Those blasted ships and their triple redundant shields protected their starfighter brethren as well as the Archer-class destroyers who had still been lobbing proton torpedoes at the fleet even as they jumped out.*

And yet, Dominus reflected, smirking just slightly as he looked at the data, then at the strategic picture. The STD had even brought up another screen showing what the Confederacy knew of the GDL fleets, their numbers and tonnage. *And yet, this is the exact kind of grinding campaign I can win. It will take a while, but the preparation time will allow us to bowl forward.*

Soon, the Captor-class carriers jumped in, fully loaded with more vultures to replace those lost in the battle, along with dozens of fleet colliers, and even a few dedicated repair ships. *Yes, it will take me a few days, perhaps, to get there, but Corellia will fall. And with it, the Green Jedi and the heart of the GDL, its so-called House of the Stars...*

OOOOOOO

Deep in the dark between star systems in the Esuian sector, a Mid Rim sector aligned with the GDL, space rippled, and the Tyrant's Bane came out of hyperspace.

The Esuian Sector was one of the few sectors that needed, and mostly had, their own dedicated fleet presence, semi-separate from the main GDL fleets, since it was almost entirely cut off from the rest of the GDL, surrounded by CIS or Republic space. The Tyrant's Bane had to take its time and go well out of its way to get here with no one spotting them, but thankfully, it wasn't really important in terms of the war or war industry.

While the whole sector was known to produce a great deal of botanical goods and services along with food, mainly wheat-based, some of which had made it an area where pirates could make a decent living, in times of war, those goods were very low priority in terms of commerce raiders or stopping the trade by other means. It had seen several attacks, to be sure, but very few.

It was mainly protected by the forces of the planet Anteevy, the only Type-1 planet in the sector. It didn't have any of the newer, advanced units beyond the Braha'tok gunboats, but that was fine by the local commanders. Dozens of systems in this sector had asteroid fields, none of which had important minerals in them or anything else worth the effort to try and mine, but they served as bases for the gunboats, patrol boats and the starfighter squadrons that were the locals' main reaction force. Beyond that, dozens of Golan-style defense stations and hundreds of small, converted freighters were it. They'd been enough to deal with Munificents and even a few Lucrehulks-assaults, but nothing beyond that. Which was probably a good thing, as an ably led Lucrehulk division could have taken out the sector's mobile units pretty easily.

The local fleet was not going to be involved in Harry's offensive operations. Indeed, this area had been chosen because it was beyond their patrol area, even though it was technically within the sector they were responsible for. Thus, there should have been no ships out here. There were, though, and even as the helmsman spoke, data was already coming in from their sensors.

"Jump complete, Point Epsilon reached," the helmsman announced, his tone implying quiet satisfaction. "We shaved two hours off the computer estimates."

"Well done," Harry agreed, with other Jedi also voicing their approval around the bridge, his eyes remaining on the rapidly updating main hologram.

Surprisingly, the coms officer spoke first, beating out the sensor's officer, the Green Jedi Master Ify Poll. "We're getting IFFs from more than five dozen sources, transmitting our own now."

"I'm reading that... huh." Ify hummed. "Well, it appears that despite the coms blackout on this mission, General Iblis and Master Yaddle came through as much as we could have hoped. I'm reading five Mon Calamari heavy cruiser divisions, without any missing ships. Thirty-two gunboat divisions as well. They seem to have been running some kind of wargame when we came out of hyperspace, so their flagship hasn't identified itself just yet. One division of troop transports, four divisions of converted freighters, twelve divisions of the older frigate-sized Archer-class... those are scattered all around the area in a wide arc. Twenty mixed destroyer divisions which were running their own wargame... but only four of those divisions are the newer destroyer-sized Archers."

"That makes sense, as those are probably needed on the front lines," Harry pointed out from where he and Padme sat in the captain's observation area. "Coms, respectfully request the current flagship announce itself with my compliments. While I'll be taking over,

whoever it is will become my second in command, and I'd like to build a good rapport quickly. What's the starfighter complement like?"

"None of the ARC-170s," Arjen Larima, the senior starfighter leader pouted a bit. "That's a pity, I had hoped to see them in action for myself."

"Bah," Ahsoka muttered from where she had been meditating near the back of the bridge, not assigned a specific role at present. "They are clunkers in comparison to our Falcons!"

"Maybe, but they don't rely on any Force manufacturing," Arjen shot back. "That makes them far more viable in larger numbers than Falcons ever would be."

"There are callsigns for eighty starfighter squadrons out there, all Arrowheads. The freighters are also reading as having twenty more squadrons still aboard. Mantas. Evidently they weren't going to be part of the current wargame," the coms officer interjected, trying to answer one of Harry's questions, at least.

Good. With our own vulture fighters, we have a decent starfighter punch. What with everything going on elsewhere, I'd wager peeling those Mantas away was more difficult than any of the other units out there, Harry thought, almost automatically sending those thoughts out into the ether as if Allison was still there to connect to, before shaking his head. *Still getting used to that. Heh, I bet I'll still be saying that in months. Kriff, but I miss her. As much as I love having Padme here, Aayla's absence is going to remain a wound that just won't heal, I feel.*

"You're making that grimace you make when you forgot that Aayla was gone and are now brooding on it," Padme whispered behind him, taking his hand in hers. "Don't spiral. You've been doing very well, but disappearing into your own mind is not a good thing, and right now is not the time for it."

"Heh, I didn't know I had a specific facial expression for that," Harry murmured back, leaning sideways. "You're right, I can't let myself fall into a rut about Aayla being gone or our broken bond." He smiled and squeezed her hand. "And I know you're missing Aayla and Zule too."

"I am, but I won't try to argue your bond wasn't special, Harry." Padme leaned sideways a moment as the Tyrant's Bane finished the digital handshakes and began to move forward, with several other ships moving to meet it. With no one looking in their direction bar Ahsoka, she was free to be a little more affectionate. "Frankly, you're doing far better than I feared you might be. It's only been three days since you woke up, after all."

Nights were still difficult, and seeing as she shared a bed with Harry, Padme knew that all too well. Harry would have a bad time for an hour or so after falling asleep, where he'd flinch, start awake or just start twitching. But Padme's presence comforted him, and soon, he'd slip into a deeper sleep, his arms around her. That was both gratifying and helpful for Padme, who had found herself missing Zule and Aayla herself more than a few times. The hour each day they had set aside for romance-time had also been amazing, and Harry knew that he'd fallen even more in love with Padme, if that was possible, in that time.

"I wouldn't be doing as well without you here," Harry said tenderly, his thumb running gentle circles on the back of Padme's palm. Then he shook himself, and, with his thumb still making those circles, he turned his attention to the bridge once more just as the coms officer spoke up.

Squeezing his hand briefly, Padme followed his shift of attention, shaking her head as she too took in the main hologram. She had gotten used to reading such as part of the Senate's Military Oversight Committee. "I have to admit that I am very impressed that the GDL was able to pull this large a force from the disparate fronts and control zones to come together so quickly."

"Dac and Dornea are basically the only reason we can. Serenno might be supplying large numbers of destroyers by this point, and are the majority of the Core systems, but those are the main centers of manufactory for us," Harry said, shaking his head before smiling wryly. "And Dac, along with Serenno, is also the source of a lot of our military's trained, and, more, the GDL's professional edge. Corellia... not so much."

Padme snickered at that, and the coms officer finally announced that the acting flagship had announced itself. "The MC-80 Star Cruiser, *Nascent Waves*. Captain, Zesk Culg. Acting flagship of Commodore Gial Ackbar."

Harry blinked, then smiled faintly. "AH..."

"Harry?" Padme asked, blinking. "That was not a 'I know that name' sigh. That was an 'ah that's nice' sigh."

Laughing and wrapping an arm around Padme's waist for a second, Harry explained. "The first name is that of a Quarren, while the second is that of a Mon Calamari. There was a lot of tension between the two races, as both of them had evolved on Dac. By the time they had reached the stars, the two races had dozens of wars with one another under their belts. Aayla and I were able to wrangle a far better arrangement between the two races than they had previously. It was one of the reasons why the whole Dac Sector came over to the GDL. Hearing the two races assigned to the same ship is a very nice feeling."

Padme nodded, a smile of her own crossing her face. “Unity isn’t built just on the edge of a sword or a shared enemy, but shared social structures and understanding. I know the feeling well.”

“Right? I’m not a Consular, but I have to admit I take as much happiness in a job well done in the political field as I do in any other.” Reflecting that now was not the time to explain how unique and, frankly, amazing Dac was, Harry turned his attention back to the coms officer. “Thank your opposite number for the information. Give Commodore Ackbar my compliments, and formal assumption of command, and then tell him we’ll be addressing the whole fleet in a moment.”

Harry took that moment to pull up a screen showing what the High Command had on Commodore Gial Ackbar, which, of course, was a good deal. *Former flagship captain of Admiral Dulnor, the most senior Mon Calamari officer in the GDL, and head of the 4th Defense Fleet. Recommended for command of one of the small trouble-shooting flotillas we assigned to defend star systems that needed to relocate their industrial complex further inward from the outer system after the Confederacy started their cutting out assaults months back,* Harry read.

At the time, the CIS had shifted their strategic doctrine. Before that, they had been concentrating on conquest and feeling out the GDL. Afterward, they had devoted more forces to the GDL front, not just in larger-scale assaults, but also in cutting out expeditions: attacks meant to simply destroy any industrial target they could.

As a lot of star systems relied on mining from their outer systems, this shift in doctrine had been devastating to many a star system, forcing the GDL to respond. This they did by shifting as much of that industrial capacity further in-system and emplacing small fighter stations designed by Rendili Shipyards throughout many of the GDL star systems. Those stations weren’t large, and barely had any weapons of their own, but they had enough shielding to be able to launch their fighters. With them and 12% of the GDL’s industrial capacity devoted to gunboats, those cutting-out expeditions, while painful, had begun to cost the confederacy a lot.

Twenty successful small-scale defenses since being given command, three large-scale engagements including a successful one against a Lucrehulk? Impressive, given the size of those flotillas. The flotillas in question were mostly made of two Mon Cal cruisers, two destroyers, twenty-four gunboats and a wing of Arrowhead-type starfighters. Not exactly a heavy force. Indeed, a Lucrehulk should have been able to handle that force relatively well, especially since no Lucrehulks operator on their own. *Seven Munificents kills to his flotilla’s name, and even one offensive operation to help free a Type-2 planet*

from occupation. Garm definitely found a good one to act as my second. Frankly, he's got more experience with commanding disparate forces than I do. Impressive. No wonder he was placed in charge regardless of seniority.

Shaking that thought off, Harry nodded over to the coms officer to indicate he was ready. He left the screen up and gestured for Ahsoka to come over, indicating she should read it while he spoke into the pickup. "Ladies and gentlemen, greetings. My name is Count Potter, which you all undoubtedly know already, but it never hurts to be polite."

As he spoke, the hologram showing the space around them was replaced by images of the captains of the heavy cruisers. These were followed rapidly by the destroyer captains, frigate captains and gunboat commanding officers, each of whose image was slightly smaller than the ones before it. "I also think it never hurts to point out how grateful those of us in command positions are to the men and women who follow us into danger, and all too often do the dying when we do not. Thank you for your service. It is through the will and determination of men and women like you that the GDL will continue to thrive."

While he wasn't nearly as good an orator as Padme, Harry had more than a thousand humanitarian and diplomatic missions behind him before the war began. His words were not empty political prattle, and every officer there knew it. He waited a moment, locking eyes with several of the men and women after another, noting that the officers of this relatively small force represented at least a dozen races. "Hopefully, this operation will allow us to take a sharp step forward in making sure that this war ends soon and fewer people pay the ultimate sacrifice for our continued freedom."

There were a few murmurs, mutters and nods of approval at that, and Harry continued on. "I cannot tell you all about the mission we're here to take part in or our goals. We need to keep operational security even now. Even after I meet with your division commanders and put together our command structure, that will be the case. Indeed, I officially order all division commanders to not share our actual targets with your captains until we are ready to jump to the first of those targets. Is that understood?"

This time, Harry used the Force more freely to sense the thoughts of the individuals in the images. He glanced at several who were feeling annoyed or who were almost anxious for that information, either through simple curiosity or annoyance at the cloak and dagger manner of the orders that had sent them out here. He locked gazes with those individuals one after another, waiting until they nodded, acceding the point, and Harry smiled before locking on the image of a calamari officer with reddish skin whose appearance matched the report he'd just been reading. "With your permission, Commodore, I believe it is time to share the specifics of this operation with you and the division commanders, and I would

like to do so on board your ship. Please communicate that to your captain and ask his permission.”

As the fact that the *Tyrant's Bane* had several secrets that could not be known to the general public was itself general knowledge at this point, Ackbar simply nodded, looking over at someone off of the pickup. A moment later, seemingly smiling at the formality and being asked even though Ackbar could simply have agreed, a Quarren captain nodded. “Count Potter, my ship will be happy to take the flag aboard. When can we expect you?”

“Let’s put it at an hour from now, ladies and gentlemen. Division commanders only for this initial meeting, as I said. I look forward to seeing you all in person.”

With that, the dozens of officers and Harry signed off. He turned to Ahsoka, one eyebrow raised, and Ahsoka could have already answered the question before it came, but let him speak. Being polite like that was part of being a padawan. “Thoughts? Impressions?”

Ahsoka fought back a blink, having anticipated the first, not the second, and seeing her Master’s eyes twinkle a bit in that way he did when he was conveying something told her that he had noticed. *Drat him*. Still, Ahsoka paused, thinking, centering in the Force.

“There... their faces, there was a tenseness there, a worry. I don’t have Master Secura’s empathy, but it was clear something was worrying all of them...” she paused then nodded slowly. “Commodore Ackbar, his face didn’t show it. The wargames they were running when we arrived weren’t just to start molding the capital ships and so forth into a real battle group. It was to give them something to do.”

Padme hummed as well, staring at the information about Ackbar’s previous record, but said nothing, leaving it to Harry to answer. He did so, not reacting more than a crinkle of his brows at the mention of his absent life-partner. “Yes. Morale is a very important aspect of warfare even in space, Ahsoka. We Jedi have the Force, and on the *Tyrant's Bane*, have one another, the gestalt to keep us going. This will be the first time we will work with a larger force, and while my Battle Meditation can help a lot, there’s only so much it can do for morale. And the morale of the League’s military has taken a hammering.”

“Even if there’s been no official report on things, losses, defeats, what-have-you, rumors spread.” Ahsoka hummed thoughtfully at that. “Your speech, it helped; their faces lightened. And Ackbar’s... professionalism?” she paused to see if that was the right word and Harry smiled, causing her to go on. “And your own when he addressed them, it mattered more than just on the surface.”

“Exactly so. In the Republic, Jedi are placed in command in the field without any buildup or official exchange. The clones are conditioned to simply go along with things like that for the most part. The GDL does it differently. The Jedi who take command on the front lines are much fewer and farther between, and we have to show that we are not separate from the command structure, but simply part of it.”

“To better work together,” Ahsoka agreed. “I... I think I hadn’t really realized that before this.”

“That’s why I wanted you to think about it. And why I’ll be bringing you along to the Nascent Waves.” Harry said. “This will be the first campaign we’ve run where the Tyrant’s Bane is part of a larger battle group, and also where we Jedi aren’t the majority of the sentients involved. Listen, observe, think.”

Ahsoka scowled, but nodded. Harry had been working her to the bone over the past few days as the Tyrant’s Bane slowly made its way, thirty small jumps a day, through unknown and possibly CIS-controlled space without being spotted, mostly thanks to the Jedi feeling out their route. It had worked but had been very tiring for all involved in terms of their minds and the Force, and Ahsoka’s training beyond that had pushed her body just as much. She also knew that Harry often indulged her in the types of lessons and training that they did. “Yes, Master.”

Nodding at her, Harry looked over at Padme, his mouth quirked into a wry smile. “Are you sure you want to come over as well? The separation between your political position and our personal friendship is looking a little flimsy at this point, love.”

“It might among your officers aboard this ship and even in the larger battle group, but it won’t back home. And unfortunately, given the nature of the third target on our list, I still need to be there as the representative of the Republic, Harry,” Padme answered, shaking her head. “I won’t have any input whatsoever on the military side of things, and may I say once more that I’m very thankful that you are up and about and able to see to that aspect yourself again, but I still need to be there.”

Harry frowned, but nodded, having known that Padme would want to come over the moment it had something to do with the duties assigned to her by the Chancellor. Part of what made Padme so attractive to him was her sense of duty, after all.

The third target on the list of coordinates where Jorj Car’das’s information told them the CIS’s hidden shipyards were located was in the Tangrene System, a former Republic holding named for its peaceful, nomadic inhabitants. Tangrene had a significant civilian infrastructure too. Padme had also informed Harry that Tangrene had been mentioned in pre-war intelligence reports about being one of the more reluctant members of the

Confederacy when it succeeded, only doing so because of its clear ties to the larger Retail Caucus rather than any true secessionist beliefs. Well, beyond the normal Outer Rim inhabitants' thoughts about how the Core Worlds had too much say in the Senate, anyway. But that was a far cry from wanting to secede from the Republic.

It was also on a heretofore secret Hyperspace Trade Route, the Axxila-Tangrene Hyperlane. That meant that ships built there could be shifted elsewhere very, very quickly. The star system also had numerous asteroid belts, and nearby systems that could provide the more esoteric materials needed for shipbuilding.

If the Galactic Defense League tried to conquer that star system, which Harry had indicated might be the plan if they took the shipyards there by surprise, Padme would need to be there to make certain that the GDL didn't actually bring the planet Tangrene into their fold in the short or long term. Or else that could well be taken as an act of war with the Republic.

Rationally, that was an incredibly flimsy justification, considering that at the time of its conquest, Tangrene would have been part of the Confederacy, a secessionist polity no longer part of the Republic. However, the Centrists were still not altogether happy with the GDL. Even after the Tyrant's Bane had arrived in time to defend Thyferra and public opinion of Harry had him as big a hero as some of the Jedi fighting for the Republic, the GDL was still seen as a problem. One that would need to be solved sooner or later in some fashion.

Many Centrists hated them almost as much as the CIS, which was frankly stupid of them. But Padme still knew that line of thought was still prevalent, considering many of those people still thought of the Peace Party as traitors in the making. How much of that was emotion, politically motivated, based on fanatic adherents to the Centrist platform, or simple avarice, Padme couldn't say, but it was there. And part of Padme's job was to make certain there were as few flare-ups as possible between the two allied powers.

"In that case, I know you've got some reports from the Republic side to go through. Why don't you do that, while Ahsoka and I look through the rest of the records on the men and women we'll soon be fighting with," Harry suggested, then smiled. "If you get enough of that done now, and I get enough done when I meet with Ackbar and the others, we might have time tonight for me to do some cooking."

Since he hadn't done any of that over the past few days, that would have been enough of an incentive on its own. However, the way Harry said it meant it would be a date between the two of them. With Ahsoka probably given something of her own to take back to her quarters, admittedly, but Padme had gotten used to that since first coming aboard and getting to know the young togrutan.

Who was currently giving them both the side-eye, and a little sigh of annoyance.

It almost made Padme giggle, reflecting on her own childhood when her parents had decided it was romance-time, but she womanfully suppressed the urge and stood up, heading to the hatch leading out of the bridge. “In that case, I’ll get right to that, shall I?”

An hour later, Padme stared out the viewport of the shuttle for a moment as they came in close enough to the *Nascent Wave* to see it’s sides, admiring the almost artistic lines of the ship, the strange, almost living lines of it, so unlike any other ship she’d ever seen before. Harry took in the view too, although his gaze wasn’t nearly as appreciative for its own sake. Rather, the sight of the Mon Calamari vessel so close up reminded him all too much of the various arguments that had gone on when they had been pushing for mass production in Dac, and had been forced to basically sit on both the Corellians and the Mon Calamari to get them to work together.

Still, the refitting project’s speed tells me that we were right to do so, and I’m extremely pleased to see the Dac shipyards turning toward creating our own dreadnoughts. That had been yet another argument, but one Harry and Aayla had won quickly. Dac had both the shipyards and the Dac Sector so far out of the way that the shipyards there were essentially unassailable. Much like with Serenno, there was no chance of a Rendili-style blockade, or of the direct assault the Confederacy was attempting on Corellia succeeding there, not with the Quarren enthusiastic about the GDL and their repaired relationship with the Mon Calamari.

I’m not so foolish as to think that we’ve solved that particular problem permanently, but it will hold together for a few decades at least. And meanwhile, the Dac shipyards and the Corellian shipwrights we’ve brought in are the best we have in terms of building new dreadnoughts. To say nothing of the Jedi side of things and the lessons from the battles the Tyrant’s Bane has been in.

Moments later, the shuttle entered their assigned hangar bay, and as the shuttle, which Harry was piloting currently, settled down, Harry stared out the viewport from the pilot’s chair, shaking his head wryly. “Why am I not surprised?”

Padme also snorted, shaking her head. “Some things are universal across the military, I suppose. Pomp and ceremony being one of them.”

“Just like hurry up and wait,” Ahsoka chortled.

With a sigh, Harry stood up, making for the hatch. “Do you want to stay here until it’s over? Distance yourself still more from the GDL and so forth?”

While his tone was almost lackadaisical, Padme nodded her head. “If they were rolling out the carpet for a foreign dignitary, that would be one thing, but I rather think that this is simply for you, Mr. Head Of The GDL. I’ll wait here until they have greeted you.”

Shaking his head, Harry didn’t argue. Straightening, he made sure that his Jedi robes were clean without wrinkles or rumples, before gesturing to Ahsoka. “Well, come on, Padawan, formal time.”

Ahsoka looked startled for a moment, but under her master’s raised eyebrow hopped to her feet and followed. By the time the shuttle’s loading ramp finished descending, she had even composed herself relatively well. She still twitched, though, as they were greeted by the sound of boots stamping and clicking together and a voice shouted, “Primark arriving!”

As his padawan attempted to look composed behind him, wondering where the hell this amount of pomp had been when they arrived and interacted with the Command Center on Serenno, Harry took several steps forward, holding back a grimace of his own at the use of his official title as leader of the GDL. *At least I was able to stop any attempt to call me Lord Defender, but why did they have to go with that title rather than something simple, like Prime Minister?*

He then saluted the sigil of the GDL on the far side of the hangar bay. This was a series of five shields around a star. The shields were painted in blue, and from each a single drop of blood dropped towards the four-pointed star, which was made out of gold.

Harry held that salute for a moment, before turning that salute onto one of the men waiting for them at the far side of the two lines of sailors lining the way forward. He did not salute Commodore Ackbar just yet. GDL regulations, which they had adopted from the Republic Navy, the Mon Calamari Defense Force, and the Corellian Defense Force alike, was firm on that point. A Commodore and above could not also be a captain of his ship, and when coming aboard a ship, one asked the captain for leave. “Permission to come aboard, Captain?”

“Permission granted, Primark. The Nascent Wave welcomes you aboard,” the Quarren captain answered in Basic, a marked contrast from many Quarren Harry had met in the past, who preferred to not learn the common language, finding it crude and annoying. Most relied on translator devices, but with Jedi like Harry, that wouldn’t have been necessary. That he didn’t need to translate pointed to Zesk Culg being more cosmopolitan than most of his race.

Zesk returned the salute, then formally shook Harry’s hand, before introducing the Commodore formally. Harry in turn introduced Ahsoka, who received twin nods from the

sentients from Dac, and Zesk turned, shouting 'dismissed' to the honor guard that had been brought together for this little ceremony.

As he did, Padme finally joined them, walking down the ramp towards them before asking the same question of the captain.

Captain Culg was a little more formal this time. "The *Nascent Wave* welcomes the representative of the Republic aboard, Senator. You will be accorded all respect due your diplomatic position so long as you are aware that this is a warship, and there are places that even someone of your glorious reputation will not be allowed to go."

At that, Zesk forewent formality for a moment, squeezing her hand just a little longer than propriety required. "As a personal aside, Senator, Primark. Thank you both for defending Thyferra. I have two brothers in this war, and one of them was gravely wounded in an earlier battle. If not for bacta, he would've lost his arms, both of them, and I know he is but one of a vast number of others the galaxy over who have you to thank for continued access to that miraculous substance."

"An oversimplification I feel, but I will take your thanks in the spirit it's offered, even if I personally think I didn't do all that much," Padme deflected gently.

Harry wasn't the only one who rolled his eyes at that, and when a Mon Calamari like Ackbar rolled his eyes, it was quite an impressive sight. Still, she simply chuckled at the response as he posed the question on both military officers' minds. "While the captain is within his purview to welcome you aboard, Senator, I have to question why you are here. It is well-known that you were assigned to the *Tyrant's Bane* to act as a permanent diplomatic conduit between the Senate and the GDL high command, but your presence specifically here, on a mission of such secrecy that not even the surface water has rippled in its passage, is in question."

"A question that will be answered in time. Suffice to say that I will remain silent during this briefing until we get to that point. I have no great understanding of military tactics or logistics or anything of that nature, but there is a certain political aspect to this operation that I need to be on hand for. Primark Harry and I both agreed that you and your officers have a right to understand that once you understand the implications of this operation in its totality," Padme answered.

"I see... so, an offensive operation of some kind. Such had been rumored for a while, but no specifics. And even those rumors drowned in still waters after the Battle of Thyferra," Ackbar mused.

“Wow, rumor really is the only force in the galaxy faster than lightspeed,” Ahsoka muttered, causing the older folk around her to chuckle.

“That is one of the basic underlying certainties of the galaxy. Occasionally rumor will not travel from planet to planet, but the leader who believes that such is always the case will never last long,” Captain Culg observed.

“I take it, padawan, that you are here to learn? I have been in that position several times already in this war,” Ackbar observed as the captain waved them towards the inner hatch that led into the rest of the ship.

“I am. I won’t have much to contribute, but I’ve been instructed to listen, observe and think,” Ahsoka drawled.

“Which is much harder for the young than for those of us who are older,” Harry interjected. “Even young Force users. I take it you do not object, gentlemen?”

“Not at all,” Ackbar answered, with Culg just shaking his head. “It is the duty of the learned to educate the young in all things, even if I object to her specific age as a soldier. Still, I have come to understand that such things are handled differently among the Jedi, and I know enough of the Force to not underestimate someone despite their age... or size.”

He added the last two words in a low tone, but even so, most of his listeners had to chuckle at that as he explained, “That last was something I learned from Master Yaddle. Her mind is a steel trap even if she barely comes up to my thigh. It was a most revealing experience.”

Culg paused outside the hatch, waving a sailor forward. “I have others to welcome to my ship. For now, as we wait for the rest of the officers, would you like a tour of my ship? I’m rather proud of her.”

Harry and his two companions allowed themselves to be led around the ship for a little while. As they went, Ahsoka and Padme came away with even more respect for the Mon Calamari method of ship design than before. It wasn’t quick, and Harry wasn’t the only one who heard the small mutters that Ackbar allowed himself when mentioning how more ships were being built in Dac than ever before, but there was still a lot more positive things to be said about their construction method than negative ones.

As they went, Ackbar was pulled into a discussion about some of the small-scale battles that he had been involved in. Not the bigger conflicts, as Harry and Ahsoka had already both seen those. But the small-unit engagements were something different, and told them both more about Ackbar than perhaps he realized.

By the time a report came in that the majority of the division commanders were aboard and being led to the briefing room, Harry realized Yaddle and Garm had indeed found someone he could work with, while Ahsoka wondered about the different leadership styles she had seen so far.

Harry's personable down-to-earth and he relies more on charisma and his general attitude to lead. Garm can act personable and wears his authority easily, like the noble he is when he wants to, but personally likes to act the scoundrel. Whereas Commodore Ackbar is simply wholly professional, thoughtful, and analytical. It's a colder sort of leadership, but no less viable, she mused. It's even more interesting to see how people react to Harry and the commodore in turn.

Soon after that summons reached them, Harry and Padme were led into a small auditorium, the kind all flagships used to give in-person briefings to large groups at once. Most of the benches there were already filled, but Padme found a place at the back of the room kept clear for her by one Nascent Wave's officers, as the captain led a last group of officers in and Ackbar slid into chairs at the front.

Padme sat down smoothly, smiling politely at the new nearby officers, one of whom was a human who recognized her almost instantly, and bowed in her direction. This caused a few others to look towards Padme even as Harry moved to mingle with the crowd that had yet to sit down, saying hello to this or that officer whose name and face he remembered from the reports he and Ahsoka had read through before leaving the Tyrant's Bane.

The reasons these particular officers stood out from those reports varied wildly. One had an odd disciplinary incident while ashore, involving a farm that had apparently been ransacked. Another had been part of an almost suicidally brave maneuver that had saved a civilian space station from being targeted as a Confederacy fleet- not one of their smaller formations, but a full fleet was forced to retreat from a Type-3 planet that had proven to be more toothsome than they had expected.

When Ackbar nodded in Harry's direction to indicate they were all there, he moved towards the podium. The men and women who had yet to sit down took that movement as a sign to find seats, while Ahsoka moved to lean against one of the walls, her eyes flicking around the room, her Force senses active, pulling in every detail she could.

Reaching the podium, Harry slid a small data crystal in place, then found the room's controls. A small button let out the sound of a small bell, the noise coming from several speakers around the small auditorium, cutting through the susurrations of the various conversations still going on. He stood there for a moment as all eyes shifted to them, and

then began to speak, reintroducing himself as a starter, superfluous though it was. Yet it did serve as a conversation starter.

He then continued, and suddenly many people were paying far more attention than they had been a second ago. “Before we get to the portion of this briefing that will assuage your curiosity about how much secrecy this mission has been created under and the discussion thereby, let’s get some organizational issues out of the way. Commodore Ackbar, please step forward.”

Commodore Ackbar stood, his spine rigid, wide Mon Calamari eyes watching Harry, as supposition, surprise, and weathered acceptance appeared on his features one after another, visible only to Harry and Ahsoka thanks to their Force powers. “Sir.”

“By the power vested in me by the people of the Galactic Defense League and the high command thereof, I, Primark Potter, raise you to acting rear admiral. You will officially serve in that capacity as my second-in-command, and, should this operation prove successful, continue to hold that rank going forward.”

Harry’s smile turned from somewhat formal to wry. “I realize that there are already too few billets for the various rear and vice admirals out there. Such is the way of a military built on dozens of smaller, and... professionally disparate navies.”

His dry tone carried a large amount of sarcasm, and many in the room chuckled even as some clapped for their fellow officer. As Harry had thought after reading his record, it was clear that the man was well thought of among his peers.

“SIR! Thank you, sir, I will continue to perform my duties to the best of my ability,” Ackbar answered.

“On behalf of the GDL, I thank you for your continued service. For now, I’m certain that between you and your captain, you can find some rank tabs.”

He waited until the two Dac natives chuckled, then looked around at a few other officers. “Similarly, Captain Doko, Captain Royin...”

This continued for some time as Harry named fifteen other officers. Four others came from the Mon Calamari cruiser divisions, while the others were captains acting as division commanders among the destroyers. They would no longer be acting such, as Harry bracketed them all up to Commodore one after another, ending by asking if they all felt that their first mates to jump them up to captains as well. Only one of the destroyer captains answered that he wasn’t, and Harry agreed to send over the Drall Master, Ify, to act as captain. He didn’t have enough instincts to truly command a large force on his own, but for the duration of this mission he would do very well.

Harry also formally appointed an overall commander for the gunboats and the Commander Air Group, the lead starfighter pilot of the fleet. He had initially thought to name Arjen to that position but had decided against it after speaking to the Nautolan Jedi Knight before coming over to the *Nascent Waves*. She lacked the experience to take on that role and, really, the instincts to command larger groups in combat. She had also admitted that the vultures off the Bane did most of the work for their own squadrons, leaving her to use the Force and their gestalt to command the Falcon portion of the *Bane*'s Air Group.

Instead, Harry had chosen one of the most senior squadron commanders among the Arrowhead squadron here. This was a Corellian man who was, honestly, too old to really be a starfighter pilot any longer, but Harry knew better than to try and argue the man out of his cockpit. Instead, he gave him more authority, a poisoned chalice kind of gift which, judging by his expression, the man was fully aware of.

Still, Harry felt that given his track record, he'd do quite well in the task and moved on even as the man continued to glare blood murder at him. "Now, with the various ranks given out, we'll forgo any further organizational issues for now. You've all been very polite about waiting, about not asking why we're out here like this, why you all were peeled away from the rest of the GDL and sent out here with orders to be as secretive as you could."

"Damn right!" the Corellian CAG growled. "We went so far out of our way it added days to the time it'd take to get out here. To say nothing of being so far away from the important front lines."

"You are out of order, CAG Figrel," Ackbar growled.

"But he's got a point," Harry held up a hand before the two could exchange any further words, knowing Corellians and Mon Calamari didn't often get along on a personal level due to very different views of the galaxy and how it should work. "However, trust me when I say that the reason you're out here is important. My earlier statement that this mission might help end the war sooner was not at all hyperbole. It was a simple statement of fact. Because we have discovered the locations of five of the Confederacy's hidden shipyards."

Those words took a moment to sink in, but when they did, the reaction was immediate. Every officer there sat upright, some gasped, and one Kiffar woman slammed a hand over her mouth to keep from cursing in surprise. Harry let his audience gather themselves for a few moments, then, when one of them raised a hand, pointed to him.

The Sullustan stood up, choosing to stand up on the actual chair rather than in the area in between rows to be seen by his fellows. He was the only officer of his race in the battle group; indeed, he was probably one of only a few hundred thousand scattered

across the entire Galactic Defense League, as the Sullustan home world had joined the Confederacy, but that didn't seem to matter to the man as he spoke.

"Are we certain of this intelligence, sir? Where did it come from? I was involved in developing our combat doctrine against infiltrators and spy ships, and I know for a fact that we ran our own clandestine scout programs, though I don't know anything about them beyond that. Yet surely, they haven't had nearly enough time to find even one enemy nest, let alone five."

"You are correct, Captain Tascobbs," Harry answered, pulling the man's name from his mental files thanks to his Jedi training. "It does not come from our own scouting program."

With the need to keep the stealth array a secret along with all the other runic arrays, the refitting of the original Archer-class frigates to that job was going very slowly, although it had finally begun to pick up pace right before the Battle of Thyferra. *Hopefully those frigates will be able to find the last few shipyards out there, and will let us probe star systems well enough to start hitting them in turn.*

"This knowledge instead comes from a turncoat," Harry said aloud. "The Confederacy's assault on Thyferra cause a massive public outcry across all borders, and this fellow decided to turn traitor against the CIS. He to come to us rather than the Republic with information about these shipyards thanks to prior ties, and being involved with their supply knew generally where these shipyards were."

Rear Admiral Ackbar raised his hand. When Harry called on him, he asked delicately, "With the way you describe things, it doesn't sound as if we have any other means of making certain the information is accurate. Is that the case, and could this not be a trap for the *Tyrant's Bane* in some fashion? We will need to move quickly on this information, which itself is a concern."

"While you are correct in that I personally met with this man and vetted his personality, he did not approach me, Knight Secura or anyone aboard the *Bane* personally. Rather, the means through which we did meet were so random that no one could have set it in motion ahead of time. You are also correct, we don't have time really to probe these systems before we attack. The turncoat's absence from the Confederacy was well hidden, but it may eventually come out, and when it does, the Confederacy might move or otherwise reinforce these sites to the point we won't be able to attack them for some time. We have a window of opportunity here, and one I, and the high command, have agreed is important enough to try and take."

A few of the officers still looked worried, but the nature of the targets and how much succeeding in this campaign would matter in the long term to the war was undeniable. The Confederacy simply could not match the Republic in terms of industrial capacity, not in the long term. The GDL was a different matter entirely, but even there, with Rendili now free to start supplying the rest of the league in earnest, things would be much closer than they otherwise would be in terms of ship-building.

If the Confederacy lost those shipyards, lost the ability to rebuild their losses, all they had left to fall back on would be the massive reserves they had built up before the war began. A reserve which did not include the dreadnoughts, since building large numbers of those ships in secret would have been impossible even for the CIS given the sheer amount of material needed for their turbolaser batteries, heavier shielding, and so forth.

It would take time, years, to replace even a single large-scale shipyard. If the CIS lost all five, the Confederacy might be forced to change its strategic doctrine to a large degree. No longer would they be able to try to overwhelm their enemies with large numbers of capital ships. It wouldn't be a change that would occur overnight, but it would be a turning point, even if the Republic was better placed to take advantage of it than the GDL.

Harry used the controls on the dais again, and some of the information from the data crystal he had installed popped up on the large screen behind him, spreading quickly, then separating to show each of the five different targets in their own area of the screen. "We'll go over these one at a time, but let's first start by saying what we expect to see in all of them. Judging by what the turncoat passed on, we can expect..."

From there, Harry's presentation became technical, and from where she had been watching to one side of the room, Ahsoka tuned out her Master's words for a few moments. She'd already gone over the data with him, Master Secura and other Jedi aboard the Bane. Listening to the sheer number of dockyards each shipyard would contain, the massive local industrial complex which had been built to sustain them, and the fact that they would each have at least three divisions of Lucrehulks to defend them, even though secrecy was their main protection, were all things she already knew.

So instead, the young Togrutan looked at the reactions of the crowd, felt it through the Force. She could see that the number of suppositions and the knowledge that most of this was based off a single source they had no way to correlate was still bothering a lot of the officers, particularly the Mon Cal and Quarren. They were normally more conservative in terms of taking risks in warfare (while the Quarren were just conservative period), and it was showing now. *Whereas the handful of Corellians and that Kiffar lady are all for it.*

It did not surprise Ahsoka when, after Harry had finished talking about what each would know most likely contain, the newly promoted Ackbar was the one to speak up for his fellows. “I’m unhappy with how many suppositions you made in terms of the defenses we might run into, Count Potter. Further, relying solely on your Hypercom jammers might not be enough to make certain that word doesn’t get out once we start the attacks.”

Another officer spoke up, a human male with a beard that looked just this side of what regulations allowed who was one of very few humans in the crowd who didn’t look enthusiastic. “Ackbar’s right. Trying for all five of them is ambitious, and maybe a little too much. Three of those locations are close enough together that we **might** be able to take all three by surprise. But I would be willing to bet credits to dirt that when we hit Tangrene or... Asca Too? Why Asca Too? Who the Kriff named it that!?”

Many in the audience laughed at that, but the officer continued on after getting over his annoyance at the name. “Regardless of bizarre names, too much time will have elapsed for us to take those two by surprise if we start with the other three. I’m not arguing we shouldn’t, because that makes sense. I’m just saying this feels too ambitious to plan out like it’s a single campaign, that we can take them at the run as you put it, Primark.”

“Even just getting there through Confederacy spaces is going to be difficult,” another officer agreed, a Zabrak with rather pretty eyes in Ahsoka’s opinion, who shook her head. “The longer the battles themselves go on, the more danger there is of ships trying to come in to drop off supplies, or just check-ins being missed.”

“I realize all that. I realize we are probably being too optimistic on our chances. However, if we do destroy even two of them without spreading the alarm, we will be ahead of the curve, despite being within the CIS’s reaction envelope. Better, we’ve brought along several slicers aboard the *Tyrant’s Bane* to hack their communications. Hopefully, with all that in place, we’ll be able to keep word from spreading long enough to keep going.”

“And if the CIS realize their shipyards are under attack and reinforce them? What then?” Ackbar asked, his tone formal.

“Then we keep going.” Harry’s words were just as formal and far more final. “If it happens when we’re hitting Tangrene or Asca Too we call in the nearest Republic fleet presence to help. If it happens before that, we keep attacking. We take our lumps, with the *Bane* leading the way, but any hope of taking these shipyards intact goes out the window. We deny them to the enemy one way or another, gentle beings. That is the mission here.”

“Tangrene,” another officer murmured, a Tholofian, who slowly turned to look over at Padme. “That’s the only star system where these shipyards are supposed to be which has a pre-existing civilian population to it. Would that be why you are here, Senator?”

“That is indeed the case, good sir.” Padme stood up, bowing her head lightly towards the speaker, before glancing around at the others in the room, her voice and manner commanding attention. “It is well known by this point that the Republic has made it illegal for planets or star systems to vote or otherwise decide to secede from it. In times of war, the Senate took it a step farther and now call that treason. Even though the Tangrene System will be part of the Confederacy when you conquer it, it is still, **legally**, part of the Republic, simply in revolt. Your conquest of it would just replace one conqueror with another in the eyes of far too many Centrists within the Senate, and, perhaps worse, in the overall Republic bureaucracy. That is why I am here, to help smooth things along, and to make certain that no further problems between the Republic and the League occur to the best of my ability.”

There was silence for a moment, then everyone nodded reluctant understanding.

After a second, Ackbar pulled everyone’s attention back to the meat of the matter. “I believe I speak for us all when I say that your earlier words about this being an optimistic plan are well-founded, Count Potter. However, you are also correct in saying that these targets are too important not to pursue. Yet we cannot move after any of them swiftly. Nearly every unit that makes up this battle group has not worked with any of the other formations. We need to work up into a proper battle group before we can do anything. We also will need to have proper plans in place before we move, set conditions to make use of each in turn. Not unless we wish to pay in blood for every mistake and incorrect assumption.”

“You’re correct. That is why I didn’t set a firm timetable for when we will start this operation. I will, however, put my foot down sharply on it taking longer than five days. Given how much time the turncoat took to escape the Confederacy, I think that is as long a time as we can possibly take before hitting these targets with any assumption that they will not have been moved or warned to possibly expect trouble somehow in the intervening time,” harr warned.

“With time being so much of a finite resource, I believe that my fellow officers should return to their ships at once, and we can start commencing wargames immediately. We can even use shipyards like this as the opposing forces, work up into a real battle group against them.” Captain Culg interjected. “It is late in the day, but I believe that this is important enough that most of us will be willing to forgo some sleep to get started.”

The officers all looked at one another, nodding and agreeing with their fellows' words. Sweat not blood was a Corellian saying that even the Mon Calamari could not disagree with in principle and had become one of the foundations of the GDL’s Navy since well before the start of hostilities.

In that case, let's get to work," Harry answered, fighting to keep a wry look off his face as he looked over to Padme, whose own face showed a rather complicated expression for a moment even as she stood up in preparation for taking her leave. *So much for having time enough tonight to have some us time. I honestly should have seen this coming, I suppose.*

OOOOOOO

Long before becoming Chancellor, Sidious had developed the very public habit of taking at least a few meals on his own, without other people around, a few times a week. As chancellor, these meals had become fewer and farther between, but when he asked to have time on his own for that, they were still somewhat sacrosanct. Considering that he had been working twenty-four hours without break over the past two days as the Confederacy's war machine ground into the Corellian district, retook Brentaal again, and finally took several Outer Rim worlds that had been holding out before this, no one begrudged Palpatine the luxury of simply having a meal delivered to his office while shutting down all communications for a time.

Of course, with the Force, working for that long without a break was nothing, but the public didn't know that. What was really bothering Sidious and forcing him to recuse himself was the feeling he had been getting whenever he communed with the Dark Side over the past two days, something he did regularly, trusting in his Force Stealth to hide his use of the Force. With the veil of the Dark Side destroyed, a fact that Sidious had never stopped cursing since the moment it happened, however, Sidious's ability to discern what was going on had badly decreased. But at present, the feeling he was getting was almost constant: somewhere, another blow had been struck against his plans, against the Sith Order itself, rather than any of their catspaws.

With two hours to himself, he was finally able to sense where this threat had come from, although not where the blow had landed. The Dark Side kept on bringing Sidious's mind to his attempt to remove a specific irritant several weeks before the destruction of the veil: the two last Jedi Shadows. Those specially trained agents of the Jedi order who specialized even more than any other in infiltration and, more than anything else, seeking out individuals using the Dark Side and dealing with them had been a special target of Sidious and Plagueis before him for destruction.

Worse, in this case, was that Komari should have fallen to the Dark Side for eternity when she had been captured by the Bando Gora. Instead, her early rescue, after a move from Plagueis forced the Jedi to move on them en masse, had served as another reason why Dooku, Sidious's choice to run the CIS side of the war, turned back from his interest in the Dark Side.

Quinlan Vos, too, should have fallen to the Dark Side several times, but something had always pulled him back. First, his Master, when he was still a Padawan. Then the intervention of Dooku, Master Fay and, Sidious had since learned, then-padawan-Potter had pulled him back from the Dark Side. He had disappeared, gone so thoroughly that even Sidious with the Veil could not find him, Fay or their apprentices, and, worse, looking back on it, Master Giiett, a member of the Council.

At the time and after they had returned, Sidious had wondered how such a thing was possible, but he had initially felt that Fay's death was worth not knowing what the group of six Jedi had been up to. To say that his opinion had changed over time was a gross understatement. In fact, Sidious had occasionally wished he could go back in time and warn his past self about how many problems Potter alone would cause. Far more than Fay ever could have.

Quinlan's personal return to the galaxy at large had been almost missed thanks to the attention 'Count' Potter had started to draw from Sidious and his various tools. He and Vosa had then begun to destroy or bring to light the web of control that the Sith had painstakingly created over the past thousand years to influence the galaxy.

Sidious had attempted twice since the war began to deal with them as decisively as he had been able to deal with the Dark Woman and Master Tholme, only for his agents to fail. It had only been the fact that he had needed her elsewhere that had stopped him from sending his apprentice, Darth Charon, after them.

Now, as he pulled back from his meditations, Sidious was certain that it was the two Jedi Shadows who were behind whatever had occurred to give him this feeling. This feeling that wasn't just of his Sith being weakened, no. It felt now like a future closed. *More than that, it felt as if my destiny to become Emperor is even more shaky now than it was when the Veil of the Dark Side was torn asunder.*

A small communicator began to beep incessantly at him, and Sidious scowled angrily, controlling the desire to reach out and destroy the damn thing with the Force with difficulty as it signaled that his two-hour break for lunch was over. Instead, he reached over and physically flipped it on, then, with even more difficulty, forced his voice to remain normal as he spoke into it to his aide. "Could you please continue to hold all of my calls, Ms. Moore? If anyone tries to call me, tell them I fell asleep at my desk or something similar and stop them. I still... need some time to myself."

As Sly Moore was a Force Sensitive who Sidious had fully inculcated into the Sith despite not being strong enough to become one, the woman could be trusted to understand the undercurrents of what he was saying. Better, she was also a very good

organizer, a very good go-between, and had already proven time and time again to be almost as good as an Akk Dog in defending Sidious is limited downtime. No one would think twice about her doing so now, even if he hadn't given her direct orders, and he could always sooth feathers afterward of anyone she put off if something truly serious was occurring elsewhere that demanded his attention.

What am I saying? Of course there's going to be something serious occurring elsewhere. That is the nature of a political body so large as the Republic, Sidious mused to himself, actually allowing himself a brief snort of amusement, before standing up. Soon he had removed himself from his office entirely, heading down to the secret throne room hidden beneath.

There, Sidious, after taking a few precious seconds to simply exult in the darkness all around him, Sidious accessed the computer systems of the main Sith temple buried hundreds of kilometers deeper into the depths of Coruscant. This included the hidden hardline connection to the Hypercom network. It took a while; security on the Hypercom and the mass of data sent to and from it were under close scrutiny, particularly here on the Republic's capital planet. Yet that hardline still remained, and he could still send signals out without anyone the wiser.

Realizing quickly there were only a few ways that the Sith Order as an entity could have been attacked and weakened, Sidious reached out to Wayland first, believing it to be the most vulnerable. There were other boltholes, to be sure, but none so important to the Sith as an Order or to Sidious and his destiny to become Emperor.

Wayland was a planet discovered by Darth Tenebrous. He had first designed it to serve as a hidden repository, a planet that had never been known to the Republic in the first place. It was a perfect place for the Sith to create a second treasury or use as a training center. Plagueis had used it to house some of his experiments, and Sidious had used it first to house the various results of those experiments he approved of: the dozen cloned or spliced copies of Darth Maul he had used over the decades since the original had died against Mace Windu.

Currently, it was under the control of ex-Jedi Valin Draco and a group of Force users that Sidious had slowly trained in the way of the Sith. In the future, he hoped to see them become his Inquisitors, his hidden spies and assassins, but now they had been given orders to hunt and kill any Jedi they could. They had few successes, but a few of the Lost had died since he had given that order, which had made Sidious quite pleased. That, and they were working on plans that could help Sidious escape Coruscant if need be.

Despite most of them being out on missions, Boc Aseeca answered quickly, proving that Wayland had not been attacked. Indeed, she informed Sidious that Valin, Ameesa and Cronal were all on their way back, their recent missions successfully completed and more Jedi dead at their hands.

While in any other circumstances that would have pleased Sidious no end, now all he felt was growing fury. Swiftly, Sidious signed off and attempted to call Byss. Byss, the jewel world, the world that Sidious himself had discovered and decided to invest in as a second, hidden throne world. A garden world that he could mold to his design slowly over his rule of the Republic, that would be completely and solely his.

Plagueis had been almost contemptuous of the very idea of it, the need to devote so many resources to create the hyperspace tunnel and to hide its existence. However, the resources that could be so easily gathered from the Beshqek System, the fact that Byss could be built up into an industrial juggernaut with relative ease over a few decades rather than centuries as would normally be the case, had appealed to Plagueis, and he had acceded to Sidious's plans.

Further, unlike Wayland or the training world of Mustafar, Byss's location in the Deep Core would make it a magnificent place to build a new Sith order, one solely under Sidious's control. There, even more than Wayland, Sidious had hoped to mold the Sith into his own vision of the future, to stop giving even lip service to the Rule of Two while making certain the misplaced arrogance and infighting of the Sith from before Darth Bane's rise could never become so deadly again.

Sidious had thus moved the Prophets of the Dark Side there. He had given them orders to master Sith Alchemy to give Sidious more weapons to use against the Jedi when Count Potter first came on the scene years ago. They were led by Kadann, another ex-jedi, who, while not skilled in combat, had more than made up for it with his thirst for knowledge and mastery of Force Precognition.

Sidious knew that Kadann and many of the other Prophets had been mentally damaged when the Veil came apart, but he had been able to communicate with Kadann at least since then. Indeed, many of the experiments they had decided to run in their madness interested Sidious greatly, proving that madness and genius were but a hair's breadth apart.

Now, no one was responding. After trying both the orbital command center and the citadel, Sidious stopped trying to call, his thoughts awhirl even as he ordered the droids to make sure that the signal that he had sent out could not be traced back to Coruscant. It would lead well into the Outer Rim to Dromund Kas, within the Confederacy, further

pointing towards Dominus rather than himself. It would also link Dominus to the Prophets of the Dark Side, as that was the planet where Plagueis and Sidious had first discovered them.

But even as his droids were taking care of that, Sidious's thoughts were awlirl. *How, how did they discover it! What trail did they lead that could let them find Byss, **my future throne world!***

He stood up and paced for a time, a nervous energy building within Sidious, something that would have been impossible to even consider before the Veil was destroyed and his certainty of the future began to be challenged. Dark side energies roiled off him, cracking the stone underneath and above as he paced, barely keeping his Force Stealth up enough to hide his presence.

Eventually, though, Sidious got control of himself and sat down once more on his throne, taking comfort in the glorious darkness all around him as he leaned back, staring into the darkness for a moment, his hands clenched on the armrests. *How does not matter,* he now thought, his thoughts once more cold, analytical, despite the hate and raw rage building up underneath. *Only what can come of Byss being conquered by the Jedi.*

Recordings could still be within the system, but even in real-time communication with someone, Sidious took pains to ensure that very little of his face was visible, and both sides used voice changers. They would find out he was a male, and perhaps that he wasn't bearded as Dominus was, but Sidious had long known that the Jedi Order had suspected there was a hidden Sith out there beyond C'baoth. This would simply prove it.

However, they will discover a great deal of the ciphers we have used since the Hypercom uplink was set up on Byss. Unless Kadann was able to physically destroy the computers, that's almost a given, and those of us who follow the Chwayatyun (Rule of Two) have not survived this long by assuming the best outcome.

They will probably also discover the training center on Mustafar, along with Dromund Kas. Sidious acknowledged, his thoughts still cold even as his hatred and rage built up still further at the thought. Not Wayland. There's never been any direct communication between Wayland and Byss. I will have to have Draco or someone else make sure the training center on Mustafar is destroyed, as it may have recordings of Maul and me training, and perhaps worse. Aameesa, Draco or the others could even lay traps there. I also believe I might be able to use some of my contacts to create a minefield on this side of the hyperspace tunnel within a day. The Empress Teta system is so busy that a few more freighters going out of their way occasionally won't matter all that much. The Jedi will have a warm welcome then when they come back.

That thought tickled his fancy a good deal, but Sidious's mind couldn't get away from the fact that this was yet another **major** blow to the plan. Yet another major blow to the resources he could call upon in the long term, and specifically Sith Alchemy, as all of the ongoing experiments and even the droid that Plagueis had used as an assistant had been moved to Byss on his orders, along with a great deal of the treasures from Wayland.

All of that was bound to be lost, and unless Sidious sat down and recorded everything he knew about the art, which he had no time or inclination to do, some aspects of Sith Alchemy might well be lost forever. *Well, unless I can find Set Harth and his treasure of Sith artifacts. Beyond that, I cannot be certain that something at Byss won't point back to Coruscant, and unless I can, it becomes even more imperative to plan out my escape.*

Once more, the feeling of being in a slowly shrinking cage came to Sidious. The knowledge that the Great Plan might no longer be viable, that he would no longer become Emperor, or even bring about the destruction of the Jedi for all time as he should have.

Yet Sidious's very spirit railed against that idea, and he thrust that thought away once more. *No! I will not cut and run; I will not hide away and reform the Rule of Two, simply hoping that Dominus takes the fall. I will not just hide until the Jedi Order stops searching!*

"No!" he suddenly roared, his self-control breaking, his face a rictus snarl unseen in the darkness of his throne room. "That is not my way, not my role. I will rule as Emperor of the Republic, or I will destroy it as a conqueror!"

It took Sidious a good hour to regain control of himself and order one of the droids to see to repairing his throne, the damage done to the surrounding stone by his loss of temper. Eventually, he headed back up to his official office and resumed his duties as chancellor, his 'Palpatine' mask fully back in place, his control seemingly fully restored. Yet the damage he had done to the throne room was but part of the way he had lost control there, and the galaxy as a whole would feel the reverberations of a few clandestine orders he had sent out to various agents the galaxy over in time...

oooooooo

Elsewhere on Coruscant, Masters Sinube, Master Iri Camas, and Knights Obi-Wan Kenobi and Gillian Hess had begun to scour the planet for, well, at first they hadn't been really certain how to begin their search. Soon after setting up a way of contacting one another and a series of safe houses on the lower levels completely unconnected to the Jedi Order, the group spent barely a few days exchanging training in Force Stealth before separating. None were as good at suppressing their presence in the Force as Obi-Wan's old friend Quinlan had been, but they could get by. And Hess was surprisingly adept at Force Cloak. The others had their own ways of blending in.

Obi-Wan started his search by talking to some of the restaurant owners. Not the big ones, the ones on the upper levels of the ecumenopolis or even the ones on the two levels below that. Rather, he started to canvass those that served the lower rungs of society, the diner managers, the cooks, and so forth who made do with what trickled down to them. He hoped to discover some hidden line of supply going where it shouldn't, or just disappearing.

Coruscant could not grow its own food. There wasn't enough space devoted to hydroponics to do that, or even local soil. Even the Jedi Temple wasn't entirely self-sufficient. Water in particular had to be brought in daily, with only ten percent of the planet's needs for water being supplied by the slow melting of the poles. Thus, food should have given him a lead if there was some kind of hidden temple of Sith users.

It hadn't. After more than a week of searching, Obi-Wan admitted his idea had failed. Oh, he's been able to shut down a few illegal food-packing companies that weren't packing real food and were, in fact, poisoning their constituents slowly, which was all to the good. But there had been no sign of the hidden Sith there. Wherever the Sith were getting their food, it wasn't coming in from off-world.

Master Sinube teased Obi-Wan about when they passed one another. Sinube was using the cover of a traveling cook feeding the masses for pennies on the dollar, and reminded Obi-Wan that, "There are very few Sith likely here at any time, Young Kenobi. Even if you looked for centuries, I doubt you'd be able to find any kind of supply line so small as to feed that small a number of people. Not on a planet like Coruscant."

However, Tera's own investigations into the criminal underworld of the home planet hadn't yielded much of anything either. While up in the first and second levels of the ecumenopolis, crime was heavily organized and interconnected; down below, where light, food and even energy began to fade away, gangs of barely organized scavengers made up the greater part of the criminal side of things, and most of them were more interested in surviving day-to-day than anything else. They didn't have any information networks, no spies or anything similar except on the very low scale of spying on one another.

Even using Force Stealth to simply observe such gangs or the more organized criminals didn't lead anywhere pertinent. He discovered that a decade earlier, the Black Sun criminal organization had been destroyed by an outside force, rather than by internal politics as the Jedi had assumed at the time. That was interesting, but no one person had stepped forward to take over the shattered remnants since, especially after events following the Invasion of Naboo and a possible successor's death.

Tera discovered a few off-world connections, a few things leading away from the senatorial district, and to criminal organizations that had a line of communication open all the way out to Hutt Space, of all places. That was a Republic Security concern, and he had made a note of it, but with Yoda's injunction that the Sith were somewhere on Coruscant, the cosian Jedi Master set it aside.

Surprisingly, Iri and Gillian had better luck. Iri was researching old legends, local superstitions and rumors of strange goings on as he moved around Coruscant as a fixer, a person good with electronics willing to work for food, a safe place to rest or even drink. Specifically, Iri researched the darker aspects of such legends: people going missing, locals turning up dead, old bones suddenly being discovered, or areas that had fallen to 'the ever dark' sectors of the under levels that had suddenly lost all power, with no one to try and figure out what was going on. Such moments were horrendous to those within, forcing a mass migration that disrupted everything for hectares around, but rarely ever registered to those 'near the sun' as the saying went.

These were the hidden horror stories that went bump in the night, which Coruscant had a true abundance of. That abundance made Iri's attempts to sift through it painstaking and slow, and only when Gillian got word back to him about her own investigations did they start to make headway.

Gillian had gone in a slightly different direction than the others. An orphan from the lower habs herself, Gillian went back to her roots. She started talking to youngsters, children, with families or without. With the help of food, gentle words, and speaking the local dialect, Gillian learned about some of the same local horrors and legends that Iri was. Footprints in the dust or grime where there shouldn't have been any, sounds of movement where there should have been none. Tails of kids going out to find food and never being seen again, or gangs of urchins trying to move into new territory and just disappearing.

More often than not, this led her to whorehouses or local slave rings that the Guardian Jedi Knight took grim delight in destroying. Even with the injunction to not use her lightsaber, Gillian took them all apart with blaster and vibroknife, her face obscured, her presence vanishing quickly after.

Between the two of them, they found a series of old mysteries and an image that Obi-Wan and Tera Sinube felt could be connected to the Sith. First, Iri found an old industrial area several layers down that was known as particularly deadly to gangsters looking to spread out or find anything worth scavenging. That alone would not have been enough, as there were dozens of such places across Coruscant's buried districts, but then there was the image.

The image was shared among some of the kids Gillian interacted with, as if it was a relic, or a talisman. It was of a ship that, in the kid's opinion, was perhaps the coolest thing to ever exist. "It be like a scriving dag, on'y it flyin, flying to the sun, to the blue! How smooth be dat!?" the kid who shared it with Gillian said around a large protein bar.

The image was of a needle-shaped black ship somewhere between a patrol boat and gunboat in size and matched one that had been sighted occasionally in the past, used by the Sith assassin with the red and black markings on his face who had apparently been cloned several times over the years and had slain at least two dozen Jedi over the years.

Those images pointed the four Jedi towards a specific old industrial district, long since covered over by a new layer centuries ago. That didn't mean there weren't ways upward, of course. There were, but it would have been incredibly tough for most pilots to navigate. Only Force sensitives and the very best pilots could have tried it, something Obi-Wan commented on, before asking, "Are you certain this is where the ship was seen?"

"No. Rumors say those images were taken somewhere here; we just need to find the place whose background matches. This is just a starting point," Gillian corrected.

Iri nodded and shared out the image he'd copied once Gillian met up with the others. "Move around the area carefully. It's still got power in places, and that might mean traps. Keep both your Force stealth and Cloak up, and our senses reaching out for any dangers."

The other three Jedi all nodded firmly, and after a few seconds, all of them disappeared to the Force and physical senses of anyone who might've been observing them. Recording devices would still record them, but if any living brain was watching through such a video camera, they wouldn't be able to notice the Jedi.

In this manner, they headed into the industrial district, and indeed ran into traps almost instantly. One of them nearly caught Gillian. She felt one trap through the Force, and moved to evade it, nearly stepped onto another, a pit opening up as her foot tapped down. A hasty Force Jump saved her, and she stared down into the small pit thus opened, seeing crude spikes and what looked like refuse below.

Examining the area slowly, Gillian noted that a sewer of some kind was dripping into that trap, slowly depositing feces and so forth over millennia. "That would've been both grotesque and a horrible way to go," she murmured, moving away, delicately holding a hand over her nose. That thing down there smelled horrible, and that was saying something considering Gillian was a low-down Coruscanti native.

The others also ran into traps, nothing elaborate, nothing loud, but deadly for all of that. Floor pits like the one that Gillian had found made up half of such, while gas leaks, walls suddenly powering up and crashing together, and old walls giving away and suddenly letting out deluges of vicious, noxious chemicals or even acid made up the rest. One blast of acid in particular missed Tera only because he was so short and able to duck away, while Obi-Wan made use of the Force Shield technique several times. Only Iri had the skills to detect the traps before they went off, and he disarmed several electronically powered ones.

As they went, they found at least evidence of at least ten or twelve bodies, small gangs that had tried to live here in the past. Most were killed by old traps. But several had been overcome by something, something that had killed them silently, without leaving any evidence of how. Someone without claws or weapons that had snapped necks and broken legs.

They eventually found a place where the background matched the image of the ship in question. From there, they began to delve even deeper underground, going in the direction the ship had seemingly come from, then working their way down.

Within four days of this, they finally discovered what appeared to be an area that could have been used as a landing pad. It would've taken a consummate pilot, and nerves of steel to get through various large industrial pipes, and the layers of intervening ferrocrete floors that completely separated this area from the area above, and even then it would have been impossible for any ship larger than the one in the image.

However, it was there. The landing pad was there, and when Master Sinube looked around, he smiled faintly, his glow stick and those+ in the hands of the others the only light in the area at present. "Well, lady and gentlemen, I believe that we have finally found the top of the string. Search around from here if you please; let us see if we can discover where its length leads us. And as always, be very, very careful. I rather imagine that the traps we've run into before this will be a nothing to what we find here."

OOOOOOO

Two weeks into the assault on the Corellian sector, Dominus exulted, as did the sentient men and women of his fleet. Or at least, all those people who had access to scanners, for it was obvious to the most junior Scanner Rating as it was to Dominus and his STD that, for once, they had caught the enemy severely unprepared and out of position.

Up until this point, Dominus had pushed his fleet forward in a semi-set pattern. There had been three major battles per day as they jumped from one hyperspace trap to another, pushing their way through them with sheer grit and weight of their numbers. Then they would

wait while the fleet colliers and Captor-class refilled the vultures of the Lucrehulks, and repaired the damaged ships that weren't too badly demolished. Those that were would be sent to the back of the fleet, and replaced. The next day, they would start again.

That wasn't to say that those three battles were the only battles that the First Grand Fleet faced each day. No, those were just the battles the fleet faced in forging towards its goal of Corellia. The Grand Fleet was now dealing with nigh-on constant attacks along their rear. The supply convoys were facing constant pressure, and the nodal points were attacked at least once a day. In this, the Archer-class destroyers with their massive racks of proton torpedoes and willingness to 'shoot-and-scoot' as many called it, had proven deadly.

More than once, Dominus had ordered a flotilla to try to mouse-trap the enemy by jumping out after them when the GDL wolf packs retreated, attempting to find where they went, and a few times it had worked to bring the GDL to battle again. Only rarely did those battles go entirely in the way of the Confederacy. More often than not, those pursuit flotillas would, in turn, be jumped by others, with the GDL's strategic doctrine of escalation and small-unit tactics coming into play again and again. Never, not once, had they hit anything on those side trips that were even tactical targets, let alone strategic ones, yet the GDL was hemorrhaging destroyers and light cruisers by this point, to say nothing of their losses in starfighters.

However, Dominus changed that formula today. Instead of bringing forward the rest of his fleet to reinforce the latest gravitic trap they had cleared of enemies, Dominus had left his original vanguard in place there, only bringing up a few colliers. At the same time, the second and third waves had leapfrogged that position, continuing on the route towards Corellia along what had been the Corellian Trade Run in peacetime.

In this manner, They'd gotten a good hundred parsecs before hitting the next hyperspace trap, the largest distance between two gravitic traps. That meant the fleet might finally be pushing into territory less well defended. Even better, six divisions of mixed destroyers were within the area of the hyperspace trap itself, among the mines, helping to tractor them into position as the divisions of dreadnoughts and Lucrehulks jumped in. The Diamond-class frigates and Munificent-class cruisers.

From his flag bridge, Dominus watched as the battle erupted. The Archer-class destroyers had already launched their torpedo broadsides, shooting out randomly rather than in tremendous shoals of proton torpedoes as they tried to escape from the range of the heavier ships. Unlike that class of ship's immediate predecessor as a frigate, the destroyer variant did have significant shielding for their size as well as armor. It looked as if more than a few of them

were going to pull out of the kill box his heavier ships had created, as it was such a target-rich environment.

Dominus reached through the Force, aiding and empowering his people, their reaction times, their coordination, and then felt it. The first flush of death, of beings snuffed out suddenly from the galaxy. This was not just the death of sentient. That was nice enough, but nothing to the sheer euphoria of feeling a Jedi's essence disappearing from the galaxy.

That euphoria did not blind him to the fact that the GDL had seemingly decided to throw good money after bad, though, as the Force blared a warning at him. "Spread the fleet out further. Bring up the second wave of escort vessels. The GDL are not done just yet with this battlespace."

The orders had gone out, and his fleet had time to reposition and launch further vultures before the sensor droid made his report. "Hyperspace footprints, multiple hyperspace footprints in all directions around the battle zone."

What followed were the specific coordinates of the hyperspace egress points, but Dominus ignored them, watching as the main plot came alive with thousands of glaring red dots.

From several directions came whole wings of starfighters, Arrowhead-class for the most part now, although there were a few squadrons of ARC-170s out there. The fighters came in dense waves; they weren't nearly as widespread as Dominus had been worried they might be, thankfully, hence his order to bring up more escort ships. No bombers either, although he did see five enemy dreadnoughts and eighteen Mon Cal cruisers out there.

The lack of bombers and the inclusion of the dreadnoughts might mean we've not only taken the GDL by surprise with this move, but we have scared them at the same time, Dominus exulted. In turn, this becomes an opportunity.

"Communications!" He barked. "Orders to the reserve. Bring in the 3rd and 5th dreadnought division, and the 9th through the 12th Lucrehulk divisions to reinforce us. Bring in divisions ten through twenty of the Diamond-class frigates. Leave the Munificent reserves where they are at the latest nodal points. Inform the ships of those divisions that I will be performing their hyperspace jump calculations for them, and relaying them back."

The destroyers they had ambushed in this surprise assault had already emplaced a tremendous number of mines, and the Lucrehulks and dreadnoughts that had made up the first wave had taken a pounding, in particular to their vulture components. Even the Malevolence was dealing with its shield having been badly battered, and two of their secondary guns had been smashed out of commission.

"I advise bringing in the Munificents rather than the dreadnoughts," the STD recommended even as Dominus closed his eyes, beginning to feel out the jump calculations for the incoming vessels. "Given the data we have on the GDL thus far, we do not really have a chance of catching those dreadnoughts before they jump back out of two hyperspace when they can see that the battle is already going against them."

"True. However, we are close enough to see in which direction they jump out. Split the remaining Munificents from nodal point alpha into groups of five, assign each group an equal number of frigates. Once the GDL retreats, share the angle of their jump with them. They are to follow an attempt to jump them in turn."

The droid fell silent for a moment calculating, then stated simply, "This unit will comply; however, analysis dictates that attempting to do so may result in some of those units simply running into further gravitic traps well before reaching whatever set retreat point the GDL has designated."

"Perhaps, but perhaps we can also surprise them as we have here." With that, Dominus concentrated on the force for a moment, then sent the calculations. This would be the first time he did this particular trick so removed from the actual ships doing the jumps, but with the Dark Side empowering him further with the death of yet another Jedi, he felt it would work.

He sent the coordinates, then Dominus turned his attention back to the battle outside, grimacing as one of his dreadnoughts exploded. One of its shields had gone down right over its engines, and before the ship could twist and turn away, even empowered by his will, one of the destroyers- not an Archer-class, but something else - had crashed into it.

Dominus wondered if that had been deliberate, but decided after a few moments it probably hadn't been. That ship had previously been trying to wildly evade fire from another dreadnought and one of the Lucrehulks, and all of its weapon systems had already been smashed to ribbons.

Gozanti-class light cruisers flashed in, trying to hammer at another ship to help their smaller brethren escape, and a Lucrehulk that had lost several sectors of its shielding came under harsh assault. But Dominus's influence on the fleet was such that another Lucrehulk had already shifted in to defend it, and hundreds of vultures, the last of their onboard component, were launched along the length the Gozanti cruisers were just about to shift to. Instead of being able to simply continue on their way as they had thought they might, the vultures interdicted the light cruisers, hammering at them with concussion missiles, lasers, and more.

Five of the lightly shielded vessels exploded, with only three more being able to escape, all of them limping and badly damaged.

At that point, the enemy dreadnoughts and the Confederacy dreadnoughts already in the field began exchanging long-range fire as the Mon Cal cruisers shifted forward, engaging his fleet from different angles. Yet already, the dreadnoughts were turning around, intending to retreat. From the reports about the Corellian-made dreadnoughts, they didn't have as much shielding as the Mon Cal cruisers, and their engines were more susceptible to damage.

But then, Dominus's second wave arrived. Spread out, they came into range of the GDL dreadnoughts and several groups of the Mon Calamari cruisers. "There will be no escape for you now..."

The battle continued then, as the enemy commander tried to compensate, but with the Dark Side flowing through him, Dominus reacted to every move they could make even as it happened or even before in many cases. The destroyers tried to get out to their larger companions through the divisions in their way, and the vultures were dying at ruinous cost, but the GDL's heavier ships were also taking a pounding as they stayed and fought, trying to give as good as they got, trying, for some bizarre reason, to draw fire away from their smaller, stuck fellows.

More fighters arrived, along with hundreds of gunboats, but once more, Dominus had felt the danger coming. The Diamonds and scattered Munificents had been bunched up to receive them, and most of those fighters died before they could do much damage. The gunboats were a different story, and two Munificents reeled out of position as a lone Archer destroyer flushed its racks at them at the same time the new formation of gunboats and the Munificents engaged.

One of the enemy dreadnoughts jumped out, its shields gone, one side having been slagged. Dominus then directed the fire of several divisions onto two targets, feeling the Jedi aboard. Even as the enemy began to try to disengage, the two ships were pounded so hard that their shields blazed yellow and orange in the dark of space, from one end to the other. Then those shields failed, and within seconds, Dominus felt three Jedi die all at once as two Mon Calamari cruisers died almost in the same instant.

The exultation, the near euphoric feeling that hit him at those deaths, joined with the feelings of hate, rage and anger hitting him from all sides. Combined with that ever-growing river of emotion, the deaths of the three Jedi gave Dominus a very heady, almost overwhelming feeling of black delight.

And because he was feeling it, so too did his puppets across the fleet feel it. That in turn reverberated back to him. Along with the feeling of the Jedi's deaths, this created a feedback loop, overwhelming Dominus. For a few moments, Dominus lost the bubble, lost the ability to follow the battle.

Realizing what was happening, Dominus quickly shouted, "YOU, you are in command!" turning over command mostly to the STD. Convulsing in his seat, he tried to concentrate on centering himself in the Dark Side, pushing away the euphoria of feeling the Jedi die, reaching for the need to dominate and to control, to make people fear and respect him that had driven him to the Dark Side in the first place.

Eventually, it worked, and Dominus came back to the here and now just as the tactical droid uploaded the after-action report for the fleet to the main plot. That sobered him further, and for a moment, Dominus stared at the report, unseeing.

I will need to watch out for that in the future. I seem to have lost two hours trying to come back to myself! Feeling the Jedi die, taking in their power... that was glorious, but too distracting.

That had been the other aspect of the deaths of the Jedi that had caused Dominus to feel so exultant. He had long mastered the ability to drain the strength of other Force users, adding it to his own. And when the Jedi had died, Dominus had instinctively grasped some of their strength even as their spirits disappeared from the Force.

Shaking that off, for now, Dominus concentrated on the report, the number of enemy losses enough to make his smile, which, unknown to him, had looked quite manic for a while, to widen further. Ten Mon Calamari cruisers, with their damnable triple reinforced shielding, had been badly damaged, with two of them, the two that he had seen with the Jedi aboard, destroyed outright.

Dozens of gunboats, several thousand starfighters, thirty-two light cruisers of various types and, wonder of wonders, one of the enemy dreadnoughts had been unable to retreat to hyperspace due to a series of strikes that the STD had directed on it soon after assuming command. It had already been showing some battle damage before this battle began, and the STD had targeted it ruthlessly, up to the point where vultures had been ordered to ram themselves into its shielding to weaken it. That had worked, and its engines had been disabled quickly thereafter.

It hadn't exploded, and it had gone down swinging, but the enemy had lost one of their precious few dreadnoughts.

However, in return, nearly every ship bar his own flagship that had jumped in with his initial assault force had been badly battered in turn. Eight of the Lucrehulks were complete write-offs, as their hangar bays had been smashed along with all the other damage, even though their hyperspace engines were still working. They had some working weapons, but that was all.

It would take the fleet colliers weeks to get even a few operational, and the STD recommended they simply be pulled entirely from the fleet roster and sent back into Confederacy space to a dockyard that could do the job faster. That was the single largest loss they'd faced so far in this campaign, but they had more in reserve thanks to how long Dominus had taken to build up this fleet. *Frankly, it's doubtful those ships will survive to escape GDL space, but it doesn't matter in the long term.*

The dreadnoughts had only lost one of their number, but the others had also been hammered. Even caught off guard and in the range of larger capital ships, the Archer-class had survived long enough to completely flush their racks, and the sheer volume of proton torpedoes accompanied by the number of mines and single-shot satellites that the destroyers have been placing had taken a nasty toll, to say nothing of the rest of the battle.

Worse, while Dominus had been out of it, the STD had obeyed his prior orders to bring up Munificent-centered battle groups to try and follow the retreating GDL forces. Only two of those expeditions had found anything, and one of the Munificent heavy forces had been jumped in turn by a group of eighteen divisions of destroyers and had been literally wiped out to a ship.

The other two had done better, eking out small victories on their own without Dominus's input.

Bringing up the logistical data from the fleet, Dominus scowled. The defensive depth of the GDL, the sheer number of hyperspace traps, was beginning to wear on them as he had known it would, but even more than he had anticipated in places.

However, Dominus knew for a fact that it was not weighing nearly as heavily on his Grand Fleet's personnel as it was on the defenders. For one thing, his Grand Fleet wasn't the only campaign going on at present. There were dozens of others, all across GDL's and Republic space, five of which had been launched to assist his own. Those had been designed to draw away attention from his own, including a forlorn hope trying to break into the D'Astan sector. This meant the GDL could not concentrate their reserves against his fleet.

For another, while the GDL might have a better refit and resupply structure than his own fleet at present, it also relied on sentient crewmen and starfighter pilots. The Confederacy had proven again and again that droids, despite not possessing the elan, imagination or inspiration necessary to be truly exceptional at war, did have a marked advantage in constant warfare on this scale. Droids did not tire; they did not need breaks; they could be tied directly into their systems, thus coordination between droids was almost always as fast as their computational powers, easily backing up the coordination and morale that Dominus had instilled in his fleet's living component.

Even better, they were so close now that it would only be a few more jumps, probably five or six more gravitic traps, before they reached Corellia itself. They were winning, and both sides knew it.

And yet the logistics aspect of the report loomed in Dominus's thinking. The vulture wings of the ships involved with his fleet had been **badly** diminished across the board. So much so that only a single Lucrehulk division still retained its full complement. The GDL had attempted to close the door behind them several times, and although they had not succeeded, they had destroyed dozens of fleet colliers and even several of the Captor-class carriers and their hit-and-run attacks, a few of which had still had mostly full racks even as the proton torpedoes crashed in. This meant he would need to reach back into Confederacy space to bring still more vultures forward.

That would prove problematic in turn, because the nearest Confederacy holdings were themselves facing a severe vulture shortage.

The GDL had suddenly begun to attack the Confederacy's logistical apparatus in several places. Nowhere important, to be sure. The years leading up to the war had allowed the Confederacy to build its hidden shipyards well away from any place where anyone could ever find them. However, GDL wolf packs of frigates and starfighters were now hitting convoys in several Confederacy sectors, including the ones closest to the Corellia Sector, and wreaking havoc.

That was problematic, worrisome in fact, and highlighted yet again, to Dominus's tooth-grinding frustration, that his military truly lacked an answer to the GDL's smaller ships. *Gunboats, frigates and destroyers, we are still, **still** lacking in those, and the frigates and gunboats are literally made for such expeditions. Quickly in, quickly out, expendable if they are destroyed, blast it all!*

Of course the people aboard such ships, let alone their families back home, certainly did not think like that. Yet the fact of the matter was, even if a whole flotilla of such vessels died, the GDL didn't lose as many personnel as one Golan defense station or a Mon Cal cruiser. It was horrific to think about, and Garm Bel Iblis had not been sleeping all that well for a while, but war did occasionally come down to a numbers game. Sacrificing small numbers of men and women on such a mission to make certain their weight in armor plates, guns, vultures and so forth did not reach their destination was worth it.

Still, the STD had already begun the work of consolidating the vultures once more, of sending the damaged Lucrehulks back through the supply line and so forth. They had even taken the opportunity to remove several of the other worst damaged ships within the fleet, regardless of ship class. That stripped a large number of the Diamond-class frigates away,

though, and Dominus countermanded that aspect of their orders, but allowed the Munificents, Lucrehulks and even the two dreadnoughts who the logistical droid had analyzed as being too damaged in several key areas to be combat-worthy to be pulled away from the Grand Fleet and reassigned.

If that is, they get out of GDL space at all. Sending them all back at once might allow them to do so, but I would not be willing to wager on it. That blasted shoot-and-scoot tactic their destroyers have perfected is quite nasty to deal with.

However, some of what the logistics report told Dominus made him smile, and he began barking out orders.

Within moments, hundreds of small hyperspace rings were being set up all around his fleet while repairs, resupply and so forth continued all around them. Two of the Lucrehulks brought forward to replace losses began to open their hangars. Soon hundreds of Viper-class probe droids began to scoot forward out into space, heading towards their assigned hyperspace rings.

The Viper probe droids had been developed by one of the companies that made up the Techno Union, specifically for running down GDL units and probing enemy space. Almost as easy to destroy as the one-shot satellites and mines that every side in this war made extensive use of, they were also just as inexpensive once you got the factories needed to build them up and running. There were still too few of those factories for Dominus's happiness across the Confederacy, but he had earmarked several thousand of them for his own use even though he hadn't wanted to wait for them to arrive in the fleet before launching his campaign. They had eventually arrived and been slowly moved forward through the fleet until the two Lucrehulks they had been assigned to, the Ardent Freedom and the Malfeasance, accepted them aboard and then jumped to support the rest of the fleet here.

The probe droids accelerated via the rings to hyperspace one after another to probe outward from the fleet's current position in every direction, and Dominus leaned back in his chair, idly ordering one of the droids by the doorway to inform the cook he needed sustenance. While Dominus didn't really partake of fine dining, drinks or other affectations of leaders the galaxy over, preferring to take his pleasure in more esoteric ways as befit a Force user, Dominus knew he needed to eat to be at his best.

With that done, Dominus closed his eyes and meditated on the Force for a time, trying to probe the future, trying to ascertain where the next trap would be. His surprise here with the rapid double-assault had worked, but the GDL had made him pay for it, and he did not want to do that again unless he could be certain that he would catch all four of the enemy dreadnoughts and a goodly number of other heavier capital ships in the same bag once again.

However, probing the future wasn't nearly as easy as it once had been. The Veil of the Dark Side was gone, and without it, the Sith faced hundreds of different futures and could not pick out which one was more likely among the rest. Or at least, Dominus could not, a fact that was galling to the former Jedi Master. If Sidious could still see the future, could still see enough of the future to act upon it on a strategic level, he did not know, and knew Sidious would not share.

Here though, Dominus was indeed getting a feeling of something, a feeling of, of a trap? Corellia itself was a trap. Or, or something he was missing, perhaps.

The more he probed the future, the more this feeling grew. Something about Corellia, something was waiting for the Grand Fleet there. But that was all he could sense, nothing specific. *Damn it all. With the Veil, I would be able to see precisely what it was and plan accordingly! But now... now there's nothing there I can plan for.*

With the Force not giving him any answers straight away, Dominus was forced to consider all of the information that they had been gathering about Corellia and its various defenses. A few things stuck out to him as he was going through all that data, eating almost absentmindedly as he worked, uncaring of the drips of crumb on his robe or the splatter of the wine on his sleeve.

As he looked at the data available on Corellia's defenses, Dominus found his mind and energy drawn instead towards anything to do with Centerpoint Station. The mysterious, ancient star station, that had been built long before the time of artificial gravity was a truly massive ancient artifact, theorized to have something to do with the fact Corellia had five inhabitable planets. It sat in the direct center between the Twins, Talus and Dralus, and had long been home to a mix of humans and Drall who made it their home, like primitives making their home on an advanced starship, not knowing much about its inner workings, and not really caring either. Studying Centerpoint was still an ongoing project of the best minds in the galaxy, yet its purpose and where the power that ran everything came from was still a mystery.

The fact that his mind was grabbed by information on Centerpoint disturbed him, making Dominus wonder if the locals had somehow discovered how to use the station as some kind of weapon. *Perhaps that is why I am getting the feeling of Corellia being a trap?*

In contrast to that growing worry, the rest of the information their spies had discovered with great difficulty was quite gratifying. While Corellia had indeed been working on two of the captured Lucrehulk refits, every piece of information they had on them said that even Corellia hadn't been able to get them up and running. The hyperspace engines were, of course, and their armor was good, but their shielding was still not finished and their rearmament, the

refitting of their main weapon systems to match Potter's blasted superdreadnought, along with all of the internal work and so forth, was still ongoing.

Everything the Confederacy's intelligence apparatus had said that those efforts had been partially stymied by the local politicians' desire to get the mothball fleet fully refitted with Mon Calamari-style reinforced shielding, then to start churning out destroyers and starfighters as fast as possible, along with gunboats, mines and everything else. Even a star system like Corellia could only do so much, and doing all that at once slowed everything down in turn, including the work on the two refits and doing whatever it was the Jedi did to enhance the Lucrehulk's internal spaces.

Dominus, like Sidious before him, still wondered how the Jedi had done it, how they had figured out a way to enlarge the interior of ships as they had clearly done on the Tyrant's Bane, but he wasn't going to argue with the fact that they had. It was the only explanation, and Dominus was not so arrogant as to not be thankful that he wouldn't be facing two such ships. Powerful his fleet might be, and with his will to guide them, they would prove a match for anything else in the galaxy, but even so the sheer loss of ships that planetary-grade turbolasers and ion cannon-armed superdreadnoughts implied was sobering. The fight for Corellia and its various planets itself would be nasty enough.

Not that it will matter in the end. We still have far more warships to spare than the Republic, far more warships to spare than the Republic and the GDL combined. And my fleet, despite the injured ships being reassigned back to the nearest Confederacy systems, still outnumbers the forces the GDL can bring to bear tremendously.

As Dominus was thinking that, more information started to come in from the Viper probe droids. While a lot of them had only found empty space, a few had discovered ship movements. One of them had even gotten lucky enough to find and record one of Rendili's mobile shipyards jumping to hyperspace from what must have been a major fallback point. The probe droids hadn't arrived in time to figure out where it went, unfortunately, but even so, the fact that they were repositioning that shipyard was an excellent sign of how badly the GDL were hurting right now. *Hurting, but not panicking, at least on the strategic level. I need to remember that.*

Other viper probe droids had spotted even larger groups. Entire divisions of Corellian-made ships, not just the light cruisers that were relatively modern, but older ships. A few more dreadnoughts that had not previously been reported, possibly rounded up from various Core Worlds? Or at least ships that were in that tonnage, among others

The STD was receiving that same data, and soon the main holo-display was showing it, updating as it came in, including the direction of the various groups of ships as they were

spotted jumping to hyperspace. Some of those were marked in yellow as suppositions, but many were marked green as certain. After a time, a pattern emerged. One that did not point back to Corellia, but in a different direction.

At first, Dominus thought it was simply one of their secret hideaways out in deep space. But as a few more of the probes reported in, specifically those that had spotted damaged vessels jumping out, the actual direction they were jumping toward became apparent. "Duros. They are making for Duros. Why?"

"Are you asking me to speculate?" The STD inquired.

"Yes. Speculate." Something about this was also tingling at his Force senses, something connected to what he had felt in Corellia. *Another aspect of the trap perhaps?*

"Duros is the only other truly powerful star system within the Corellian sector. The others are immaterial to the long-term running of the war, but Duros is a major supplier of war material and is perhaps the only other place in the sector with facilities to aid the repair and refit of a large-scale fleet. They could simply be using it as a repair station, much like they would their hidden bases. However, why would they not split the work between Corellia and Duros?"

The droid paused, cocking his head to one side in an affectation of thought that had been programmed into that particular run of droid. "There must be a reason that they're going there rather than Corellia. Going there rather than hiding behind the guns, space stations, fortresses and vast minefields that Corellia has produced for its own system defense. Either they are taking pressure off Corellia, allowing it to concentrate more on something else, or they mean to do something with the armada being assembled in the Duros system."

"..." Dominus fell silent, staring at the droid then at the plot, frowning thoughtfully. "If they launched that entire fleet at one specific nodal point along our supply line, could they break our line of supply?"

"Not before the rest of the fleet and the surrounding forces were able to respond. Furthermore, that seems like an all-or-nothing gamble, something that the GDL has staunchly avoided attempting," the STD answered promptly. "They might be consolidating a large enough force to go on the offensive themselves elsewhere, hoping to break our concentration or at least force you to split off more of your forces. Our mobile repair facilities might well have been taking them by surprise since the start of this campaign. However, that is as far as my logic center can go in terms of supposition without further data."

Once more, Dominus fell silent for a few seconds, stroking a hand through his crumb-encrusted beard thoughtfully. "Would you say that that fleet is itself a strategic asset?"

“Yes. A fleet in being is always a danger, one that must be respected,” the droid answered promptly. “History is replete with examples of fast-moving fleets tying up far larger fleets in an effort to try and corral or at the very least track them. If it is an offensive fleet, we would need to respond, tying down nodal forces to try and deal with it wherever it showed up. Further, the GDL has not launched such attacks previously. With the Republic doing so constantly, the CIS would be hard-pressed to respond.”

“Calculate the numbers that have been seen heading towards Duros, and assume that we have missed at least 25% more in terms of tonnage. Could they be a threat to this fleet? Either on its own, forcing a single large-scale engagement, or worse, coming in to close whatever manner of trap might be waiting for us in Corellia.”

Dominus hadn’t actually mentioned the feelings he was getting via the Force about there being something dangerous in Corellia, some trap waiting to be sprung. Yet the droid, like all of his kind, didn’t ask questions. They simply analyzed, added, subtracted, and came to a conclusion based on x’s and o’s.

“On its own, the probability of such a force being dangerous is barely above 45%. If such a fleet comes in after we have hit the defenses of Corellia, the odds of it doing significant damage to our fleet start at 75% and go higher the deeper into the Corellia system we have forced our way before they engage. They know these hyperspace lanes; they know which angle of advance is free of mines and which is not. They can come in at any point in that star system, whereas we will have to force our way through the minefields around the outer sphere of the star System, and we know they have more scattered throughout the inner system as well.”

The STD slowly shook his head, another affectation programmed into the unfeeling machine. “In that kind of environment, the small unit hit and run tactics that the GDL have perfected will be incredibly deadly. If used adroitly, they might well wear us down to barely a third of our numbers even before we get to one of the outermost planets.”

Dominus scowled, but the solution to his own feelings about Corellia, and the concerns the droid had just raised, was pretty obvious. *Strike at Duros first.*

Even that though was giving him warning tingles through the Dark Side, as if that was the other half of the trap. *But half of a trap, while still painful, is not deadly until the two sides come together.* “With the removal of the most damaged ships back to the colliers, how many Diamond-class frigates and Munificents do we still retain?”

The number he got was annoyingly small, and he quickly demanded a recount. “Look at the fleet entirely rather than just the assault formations. Pull from every nodal force we’ve left behind us.”

That number was far more pleasing, as was the number of Munificent-class and Lucrehulks still with the fleet. His dreadnoughts hadn't lost all that many of their numbers. With the worst damaged ships removed from their plans, the fleet colliers and repair ships would also be able to deal with the damage to the other ships far faster.

"Conjecture. Will waiting twenty-four hours to allow our fleet colliers and repair ships to fully replenish our stores and repair as much damage as possible allow the GDL to heavily reinforce the armada already available in Duros, or the defenses of Corellia?"

"Corellia, 100%. Its local industrial capacity is unmatched within the Republic, for very good reason. Duros, that percentage falls to 65%. They simply don't have the ship manufactory or industrial capacity to do more than repair the damages done to the ships we have seen previously on that course."

The droid paused, then turned from the hologram to gaze directly at Dominus, emphasizing its words, another affectation programmed into the Special Tactical Droid. "However. This unit must point out that if we do strip away the defenses of the nodal points as you have asked this unit to assume we could, if we attack Duros, we will win through. Yet if that fleet is no longer there, we might lose our entire supply chain before we can turn around to engage them."

"Consolidate our supply chain further into half again as few nodal points," Dominus grunted, frowning a little, fingers idly removing a larger-than-average crumb from his beard. "Further, rescind the order to send the damaged ships entirely back to the nearest Confederacy holding. They can still help defensively, if only to soak up further damage from still viable ships."

That this would consign the crews of those ships, or at least the bridge crews, which in many cases were the only ones truly alive aboard, to destruction was immaterial, and both Dominus and the droid could see such things with the cold dispassion that was necessary in a war this size. "Further, I will contact the nearest admirals and demand they send us further Munificent-class ships. With those, the nodal points should be protected."

He smiled thinly, staring at the plot for a moment, which was still showing the ever-updating information from the Viper probe droids. "But I will want the vast majority of our fleet brought together here before we hit Duros. I want to not just hit them, I want to crush them, to obliterate that fleet and Duros's defenses, overwhelm them in such a way that they cannot damage our own fleet overmuch and slow the timetable for Corellia for much longer."

By the end of the twenty-four hours that Dominus had ordered, the fleet had been assembled. It was no longer as massive as it had once been, especially with nodal forces still pulling ships away from the actual front line. However, it was still the largest fleet in existence, and Dominus was pleased.

However, even as a portion of Dominus exulted in that, the war had taken a few turns against the Confederacy. For one thing, their campaign to blockade Rendili was now over. With the sudden death of the commander that he had shifted into that area of operation to take over from the former commander, the blockade on Rendili had been broken entirely, and with it, the defense fleet of that pernicious system had been able to start taking offensive operations against the surrounding CIS-occupied planets. Further, the GDL had invested heavily in that sector, and it was now showing.

That, Dominus had somewhat anticipated. That officer had died on the heel of the Veil of the Dark Side being destroyed, and Dominus had read about Master Shaak Ti enough to know how good a commander she was, although now reports are coming in that she was no longer taking part in the war efforts for some reason.

Dominus discounted them. Only a Force user could command the sheer number of disparate flotillas moving in that sector to such a degree, not unless the Republic had its own equivalent of the orchestrator of another problem, one he had not anticipated: Yagh'dul, one of the most industrialized and important planets in the CIS, had fallen to the forces of the Republic led by Admiral Thrawn.

That name, Thrawn, reverberated with special significance in the Force to Dominus. It was as if the man was something akin to what Amidala was supposed to be, a person who could impact the galaxy on a wide scale, but who was not a Force user. He had not only taken Yag'dhul, but had taken it intact, with many locals turning back to the Republic and even willing to work with the Republic forces.

The whole sector was in danger of collapsing now, and at the center of it was Thrawn, orchestrating every attack as if all of it was but a part of a greater campaign, working on a scale that few officers of any side in this war could match.

Elsewhere, the war was still its ongoing back-and-forth slaughterfest that the Great Plan called for, even if Dominus felt the Great Plan itself was almost certainly ruined and had been for some time. Republic offensives elsewhere had been stymied, or were turning into meat grinders, slowly breaking entire fleets or army corps. Yet at the same time, several of their own assaults were doing much the same.

Two GDL planets in particular were becoming black holes for troops and transports. The Barabel of Barbel 1, whose swamps produced numerous gases and other resources that made it a class two planet in terms of the GDL, important but not well-defended, were ferocious warriors, and had made the occupation expensive from the start.

The other planet, though, Jabiim, hurt Dominus more because it was part of the GDL in the first place, in direct response to Count Potter and his efforts before the war began. *Blast it*

all, that mud ball should've been ours! Instead, it will be the second planet where the Morgukai are sent into the field. Alto Stratus and his Patriotic Army are too damned good at defense for my presence of mind, and the metals found within are too important for us to just ignore.

As the rest of the fleet around him began to prepare for the next series of jumps or perhaps even just one jump to Duro, Dominus cut orders to Grievous. He had been out of the public eye for enough time now, and the control of the press of the CIS meant that would be enough for now, and Dominus felt he could no longer allow the need to seem to be evenhanded and sad about events in the Polith System to color his actions. *Grievous is a being who knows how to wield terror like a weapon. Let him do so*, he thought, smiling just a little bit as he finished the orders to Grievous.

He would first be sent into the Weemil Sector with orders to butcher every Republic force he came across and force the sector to declare neutrality or simply wipe it out entirely. From there, he would be free to conduct his own offensives as he saw fit, so long as he brought the pain to the Core Worlds of the Republic.

Alas, Dominus would be unable to get away with doing the same thing in Duros and Corellia. At least openly. *And doesn't just leave a lot of room for interpretation, doesn't it?*

He finished sending those orders out through the Hypercom, then sensing the moment, he turned to the STD just as the droid turned to him. "The fleet is ready." He stated rather than asked, and the STD simply nodded. "Then there will be no speech this time, no attempt to rouse the rabble. Give the order to jump. It is time that the GDL learned that guile and cunning cannot stand against our might."

End Chapter

Sorry to end the chapter before the next battle, but I had barely six days to work on this chapter, lost one and a half of them to family time, and another half a day to going over Stallion when Hiryo got it back to me. So this is what you're left with. I tried to cut down on the ship descriptions and the specifics of the various battles, I wanted to concentrate on the strategic picture and Harry's first impression of Ackbar, because let's face it, Ackbar, Thrawn and Iblis are the main non-force using strategists in canon (yes, the books are canon and not Disney. FUCK DISNEY) and with Thrawn still within Sidious's sphere of influence, I wanted Harry to get acquainted with Ackbar on top of Garm.