

Last name ain't Disney, nor am I British. Though the weather here has made me wonder for about a week as to that last.

For the first time in a while Magic of the Force won the Patron only poll thanks in part to my own votes and thanks also to some of my larger contributors deciding they too felt it was time for an update. It took in 1,368. Horse for the Force only brought in 984. I wouldn't get used to this, but hey, at least it won right?

This has been edited by Kathryn518 and me through the use of the program Grammarly. This means there are undoubtedly going to be mistakes throughout since Grammarly is a very flawed program in many ways, and cannot spot half as many issues as a live beta reader could and I just have no talent for editing my own work. But the other two people I sent segments of this chapter to did not send them back, nor have they responded to appeals for progress reports. This is sad since I had assumed that between the four of us we could do as good a job as Michael does on his own in less time if I broke it up like that, so prioritized getting him FILFy Teacher instead. Hopefully there aren't enough mistakes as to severely hamper your enjoyment of the chapter.

There was a guest reviewer who left two reviews, one full of corrections, the other with thoughts on the chapter. I used the first and then deleted it, while of course letting the second pass. Thank you for the corrections and your thoughts.

FYI: Plank owner - it is a term used to imply a person had a role in funding or being one of the first to work in a company, aboard a ship, or in a military unit.

Chapter 9: Return

The Jedi returned to their mothership within a few hours of their ordeal in dealing with clearing the Force nexus that the Thought Bomb had created of the Darkness inherent in its use. Once back, they hoped to use the more sophisticated scanning and medical equipment aboard the mothership to scan Master Fay and see if they could get any reading off of Lily now that her form seemed so much more towards the solid side of things than the purely mental. The fact Fay had lost most of her normal grace and poise and reported that her physical body felt almost like an ill-fitting suit was worrisome, and they were all concerned, though none save perhaps Fay herself knew what that meant.

Or at least, that was the plan. The group of Jedi ran into trouble when they began to break out of the atmosphere.

With their starfighters in the lead, Aayla and Harry broke atmosphere first, only to immediately twist their ships around as a flare of chagrin and shock hit them from Master Fay's yacht behind them. "Master Fay, Master Giiett what is going on?" Harry asked, through the comm.

"I do not know but for some reason, Fay's body just started to go almost... immaterial, her physical form fading to nothing," Micah replied from where he had been copiloting the ship.

Inside the yacht, Fay was looking down at her own hands, and now through them to the console below them. "Ahh...I believe something both momentous and highly unusual has occurred." In sharp contrast to Micah's shocked voice, her own tone was one of wonder and intrigue.

"How can you be so calm!?" Lily exclaimed, looking at her sort-of girlfriend from where she was hovering behind the pilots' chairs. Now that Lily was more solid after doing her part to battle the darkness in the Force nexus she had been looking forward to seeing if they could do a little more than touch hands or lips occasionally. But seeing her prospective lover suddenly start emulating her former gaseous nature was not the way she wanted that to go.

"Because whatever this is, it is not something that I am causing or can change. It is not an attack at all, nor anything I can repel," Fay replied, her voice still serene even as her physical form continued to waver, becoming even more immaterial than Lily had been before the battle in the Force nexus. "However, I think it has something to do with my attempting to leave the planet."

Fay was one of the three oldest Jedi in existence, and unlike Yoda and Yaddle, she had not changed physically to show her age in hundreds of years. Yet for all her age, Fay did not fear death or seek to live forever. She knew death was but an ending and was willing to embrace it, to rejoin the Force. But this didn't feel like she was dying, rather her physical form, which had become almost enclosing before was fading out entirely but her spirit was still intact.

At Fay's words, Micah immediately twisted the yacht around followed closely by the four starfighters as Harry asked, "If it's not an attack, is it some kind of last-minute trick by the Dark Side spirits?"

"No, I think not," Fay said with a sigh. "A consequence yes, but not a trick."

Master Giiett also shook his head. "I would've felt any such. No, this is some sort of effect of the battle that we took part in. Much like her change in appearance, only taken to a new level when we thought that change was the extent of it. Instead, that physical change was simply a sign of a far deeper transformation."

"Indeed," Master Fay said, her voice still serene while her body slowly began to shift back to her new, oddly cumbersome feeling body, the Force practically glowing from within her physical frame. "I thought that my connection to the Force had widened still further, but now it seems as if that understanding has come at a cost."

"Is this something we can reverse?" Harry asked intently, while Aayla tried to soothe him through their bond. Given the fact that she was also somewhat distraught at this news, she was not having much luck.

"Where would we even start?" Master Fay said, her voice slightly chiding. "We would need to understand what has occurred in the first place, all we know at present is that something has occurred at this point."

"And here I was happy, thankful that I was more solid, only for you to have the exact opposite problem," Lily said, scowling. "Your Force is a very tricky entity sometimes."

Once they landed back where they had previously been, Master Fay began to meditate, while the others told the bouncers what was going on.

It only took Master Fay about twenty minutes to realize what was going on. First, she sent her thoughts out into the Force, finding that deeper connection to it in general that she had spoken of, the Force practically flowing into her. But she also felt another bond formed in her very being, empowering her Force sense. *Ah*, she thought, somewhat sadly. *The Force has required a price to be paid.* That bond was to the Force nexus which the Thought Bomb had created in the Valley of the Jedi.

Setting that discovery and what it might mean she reached out further into the Force and did so without any difficulty. It was almost as if the veil of the Dark Side had been lifted around her sight, though beyond that point, the Veil of the Dark Side had bunched up once more becoming even more impenetrable.

But it hadn't been pushed back just around the planet, but further. Much further. Fay sent her thoughts out and the others could feel her shock and awe but did not interrupt her meditations. *I, I can feel everything, everything with such clarity.* She could feel the suns, the planets, the moons, asteroids, even the various black holes and wandering masses that made traveling through hyperspace in this area of the known universe.

I see... The Force nexus created the spread of the nebulae that has cut off this area of space from the rest of the Republic. It still has a connection to it or rather is still empowering the movement of the nebulae. I wonder...

Experimentally Fay reached out with her mind and gently began to push some of the detritus that kept ships from being able to jump very far this way and that. They moved. They moved under her command. First small rocks, then giant asteroids and finally the gravity of black holes actually bent slightly under the pressure of her mind. She could feel it all happening. Where before there had been hundreds of lightyears worth of ever shifting gravitic anomalies, there was now a small temporary pathway through them.

This was utterly bizarre, far, far beyond anything any Jedi she had ever heard of. Oh, there had been Jedi in millennia past who had been able to move moons or push away entire fleets, and during the wars against Exar Kun there had been a report of the Sith creating a supernova. But to move gravitic anomalies? To open up a hyperspace lane over thousands of light years, on a scale of an entire sector of space? No, that had never been accomplished before.

But then the Force nexus itself, that is stationary. It cannot reach out past where the storm was, it cannot even be felt outside of that. With that thought, Fay attempted to reach further, to reach out to one of the few minds she knew well enough to reach wherever she was in the Republic: Master Yoda. She could feel her consciousness reaching out, but the moment it hit the limit of the warp storms, her mental probe halted faded to nothing instantly. To Fay's senses, whatever was beyond that point just didn't exist anymore.

And that, that must be why I am unable to leave. The Force nexus is on this planet. Therefore I, who am now bonded must remain on this planet or become one with the Force as a whole. The Force nexus cannot reach past that point, but within, within I have powers far, far beyond any Jedi.

Fay opened her eyes and stared at her friends, students, and prospective lover, and smiled a wan little smile. "I have good news and bad news. Which one do you want to hear about first?"

After Fay's explanation, Harry fell silent staring at her, his thoughts in turmoil even as he tried to calm his emotions. "And if we try to cut this connection between you and the Force nexus?"

"I do not think we will be able to Harry," Fay said gently. "We might be able to shut the Force nexus down somehow, but I do not think I would survive the attempt. The connection between my being and the Font is something so far beyond my understanding I cannot see where one ends and the other begins. This melding makes the connection between you and young Aayla look frail in comparison. My very atoms are flooded with the power of the Font. No, I do not think I will be able to leave."

Lily frowned, gesturing with a hand and softly sending out a brief pulse of the Force to pick up a bulb of water, flicking it over to Fay who took it gratefully. "I'm inclined to agree with her on that." And it makes what I think happened to me all the more tragic. I think I don't have to rely on being near Harry any longer, freeing myself, and now Fay is the one to be shackled. Only in her case, it's not to a person, but to a place.

"But, but then what do we do?" Harry asked. "Are we all meant to just stay here?"

"Harry," Master Fay said softly. "I said before you were ready to be a knight. That does not change now that I will not be with you as you take your last tests for it. After that, you and I would have had to go our separate ways in any event. There comes a time in any knight's, indeed in any young being's life when he must spread his wings. I could wish that I would be

there when you meet with the council once more, but I trust in you and your ability to understand your strengths and weaknesses, and to choose your own course."

"This," she said gesturing down to her body "this just means we will have to say goodbye here rather than later."

"I don't want to leave you behind, all alone here!" Harry replied looking at his teacher worriedly.

"I don't think she'll be alone Harry," Lily said thoughtfully, her voice gentle but firm. Harry looked at her in shock, and she gestured to the ship. "I'm a lot more solid now Harry and we were talking about what that might mean before we tried to return to the Tyrant's Bane. If that turns out to be the case, then I think I'd like to stay here to keep Fay company, and also so that you can make a clean break."

"But I'm not ready," Harry whispered, staring at Lily now. "I..."

He paused and Lily smiled and nodded looking over at Aayla, who'd taken Harry's hand in one of hers. "You won't be alone Harry. You'll never be alone. It's just, the time has come for you and Aayla to spread your wings without us around to guide you."

"Exactly," Master Fay said with a smile.

Harry looked at between of the two of them, and then breathed in deeply, closing his eyes for a second before opening them and smirking at both ladies, his emotions and thoughts once more under control. "Oh really, and this decision has nothing to do with the fact that you and Master Fay can touch now much more easily mum?"

"It does a little bit," Lily admitted with a smile, then turned a positively salacious look on Master Fay, who surprised all of them thereby flushing a little at under the weight of that look.

"Yes, ahem, well," Master Fay said actually stuttering for the first time Harry had known her. "I believe we need to think further about the large picture now. Can the five of you run the ship without me?"

"Dodging the question Master Fay?" Aayla teased but smiled and nodded. "We've automated enough of the interior for that sure. Though we will want to add some more crew in the near future. We can't fight that ship as well as it should be fought, but that was already in the plans before this."

"And I think we need to bring in more help to finish the interior before we head back to the Republic," Harry said with a nod. "I have ideas there..."

"Good, put into motion and see what happens," Fay said brusquely. She smirked as Harry looked between her and Master Giiett in surprise. "I said it was time for you to spread your wings, Harry. That ship is more yours than it is anyone else's."

Master Giiett nodded as Harry made to object. "Yes Harry, while we all worked on it recall that it is from you and your mother that we Jedi have begun to understand how much we don't know about how the Force can be used. Those runes of yours, none of us had ever thought of anything similar, and the space expansion work we've done on that ship? All of that we have you to thank for. The Tyrant's Bane is your ship."

"Take the praises and leave it, Harry," Aayla urged mind to mind. "You know they're right. Besides, I know you've been thinking about what that ship might mean long term with the Sith still out there."

"All right, I'll give you that much," Harry replied before speaking aloud. "But there is something else as well that we need to think about: how do we get back without Master Fay's aid in finding your way through the nebulae?"

"That was the other thing I discovered," Master Fay said with a faint smile. "Within the area of the previously impacted by the hyperspace storms, I have gained far more ability in the Force. Far, far more. I believe I will actually be able to create hyperspace lanes for you."

"That's impossible!" Master Giiett said sharply, his eyes widening. "No Jedi could contain..."

"But I am not a simple Jedi any longer," Fay said actually sighing sadly as she said it. She was going to miss traveling the galaxy, but if this was what the Force wanted from her, she was not going to question its will at this late a date. "I am one with the Force nexus. And that Font is powerful enough, more than powerful enough."

"That is big," Alecto said, speaking up for the first time since they had started talking, not having as profound a connection to Master Fay or Lily as Harry and Aayla did and having little to input to give. But now he exchanged a glance with Quinlan as the others realized what that ability implied too. "If you could do that for us, could you do it for other Jedi?"

"I think I could yes if I felt the need, or felt them reaching out to me in turn," Master Fay said with a nod. "Even at such a distance, I think I'd recognize such."

That would make this entire sector an almost impregnable defense. That is huge!" Quinlan ended on a slightly hysterical chuckle. They were after all talking about shifting the equivalent of gravitic bodies of various sizes spread out over thousands of light years. When he began to think about what kind of power that would take, it was no wonder he was a bit off-balance despite his Jedi sense of serenity.

"Exactly," Alecto said with a nod. "If Jedi are the only ones who can come and go like that or those already within the sector, that's just huge!"

"I will start to clean some pathways between the various planets within the sector," Master Fay said thoughtfully, tapping one finger against her lips. "That will give me an opportunity to figure out the extent and limitations of my new powers. But for now, do you have a preference for a route you want me to clear first?"

Aayla looked up at that, from where she had been typing a list of things they need to bring down to make a suitable dwelling. They didn't know enough about the local food fauna after all and would have to provide enough seeds and food to get by until the next growing season along with a few droids to actually see to the growing. Master Fay, for all of her amazing abilities, did not have any ability with growing plants. Controlling them for short amount of time yes, but not actually farming. "Might I make a suggestion for the first planet?"

When the others all looked at her and Quinlan nodded, she went on. "We should go to Jaderin. We can take in more workers, sell more of our own produce, and tell them the good news about their being able to navigate within the sector again. I don't think any other star system we have seen in this sector is as in as good a position to make use of that knowledge."

Jaderin was one of the few star systems they had stopped in along their way through the sector that hadn't fallen back into a pre-space industrial level. It was the same system where they had bought the fabbers and had four species living in relative peace. Humans were one of them, humans seemed to thrive everywhere. Then there were the Verpine and two native gas giant species that the humans and Verpine had made agreements with. Each species had their own planet, and the two native species had built a gas development industry that was larger than any Fay or Micah had seen in the entire Republic.

Gases like Bespin or Tabanna were essential in any space faring society. Refined it could be used as fuel for engines or energy cells for generators, as well as magazines or power cells for energy based weapons of all kinds and sizes, including lightsabers. Yet the number of gas giants which contained these precious gasses was few and far between. Serenno was blessed in that from its gas giant they could harvest enough for all its own needs and also trade with other systems making a ridiculous profit from it.

Jaderin, however, could probably outperform any two other systems that served the Republic. And that wasn't considering the rest of their homegrown industry, or the Verpines, who had proven to be masters of technology and mechanics.

With that decision made Fay began to meditate, clearing a path from Ruusan to Jaderin through the gravitic detritus. Harry and Aayla went up to the Tyrant's Bane and brought down food, plants and a large blanket which they set up like an awning on either side of the entranceway leading up to the ship. They also brought down a few droids from the botanic sections, which immediately went to work on a nearby field.

At the same time, Quinlan used his starfighter to go and check on the few human tribes still on the planet. All of them were far away from the Valley of the Jedi, and pre-industrial nomads at best. They didn't war on one another, but neither were they very friendly to outsiders. If Fay decided to try and lead them out of their current barbaric states, she would have a tough time of it.

At the same time, he helped Lily test her theory on her now being independent of her son. Despite her theory there she still needed help to test it of course. Lily's hovering speed was basically stuck between a walk and a human's normal running pace, and in terms of space distances, that hardly merited as more than a laugh.

However, her form was still solid when Quinlan took the Tyrant's Bane out from the system a few light years and then popped back. There was no sign of her still being tied physically, for a given value of physically anyway, to Harry's presence. Her theory there had been proven correct.

Micah waited until Harry had returned from a trip up to the mothership before going to work. "Harry, it is time for you to create your own lightsaber. Since we've come all this way it would seem a shame to wait any longer, and given that Fay doesn't use one, I will be instructing you on this."

Harry nodded. He had learned from Aayla that part of the process of creating a lightsaber was using the Force to do the entire thing: to gather the parts, to set the crystal in its cage of wires, and finally to finish putting it all together. "Yes, Master Giiett."

Over the next few days as Aayla concentrated on aiding the droids and talking to the Bouncers, while also mentally helping Harry, he and Master Giiett moved through the process of creating Harry's lightsaber. It was a difficult process, demanding a lot of control rather than brute power, and tested Harry's ability with telekinesis more than anything he'd done recently. Despite that, thanks to Aayla's help and his own raw power, Harry had a far easier time of it than most.

His lightsaber's exterior was a simple silver cylinder with a curve to it like Master Dooku's its surface dulled almost so it didn't shine but rather looked vaguely organic in nature about thirty-two centimeters from one end to the other. Around the silver was added a sheathe of wood, slightly rough to the touch which aided in the grip and which covered most of the blade barring two centimeters below where the energy blade would emit. A blade energy adjuster was installed in the interior, but no knob on the exterior. There was also a blade length adjustor, but once more, no corresponding button on the exterior.

Within the exterior of the blade were all the usual parts of course: the power cell in the hilt portion, the vortex ring, focusing lenses, field energizer, power conductor, the insulator and the crystal energy chamber. And of course, there were the four crystals necessary to actually create the plasma blade.

One, the primary crystal, was set into the power conductor. This crystal was one Aayla had found years ago, and she and Harry had meditated on it several times. It was perfect with no blemish and had barely needed any resizing or cutting to be used. Another crystal came from Master Fay, who had at one point indeed had a lightsaber only to dismantle it the moment she became a Knight. But Fay had kept one of the focusing crystals. And then there was the crystal he had found here on Ruusan, its yellow citrine color distinctive.

Splitting that crystal in two so Harry had the needed three focus crystals was the most difficult task up to that point. Harry had to use the Force and a pair of high powered magnifying glasses to cut it in such a way that he didn't weaken the crystal as a whole. The near-citrine gem slowly gave up its secrets, and two days after staring the process, Harry was able to cut the crystal in two equal and undamaged halves, leaving only a tiny sliver he could not make use of during the process.

After that, Harry had to use the Force once more to place the crystals in the thin wire stands within the crystal energy chamber. It was touch work, since each time you added a new crystal you had to hold the others still, then make certain the balance would remain just so before pulling your mind back. The work was too fine to be done by hand.

Yet eventually Harry felt the array was perfect, the Force telling him so. Then he began to close the lightsaber, setting the top half of it onto the bottom side, keeping careful watch to make certain the crystal array remained in place.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry leaned back from the small stone slab he had conjured onto the ground to work on, looking up at Master Giiett, and the others, who had come over to watch as he finished. "I'm done."

"Well, what are you waiting for Harry?" Alecto asked while Aayla knelt down beside him, hugging him from behind. "Turn it on!"

While Fay and Lily smiled tolerantly at the Alecto's enthusiasm, Harry smiled, and gestured the others to step back as he stood up, Aayla still pressed into his back. With a thought, he activated his lightsaber, the internal switch clicking on as he held in front of him, his hand angled so the blade would appear perpendicular to his body. A plasma blade pure white in color, almost like light given form, flared out instantly, the hum of the blade now audible to all of them.

The blade was a little short, perhaps an inch shorter than a normal lightsaber. But as they watched, Harry reached into the device once more with the Force, and the blade grew to several inches longer than a normal blade before it then shrank to the size of a shoto. Harry then began to whirl it about himself, switching the size and output as he did, the whoom-whoom, thrum of the lightsaber moving through the air filling the clearing.

"White? I have never heard of a Jedi with a white blade, have you?" Fay asked, watching her padawan, or rather her former padawan, go through the motions with the lightsaber. She had never liked the things, or how much of the Jedi mythos was wrapped up in them, but she had to admit they had a purpose, and Harry would undoubtedly need his soon enough.

"Yellow yes, white, no," Micah replied dryly. "It would seem that whatever Harry does, he is destined to stand out from the crowd."

With a final flourish, Harry finished, sending the blade to hang at his side. *"I'll add a few Force trick to it later like you have on yours Aayla,"* he said through their link.

Aayla had come up with a trick to pull her lightsaber to her from great distances, the blade teleporting into her hand. She had also tried a few tricks to make certain that only she could ever wield it safely.

"And with that, Harry, I think it is time for you all to be on your way," Fay said, stepping towards the two padawans. "It does no one any good to linger when we are forced to part regardless of how long we take at it."

Harry looked at her and slowly nodded. Over the past few days, Harry had processed the fact that he was leaving both his mother figures behind and the reasons why it was time. Aayla had put those vague thoughts into a single sentence the evening before after they rested from a night of lovemaking. "A Jedi can either reject the path the Force has laid out for them and be pulled along against his will, or embrace it and make the most of what he is being given. You might not like it Harry, but the Force has a plan for you, and it is time for you to meet it."

"Yes master, I am afraid you have a point. "But we haven't talked about what we should tell the rest of the Order? Both over the Hypercom, and in person."

"In person, tell the High Council the complete story," Master Fay ordered, glancing at Micah who nodded. "Over the Hypercom..." she paused, thinking. "Over the Hypercom, I think you should speak of my passing."

They all looked at her in surprise, and she shrugged. "You can clarify things with the High Council in person afterward, but if we are all correct that Hypercom communications are being watched, then perhaps spreading news of my death will help."

Micah nodded slightly. "That makes quite a bit of sense. Although it might have a negative impact within the Order itself."

"Slight chance there I think. My name is a legend alas and the council will no doubt wish to cover up the fact that I have been reported missing. Nor," Fay said with a laugh "will it be the first time that I've been reported missing."

The day was somber the skies slightly overcast setting the mood of the party quite well. Even Master Giett and Quinlan, who were more steeped in the Jedi standard of not forming long-term attachments, were having trouble with this parting.

Harry hugged his Master and then his mother, feeling her form shiver slightly as she focused on using the Force to remain solid enough to do so. The fact that she could do that through her entire body like this was a sign that it was much easier now than it had ever been before. "I'll miss you, Harry. But I also know you'll do magnificently out there. Make us proud of you."

"May the Force be with you," Master Fay said her lips quirking as she rolled her eyes. "I will not make any kind of appeal to you to make us proud of you. That would fly in the face of everything I have tried to teach you about humility. Simply listen to the Force, let it guide your actions as much as possible, and when it is silent, listen to your own thoughts and feelings."

"I will Master," Harry has said softly, squeezing her so tightly that the ancient Master winced a little, whispering a quick 'careful' before he stepped back resolutely, turned, and marched off towards the shuttle.

Aayla finished hugging Lily and moved over to take Harry's place. "Don't worry I'll keep an eye on him. And he'll keep an eye on me. Stay safe, and stay well!"

"You as well child," Fay said, hugging the girl tightly in turn.

"And just remember, I don't want to be a grandmother until you two are at least in your thirties, if not later," Lily mock-admonished, laughing with Fay as Aayla blanched, backing away rapidly."

Quinlan and Alecto both said their own goodbyes, far less effusive but no less heartfelt. Finally, only Master Giett was left. He held out his hand in the normal human fashion the universe over to shake rather than holding it up palm out as Jedi would upon leaving one another.

When Fay, with a small sardonic smile, held at her own hand out he twisted her wrist lightly and bowed, kissing the back of it in a courtly manner. "Be well ladies," he said simply. "I will not say the Force be with you, as it is patently already with you in spades, but I will ask you to take care of one another as best you may. It will be a lonely life I think here for a time."

"I doubt it," Fay replied, her smile serene. "I'll have my meditation, and..."

"While I will have the fact that I can feel sensations again to get used to," Lily interrupted with a smirk. "I know just how to do it too..." She laughed wickedly as both Jedi Masters blushed at that one, Micah actually blushing so hard his ears turned red.

"Yes, well, until the next time, ladies. I can predict that the council will have plans for this place, regardless of anything else. So you may see me sooner than you think." With that he quickly

retreated, still blushing, to the shuttle the Bane used to transport food, and he followed the other four out to the waiting Tyrant's Bane.

In the cockpit of her starfighter, Aayla shook her head fondly, having felt Harry's emotions through their link. *"You know it is okay to cry, Harry."*

"For a child yes love, it would be. For a Jedi, for an adult? No. It is time as they said, to move on, no matter how much I don't want to." Harry replied.

Moments later, the Tyrant's bane left orbit, heading out-system.

"Well, they're gone," Fay said with a sigh. "Now I shoulEEP!"

Fay found herself on her back, her body flaring with the Force within as Lily lay on top of her. Whatever had been done to Fay had made her body both material and immaterial, and Lily could interact with it far easier than she could with anything else in the material plane. "What we should do," Lily whispered as she leaned in. "Is have some fun."

Fay looked up at her, her physical being slowly falling away, and smile as she felt all of her lover's body pressing into her as if both of them had fully corporeal forms, though it was the exact opposite. In this the Force moved in an even more unusual way than normal, Fay thought. But even so Fay could not find it within her to question her good fortune and she reached up, running her hands through Lily's magnificent red hair. "I think that sounds like an excellent idea..."

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"....So ten other Jedi have come out and stated that they are unwilling to mediate between the secessionist and the centrist factions. This will not weaken Jedi Order's connection to the Senate, but it will weaken the Order internally as did my own defection and those Jedi swayed by my words who yet remain within the Order but refuse to take any further missions to deal with the Secessionist Crisis. Leaving the Jedi Order myself put me under a lot of scrutiny at the time, but that has finally faded. I am ready to take public and formal command of the secessionists."

Sidious allowed a faint smile to appear on his face, the bottom half of which was visible through the pickup to the man he was currently talking to. "Well done Darth Dominus. Hold off on that however, I have already begun the process with which they will approach you publicly for that position. You have met with them all in private I trust? You were scheduled to meet with the new head of the Techno Union last week, but we have not talked since last month."

"I did meet with the man on schedule. Tambor is punctilious about such things," the man addressed as Darth Dominus replied. "I found him to be a dangerous man, and one who has some equally dangerous ideas about the future of warfare of course. I feel he is an engineer

and organizer forced to become a diplomat and leader. The Union's new type of battle droid seems to be several steps above the original type. Further, the Techno Union is now fully onboard the idea of seceding from the Republic. Tambor seems leery of promises of further power within the Republic in the future, but that is something we can work with."

He was slightly older looking than Sidious, with a long flowing white beard and hair, and a rather unkempt look at the moment. Yet his eyes were sharp and decisive, and when he was in public, he could project a certain amount of dignity, like a king at court. He also had a tremendous amount of charisma in person. He could make other Jedi listen to him and could over-awe non-Force sensitives, convincing them of his position with ease.

Sidious knew that this and the man's admittedly well-known arrogance had also covered the fact that he had taken Force Domination to a level that was simply incredible to contemplate. Even Sidious felt that in that area, this man had few if any equals. Jorus C'boath, however, used Force Domination so subtly and easily because he truly believed it was the right of Force Sensitives to do so. He had a desire to completely dominate the lives of those around him, and that had allowed Sidious to sway Jorus to the Dark Side so easily it was almost laughable.

"Very well, then let us go back to the original topic: that of manipulating the weaknesses in the Order. While we were not able to instigate an outright split within the Order, we were able to sow the seeds for more, what did you call it?"

"Conscientious objection against the status quo," C'boath said with a smirk almost hidden under his beard. "I was rather proud of that name."

"Indeed," Sidious said, reflecting internally that was another thing that was different about C'boath to Maul, or even to how he imagined Dooku would have acted. Maul was a malignant creature of hate and rage, Dooku, Sidious imagined, would have been cold, calculating and business-like. C'boath was having fun tearing chunks out of the Jedi Order and showed it occasionally like this when they communicated.

Sidious felt that humor was a tool of the weak. The only joy that should be felt by those on the road of power that was the Dark Side should be the pain and suffering they could feed off."Has there been any talk about reopening negotiations with the Green Jedi?" Sidious asked aloud.

"No. While Senator Bel Iblis has stopped talks about cutting off the Corellia sector from the rest of the Republic, the Green Jedi no longer respond to the Order's ruling and neither side is making any overtures of peace toward the other. The death of Master Tholme within the borders of the Corellian sector and at the hands of your assassin put a dagger through that idea."

"Yes, that aspect worked out according to plan, but the Jedi Order's internal security is too good now despite Tholme's death. The cyber-bugs implanted in the Temple's Hypercom array and

cleaning droids are all gone. I, we, are forced to rely on your connections, which are dwindling with it at within every month of your exile from the Order."

"True, but we still have the bots you have in the Relay centers, and the tracking devices in all of the Astromech units which renew themselves every time they communicate with Coruscant's traffic control system," C'boath said placatingly. "That was a stroke of genius. And the training frigates were shut down as well," C'boath finished, before scowling. "Even if the training center on Serenno is booming."

Sidious snarled at that reminder, which deepened further when the man in the pickup smirked having seen it. Jorus was a very cantankerous apprentice, a tool that would in the long run turn on him. But Sidious had planned for that in the event it occurred. That plan consisted of finding an admiral that could beat any that Jorus came up with if he decided to attempt a real war of conquest and was already in place. *There is also my real apprentice to consider. And if 'Dominus' is so arrogant as to challenge me directly... it has been some time since I was able to torture someone first hand. C'boath is many things, but not a physical threat to me or even my real apprentice.*

With that thought Sidious stopped scowling and instead smiled thinly back now, letting the other man see, letting him wonder what he had missed. "It's true I am rather irritated about that," He said in Sidious best conversational tone, making the line between his real personality and his assumed personality of Palpatine blur for a moment. "I want all of the Jedi spawn in one place as they should be, easy to kill when it comes time to. Or turn if I so wish it, but that isn't truly needed. How many of the Jedi who agree with your position will you be able to sway to the Dark Side?"

C'boath shrugged his shoulders as if it was of no moment. "All of them eventually. It will take me some time, but I can dominate each of them in time if they are in my presence long enough. And with each one, I grow stronger."

This too was true and was yet another reason why Jorus was both an excellent tool and a dangerous one. Still, Sidious had already thought about the ways he had prepared for that eventuality once already in this conversation, and he wasn't going to devote more time to do so while they were in communication. "Good. Choose about ten or so to sway to your cause openly when the war begins, but keep the rest in reserve. It might serve our cause to have Jedi suddenly acting out randomly throughout the Republic, to better dirty the Order's reputation."

"Ah yes, Coleman Trebor. His work has put a halt to your plans to sway public opinion away from the Jedi hasn't it?" Jorus murmured. "I never met the Vurt myself, but I have to admit to being impressed with his work in that area. And the Sith's too. That you had so many cutouts that none of your machinations in the media have been linked back to anyone connected to your Rule of Two is incredible." His eyes narrowing above his bushy beard C'boath abruptly changed the subject. "How much longer before the 'Crisis' comes to a head do you think?"

"Six months or thereabouts. In fact, I know precisely what will tip the balance between a growing crisis and outright war: The Military Creation Act is going to be up in front of the Senate for approval then. If the secessionists wish to break away, they will have to do so violently at that point..."

"Excellent," Jorus said with a nod. "My Chosen Fleet Admiral is beginning to champ at the bit. I might have to remove some of his limbs once more if he doesn't stop."

Sidious chuckled at that for once enjoying C'boath's rather vile sense of humor, then glanced at the time. "We're going to have to cut this off now. You know how do contact me again in the future if there is an emergency."

"Of course," Jorus said, his entire body language along with his tone conveying the fact that he didn't think there would ever be an emergency that he could not handle.

"Good." With that, Sidious cut the connection.

Leaning back in his hidden meditation cum throne room, he scowled. C'boath was working out in many ways very well, but the man's arrogance and independence were beyond what even Sidious had expected after falling to the Dark Side and taking his Force Dominance powers to their fullest extent.

Arrogance could be dealt with, independence yes that too could be used, channeled appropriately. Yet put them together with his sense of drama and dark humor, his enjoyment in the machinations we are using, they make for a more volatile combination. And outside of his ability with Force domination, it is not even deserving of his arrogance! Yes, he was allowed to assume the title of Master among the Jedi as if that mattered at all, but he is not that powerful in the Force.

Every time he spoke to C'boath Sidious was reminded the man had been his fallback choice for the public face of the Sith when the time came. He could not lament using Dooku to remove Plagueis overmuch, but even so, he could have wished that Dooku had fallen into his hands as Sidious had thought Dooku would for so many years. But the New techniques, the revelation the Order could still evolve and learn new abilities, had put paid to that.

Now, Anakin, he will be a much better apprentice when the time comes, as is my true apprentice now. That thought allowed Sidious to throw off the black mood dealing with C'boath had given him. Anakin and Windu had become the Jedi poster boys thanks to Sidious's subtle manipulation of the media and the Jedi order's own Council of Reassignment. The 'Jedi Without Fear' they were called, after having been tossed into numerous combat situations over the past three years. *And the only Jedi who has enough media acumen to notice is far too busy attempting to turn back the sentiment of centuries of subtle anti-Jedi propaganda in the Core Worlds.*

Anakin is growing more arrogant, even though Windu has attempted to stomp it out, and cut off any direct communication between us. I wish I could get a feeling as to how close the two of them are, but with communication chopped off, I cannot. Still, that hardly matters. The seed is planted, or rather seeds in this case. There are numerous ways to make him fall to the Dark Side, and I have my thumbs on them all. Especially the object of his obsession, Amidala.

At that thought, Sidious contemplated how the vagaries of the Force worked at times. *Who knew that pathetic little girl would become such a voice in the Senate? And a staunch antimilitarist as well.*

She speaks eloquently on the senatorial floor, winning hearts and minds despite her youth and the fact that numerous people have attempted to attack her on that policy given the fact that Naboo has its own large military force. She successfully defended that, because while it did, it was a purely defensive force. Naboo had no ships beyond to starfighter squadrons with hyperspace capability.

Padme spoke eloquently of the chaos and anarchy that would occur if the secessionists were allowed to break off, and the fears of a military dictatorship on the other. She never attacked the Chancellor directly. In fact, she was one of his admirers applauding his actions in cleaning up the Republic's bureaucracy as much as he had been able to. But Amidala always couched her worries on a Republic military force in terms of the fact they would have to trust the admirals who controlled those fleets and any futures chancellor after Palpatine or that they would be almost forced to use them once they were in play rather than continuing to try to solve problems peacefully, both of which were well-chosen arguments. *Yes, removing Amidala could prove the perfect impetus to all-out war between the Secessionist and the Republic.*

And the other seed for Anakin's downfall it is equally important: his mother. Dealing with her will be simple, and letting him see a vision of it would allow him to take yet another step into the Dark Side.

If only the rest of the Order was following the script! Sidious thought, scowling.

He had hoped to see a true schism within the Order, but Yoda still commanded too much respect for that large-scale a movement. And though that respect had faded, the understanding and acceptance of the new techniques had spread too far by this point to be a breaking point. Further, the Jedi themselves were more flexible than the Great Plan called for with the new techniques and allowing physical relationships if not emotional ones. They were still arguing about the need for lightsaber retraining and allowing emotional attachments and the Oaths however.

The emotional connection issue was never going to go away, certainly not in the next ten years or more. Too many Jedi still saw any emotion or attachment as a weakness that automatically led to the Dark Side or simply divided loyalties. And with the Veil blocking their ability to see their own futures, Sidious believed the Jedi would not be willing to bend on that point.

The retraining process was incredibly slow thanks to the passive resistance of the Consulars who made up the large majority of those being forced into it. But the new techniques were now spread almost entirely throughout the Order.

Then again, my own think tank looking into them have been able to perform many of the same techniques. And I have found my own true apprentice to use until Anakin is ripe for the plucking, Sidious thought.

That woman was a young Dathomiri witch named Assajj Ventress who had been taken as a Jedi padawan years ago after being sold into slavery, only for her Master to die as they attempted to bring peace to a war-torn planet. When Sidious became aware of her presence, she had made herself rule of Rattatak after having given in to the Dark Side and killing all those responsible for his death. He had swayed her to his side easily during one of his periodic 'sabbaticals' away from Coruscant, finding in her a willing student in the Dark Side with a simmering rage against the Jedi Order due to their 'abandonment' of her master.

Everything in the Senate is coming to a head. My centrist party is pushing for more and more central authority to streamline the bureaucracy and get rid of the corruption of course. And the secessionists are howling ever louder, violence against the senators from either side is also slowly rising. It is magnificent, the arrogance, anger, complacency, and violence, such a delicious soup they all make!

The Jedi can see it coming. They even know we are still out there, but they can do nothing to stop it. They know the Sith are still around, but they simply can find no thread to link that rise to me. Their hopelessness makes it all the sweeter.

Yes, Sidious reflected, as he pulled off his cloak and exited the room, climbing a secret stairwell up to an equally secret entranceway hidden behind a group of large bookcases in his office. *I should be grimly satisfied with the progress of the great plan. And yet, and yet there is still something tingling in my senses. Something the Dark Side is trying to tell me. I have missed something. Something about that shift last month...*

It had felt almost as if one of the nodes set up to gather Dark Side energies that Plagueis and his forebears had created to give the Veil its power had somehow been turned to the light. But such a thing was impossible. The physical spires might be destroyed, but never turned, and even if they were destroyed, the Dark Side node they created would still be there.

Yet for all Sidious's ability, he could not localize the feeling, and that was beyond galling. Over the past few years Sidious had grown accustomed to the way that the Force itself bent to his will, would allow him to see farther and deeper than any Jedi or even Dark Lord of the Sith had ever been able to do before. It was why he felt his ascension was destiny, if the Force as a whole was aiding him rather than just the Dark Side then surely the Force knew the balance had to be restored. But in this, this is the Force was silent, and even the Dark Side seemed unable to

aid his vision. And that, more than even the niggling sense that he was missing something, disturbed Sidious greatly.

OOOOOOO

Passing through hyperspace in this area was now truly weird, Harry reflected. Where before when traveling to Jadein, the feeling had been strange too, but not in the same way. The difference was between following a trail someone had just laid down in a forest and being on the back of someone leading you through tall grass. Whereas in the first you were aware of the trees and rocks all around you, they were out of your way and not very important.

But with the grass, you could see the grass returning to its upright position after you passed and bent out of your way as you moved through it. It was a very strange and unusual feeling, as was the sense of being literally surrounded by the sensation of Master Fay's presence when she was thousands of light years away.

Looking around at the other Jedi, he could feel their own sense of shocked wonder, and he whispered, "I think Master Fay is getting a handle on her new powers."

"With the nebulae in the way no astromech computer would ever work over this distance Master Micah said with a soft smile. "Not without Master Fay to move the grass as it were to her will. And that was an excellent analogy, Harry."

Harry winced not having realized he had projected that. *"You didn't I did,"* Aayla said through their link. *"Sorry, but I thought it was too good an image not to share."*

"No worries," Mace said with a shrug.

What had taken them years to cover heading out, now had barely taken them a week. Soon they would be coming out of hyperspace in the first Republic system they had seen for over five years.

There was the normal blink of time as the ship exited hyperspace, and suddenly they were free, out into real-space once more. Ahead of them deeper into the system's gravity well, was a simple agricultural world with only a few ships in orbit around a single space station. But the visual sight of the planet wasn't nearly as important as what it represented: it was the first Republic planet they had seen in over four years.

"We're back," Harry said aloud, looking around at his friends. "It almost feels like even as Jedi we should say something momentous, but off the top of my head, I can't think of anything."

He could feel Aayla's rueful agreement through their link as Alecto laughed and the two older Jedi rolled their eyes. *"It's true Harry,"* she said through their link. *"After all, we've made this ship our home more than we ever did even Serenno, much less the Order's Temple or the*

Republic as a whole. Although it will be very nice to get in touch with our friends in and out of the Order."

"Agreed," Harry replied, their thoughts turning to the rest of Clan Saa, wondering how they were all doing, and Padme along with a few other acquaintances they had made outside the Order.

Yes, but I predict it will be some time before we can get in touch with them. The rest of the Order still follows that whole silly no attachment thing remember? Padme though we should be able to reach out to much easier."

While the bond-mates were having this internal conversation, Master Giiett was dealing with the local space controls and their understandable spurt of panic. After all, the Lucrehulk was larger than everything in orbit including the space station by a factor of two. But when they heard the Jedi Master's title they calmed down instantly and informed the Jedi that yes, they were within range of the Republic's Hypercom network.

"And that means we can phone home," Micah said with a bit of true humor in his voice. "Let us do that right now. Place us in orbit around the planet Quinlan, I will inform the locals that we will be staying only for a few hours. Padawans, start up the Hypercom array, we will be there presently."

Moments later all five of them were sitting in chairs in front of the relay system. Like much of the rest of the ship, this room had been somewhat rearranged over the years. Gone were the hard chairs that had been there originally, replaced by a series of large cushions on which they all knelt as they looked into the pickup.

OOOOOOO

Yoda sat in his normal chair in the council chamber on Coruscant his eyes closed as he meditated, feeling every day of his nine-hundred plus years. These days the weight of leading the Order weighed heavily on him, as it did Master Rancisis. The two of them had, each in their own way, been trying to steer the ship of the Order through these tumultuous times.

They had been able to for the most part, through compromise on certain matters and taking a hard stance on others. They had compromised by shutting down the training frigates but took a hard stance on keeping the center on Serenno open. They had compromised by allowing the more learned Consular Master to only learn the new techniques taught there if they felt they didn't need to retrain their lightsaber skills, but forced nearly every knight of that sect to retrain their lightsaber skills, which had been a major point of contention. There were still several thousand Jedi Consulars who had yet to be retrained, but more than two-thirds of the Order could now use the new techniques and had been trained in a better lightsaber style than Niman.

Yet there had been losses as well. Jorus C'boath leaving the Order rather than continue, in the human master's words to 'prop up the dying, moribund and corruption-riddled body of the Republic' had been a blow. It had led to the growing number of Jedi unwilling to get involved in the debate between the Secessionists and the Centrists. They called it a crisis of conscience, and with the Force silent on that like so much else thanks to the Veil, the movement was willing to challenge the Councils on this matter. It wasn't a major problem yet since even now the Jedi didn't have to use that many of their members to guard the various Senators or take part in specific debates, but it was a sign that trouble was brewing there.

All in all however, while the Order was more fractious Yoda felt that the vision he had so long ago upon meeting Harry had come to pass: that for all the added impurities, the metal of the Order was stronger now, despite the loss of Master C'boath. Fewer Jedi were dying on missions thanks to the training center, the Jedi as a whole were still respected, and several long felt tensions within the Order had been allowed to vent without damaging the edifice as a whole.

And yet, ready for the challenge are we? Yoda mused, sending his thoughts out into the Force, trying to see through the Veil. Yet even he learned and powerful Grandmaster of the Order, could not see beyond the now in the Force. It was like trying to spot a fish in a pool of sludge or trying to breathe when surrounded by the same. *The Veil still in place it is, the Sith, still out there they are. Unable to find them we are, await the next blow we are forced to. The true threat that is, not the current crisis. A tool that is.*

Master Tholme had not been the only Jedi they lost to the Sith assassin they now knew as Darth Maul. The Jedi had sent Master Eeth Koth and four other Masters after him, two of whom had died before they ran him to ground and killed him in turn. That they had to do so without the aid of the Green Jedi when the Dark Side user was hiding within the Corellia sector was still a sore point for some, but Yoda was willing to leave the Green alone. They were still Jedi, even if they did not answer to Coruscant any longer.

On the other hand, C'boath bothered Yoda more. Despite personally examining the man, Yoda was still uncertain that he was without taint in the Dark Side. And that was part of the problem: Yoda was uncertain. That was something he was not used to, not at all. But those swayed by C'boath's words those he and the other council members were more certain about the fact that they had not fallen to the Dark Side. Each and every Jedi among those who refused to take missions pertaining to the Secessionist debate had good, understandable reasons to no longer believe the Order's reliance on the Senate for most of its orders was wrong.

C'boath, watched he is, trust in the Dark Woman's abilities there we must. Yoda thought, thinking of the most senior of the Order's five remaining Jedi Shadows. *Continue to prepare for the blows to come we must.*

Then he felt it: the slight surge in the distance, a flash of Light against the darkness of the Veil at the farthest he could reach. Something had just been added once more, and Yoda smiled, recognizing the touch of that light.

Opening his eyes, he hopped down from his chair, grabbing up his gimer stick from where it had been leaning against his chair. Looking over at the other two council members in the room, master Gallia and Master Koon he gestured them to follow him. "Come. A call, coming into the Hypercom there will be soon. A long looked for group, returned they have from beyond."

While his voice was calm Yoda was almost ebullient now, his earlier maudlin thoughts overcome by a surprising surge of energy. *Hope for the future, there still is. Not so dark, any longer the waters we swim in.*

The three Jedi masters went down to the central communications room, where they respectfully but forcefully asked the two Jedi on watch to vacate the room. A moment later the call that Yoda had anticipated came in. "Master Yoda, my fellow council members, even you Plo, it is strangely good to see you after so long." Master Giiett said with a smile on his face.

"And it is good to see you again as well, my friend. You are... looking somewhat more aged than I expected, however. Have you perhaps been staying out in the sun too long?" Master Koon shot back.

For a moment Yoda simply took in the sight making note of everything, letting Plo and Micah entertain themselves with their normal byplay. The three padawans looked older but coming from races that had trouble reaching past a single century that made sense. They sat calmly, staring into the pickup with a decent amount of control and poise. Knight Vos too looked older, but not so much as the youngsters. But Micah looked far older than a mere four years should have allowed for. His hair was now entirely white, and as Plo pointed out he looked weather-beaten almost, though he still retained his sense of humor apparently.

"Hrhrhm, returned you have after years out of touch. A tale to tell you have. First, tell us you will of Master Fay." Yoda said, interrupting the two other Masters.

"I am afraid Master Fay is no longer with us," Micah said.

As the other two council members processed that, Yoda concentrated on the youngling's faces. Nothing in them gave anything away, not grief, not anything. Then young Harry winked and Yoda felt his own lips twitch. *A subterfuge it is.* "A long tale this will be then?"

"Master we have upwards of five years' worth of missions and various tribulations to tell you about, the length of the tale should have been assumed," Micah replied with a smirk. "I also wish to report that before her passing, Master Fay had decided that Padawan Potter is ready for his knighthood trials. My own Padawan and Padawan Secura are also ready."

"Hrhrhm, understood this is. Learn more about Master Fay's fall in person I wish to. Return to Serenno you will," Yoda ordered.

"A Lucrehulk, trouble it would cause in orbit around Coruscant, regardless of ownership," Yoda said, for the benefit of whoever might be listening in on the Hypercom. "For now, brief overview you will give."

"In brief, we were able to aid over two dozen planets through various difficulties. Two plagues, one of which stressed us to the limit, the other was much easier to deal with thanks to modern medicine. Several environmental disasters large and small, a few tyrants deposed, and one barbarian migration which would have wiped out the civilized society on that planet stopped in its tracks. It's been a busy time," Micah finished, his tone about as sardonic as he could make it.

"But we were unable to convince those planets to rejoin the Republic. Since they are still cut off from the Republic thanks to the gravity anomalies of the region we didn't make that our priority," Quinlan interjected.

"Understandable this is. Nothing to gain, those planets would have in seeking to rejoin the Republic. And believe you do these three ready for their knighthood trials?" Yoda asked. "Momentous it is, young they still are."

"Not as much for our races master," Harry replied for them all. "Were all in our mid-twenties after all. That's not exactly young."

"Know this I do," Yoda said, joining in the laughter of the other two high counsel Masters. "Still, most Jedi become knights they do only in their late twenties early thirties."

"I suppose we have always been precocious," Aayla said with a grin.

"True this is as well," Yoda said.

He spent a long time simply looking at them, one after another before finally nodding slowly. "Meet with you on Sorrento we will. In greater detail, we will hear of your missions then. Much information you will learn as well," he said obliquely. "Looking forward to this I am."

OOOOOOO

As the connection cut off, Harry looked around at the others. "Is it just me, or did everyone else get the impression that we've missed a lot since we started this trip?"

"It was definitely not just you, but perhaps we should have assumed that given the length of time we were out of communication. Still, that went better than I hoped." Micah replied. "After all, the Veil is still in place."

"We don't have to be told that master," Aayla said, with a shiver, leaning into Harry, the bond between them almost warming her physically as it strove to keep the Veil of the Dark Side at bay. "I felt the Dark Side closing all around us the moment we exited hyperspace."

"As did I padawan," Micah said somewhat more subdued than was his normal tone. "But in general, it is a good sign that the High Council was so upbeat and understood enough to keep their communications so circumspect. But it is both the power of the Veil and its longevity that concerns me. It shows the threat of the Sith has grown over the years."

Quinlan, who had been speed reading some of the newsbytes that they were also getting over the Hypercom, shook his head. "It goes quite a bit further than that. There seems to be a major question about whether or not the Republic will survive in its current form or at all judging by some of these headlines." He read several headlines off, looking over at Micah. "'Secessionists take to the streets! NO more taxation they shout, while children go hungry on numerous Expansion Region planets.' 'Greed and corruption, how the Republic is really run?' Four attempts on Senators backing Chancellor Palpatine's Anti-corruption stance, are the Secessionists involved?'"

"I think," Micah said quietly, "That we need to read up on what we've missed. Can we download some kind of historical archive covering the major events of the last five years?"

"Not from here, unless the planet itself keeps such. We'd have to access one of the Relay stations to pull that information directly from the Hypercom network. That's definitely possible, and given how much Serenno chaffs under Republic rule we might want to know what we're getting into before we head there." As Micah agreed with that Quinlan stood up, eager to head to the bridge and contact the locals.

"So, can we make use of the Hypercom now, master Giiett?" Aayla asked, exchanging a look with Harry. "*Padme told us she was going to run for Senator after her tenure as queen was over. And you know that given her personality Padme might be involved in all of this.*" She sent over their link.

"Plus the rest of our friends have one another and the Order, Padme only has her friends, Chewie, and her other bodyguards. And no offense to them, but that doesn't represent nearly as much in terms of resources as the Order does." Harry agreed. *"Plus, I just want to talk to her, it's been four years after all, and she's the only one of our friends we could contact without going through the order and getting the conservatives all... what was that word my mom used? Stroppey?"*

Feeling Aayla giggle in his mind and her very firm agreement with that Harry turned his attention back to Micah who smiled blandly at them and stood up. "You may indeed. However, if Quinlan is able to find us a local library which has recorded newscasts of the past few years, I will expect you both to study it before we leave tomorrow afternoon."

"Of course Master," Harry and Aayla replied, hiding their groans.

OOOOOOO

"Garm, I understand your point, I really do, but I refuse to make any move against the Chancellor like that! I have done my best to stay away from character attacks, and this smacks far too much of that kind of low-brow tactic!" Padme Amidala shouted, or as she would put it, stated forcefully as she paced about the room.

Padme had grown since her time as queen somewhat. She had added about four more inches of height to her frame while her face had lost much of its body fat, becoming slightly longer in the jawline but still just as beautiful. She stood now at five feet four inches, and had somehow, despite her job as Senator and before that queen had kept her lithe, trim figure. Her waist was so thin it was the envy of other female Senators or Senator's wives, though her bust was rather modest at the same time, which, if she had time for such things, Padme might have resented. As it was, she didn't. She was currently wearing tight pantaloons and an equally tight upper shirt which allowed her a full range of movement, her long brown hair loose down her back.

"You know you're gorgeous when you get all fiery?" Her guest asked. He was a middle-aged man with short cropped curly brown hair and a neat, trim mustache, giving him the image of a dashing rogue. Given the fact he came from Corellia, home of the romantic rogue loved in many holo-dramas, this fit quite well. This was Senator Garm Bel Iblis, the speaker for the powerful and important Corellia system.

"If I wasn't young enough to be your daughter I'd be flattered, and don't change the subject," Padme replied, but she stopped stalking around the room to sit across from him once more. "Do you have anything concrete to go on for your concerns?"

Garm grumbled a little then slowly shook his head. "No, just...I don't like Palpatine, that's all there is to it. He's just a little too certain, a little too good at always coming out ahead."

"So... you don't like him because he's better at politics than you are," Padme said, gently poking fun at the older man. As he grumbled again she asked, "And what does Shyla have to say about your concerns?"

"Ugh, reminding me you're on first name terms with my Dictat Padme? Low blow. And as you are well aware, Lady Shyla understands and agrees with our concerns about the Military Creation Act, but doesn't see Palpatine as the main enemy. Like you, she is more concerned about the Centrist Parties 'Core first' policies." Garm said, leaning back and becoming more serious. "We're racing toward a precipice Padme, you know it, I know it. As much as the Centrists like to tout Palpatine's successes, he's still the Chancellor who may or may not be in charge of the Republic once more becoming a military power. We can't forget that."

"I'm not. I've talked to Sheev about that very concern, and he is worried about much the same thing. He's approached the Jedi for their opinion, and for officers if it ever comes to it, but he is afraid of what the Secessionists are willing to do to gain their freedom. I wish I could argue that he is jumping at shadows, but given how much violence has occurred started from both sides of this debate, I can't." Padme sighed, rubbing at her face and showing a weariness she would

never allow anyone but her staunchest allies to see. "But the Military Creation Act, it is going to simply be too much for the Secessionists to stand."

For a moment the two of them were silent, wondering where to take the discussion. Garm had come here to sound Padme out in person about moving against Palpatine, but other than that, there really hadn't been anything new the two of them had to talk about. They were allies in far too many ways, so any discussion they had on most points was simply preaching to the converted. "Have you talked to Senator Organa recently?" he asked. "I understand he just married his queen last week?"

"He did, and they are both ecstatically happy, it makes my teeth itch being around them they're so sweet," Padme replied tartly. "More importantly, I just remembered that I was asked by my own queen to ask how much it would take to purchase a few of Corellia's mobile shipyards."

"For how long and how many?" Garm asked. Besides being his system's senator, he was also plank owner in several of those mobile shipyards.

"Six I think, and for at least four months. The Hearth's Shield needs some renovations, and none of our own orbital docks are large enough to service it," Padme said, speaking of the Lucrehulk which was the flagship of Naboo's defense fleet. "And several of our cruisers could also use an overhaul. It is either you or Kuat, and I was told they could not get back to us for over a year they are so busy with new construction. Rendili has already refused to have anything to do with us, they are so deeply divided on the Secessionist issue."

"Hmm..." Garm leaned forward, staring at Padme thoughtfully. "New construction?"

"Indeed. Kuat at least seems quite happy at the idea of the Military Creation Act," she said sourly. "All those new ships."

Nodding slowly, Garm understood why Padme was really bringing this up now. Kuat shipyards was easily the largest and most efficient set of shipyards in the known galaxy. They had as much pull as the Techno Union or the Trade Guild, though not as much as the Banking Clan before it was broken up a few years ago due to the scandal surrounding its head. "I think we can make a deal yes..."

They were halfway through that process and were just about to send for a few lawyers and a notary when the door to the sitting room they were in slammed open. Padme turned only to frown as she saw her assistant Sabe standing there. "Apologies, your, um, Senator," she said looking at Padme with wide eyes. "But we just received a Hypercom call from someone I think you want to talk to right away."

"Oh?" Padme asked, looking at her friend in confusion. If it was an emergency, why was she grinning? "Who is it, and why couldn't it wait until I was done with Senator Bel Iblis?"

"If I waited to tell you, you'd probably yell at me for it. It's been more than four years now since you were able to talk to these two after all."

At that hint Padme understood, and a wide, genuine smile appeared on her face. It completely transformed her face, Garm noted, changing Padme from a stern beauty to that of a normal twenty-three year old. "Excuse me Garm, but this really can't wait."

"Oh don't worry about me, I'll just take the rest of the evening off, take in the sights, maybe head to the beaches." Garm said with a smile. *And if that isn't a girl about to speak to a lost love or something similar I don't know what it could be.*

By the time that Padme reached her chambers, Sabe was already there, waiting impatiently in the open door. The queen arrived right after Padme, huffing slightly in her royal robes.

As Padme smirked at her, Eirtae growled angrily. "I knew it! You didn't try to get rid of the royal regalia because you wanted to see your successor suffer just as much as you did! That's petty Padme, very petty." Since there was no law to stop a person who had lost the election from running again, Eirtae had run for queen when Padme stepped down after her two terms as queen. Now older and more experienced and running on a platform of broadening trade connections within their sector and a strong stance on defense spending, Eirtae, with Padme's support, had won the seat handily.

"But oh so satisfying," Padme snarked back. The two of them were still best of friends, but since Padme was the senator for the entire sector, they often clashed on policy matters.

"I will get you back for this Padme," Eirtae muttered, before stepping into the room. "Somehow, I will get you back."

Padme smiled at Eirtae's now routine reply before sitting down at the sofa in her sitting room and accepting the rerouted call from the palace's Hypercom.

An instant later, there they were. Harry and Aayla, sitting there staring back at her. From what she could see they had aged somewhat, but that was to be expected. But they were still Harry and Aayla, smiling back at her, almost radiating warmth somehow through the pickup. "Hello Padme," Harry said. "As should be obvious, we're back, and we were hoping to check in with all our old friends. You were first on the list."

"Flattering I suppose, but I know you really can't ask the Order to let you check in with your other friends, so not as flattering as it first appears," Padme said with a laugh as her two former handmaidens piled into the room. Sabe joined Padme on the sofa, while Eirtae stood behind them and began to peel off her dress, ignoring the fact this would eventually entail nearly flashing her friends and the two Jedi in the hologram.

Padme then threw her arms wide. "Oh but it is good to hear from you my friends, these days I have to watch what I say and to who, have to watch for people wanting to get close to me for their own reasons. It is nice to talk to real friends that aren't these two," she said, waving a hand lazily at the others in the room.

"Ouch, that hurts, if it wasn't so true," Eirtae muttered from behind Padme. "Why did I want this job again?"

"Because you didn't listen to me about how bad it was?" Padme asked, 'innocently' not even turning around. This earned her a thwack on the shoulder and laughter from the others, including Aayla and Harry.

"Ahem, as a Jedi I am a lawful representative of the Republic and I have to warn you about performing any further domestic abuse in our line of sight," Harry said. Then he spoiled it by smirking at them all. "Wait until we're off the line please."

After they had stopped laughing at that, Aayla asked seriously. "So, I have no doubt that you became a senator as you said you would. Congratulations are in order for that, but I must ask, are you safe? We've been rather disturbed by the news records we've seen about this Secessionist Crisis."

"I still have Chewie and a few Wookies as bodyguards even though I'm no longer serving as queen. Chewie and his wife actually moved here, they said Naboo was a nice planet to spend a few decades on. Did you know how long Wookies live? They said that as if it was no big deal. So you don't have to worry about me." Padme assured her friend, happy that after so long they were still the same warm, caring people she remembered, and further still thought of her as a friend after so long.

"That means you really are involved in all this Secessionist and Centrist debate," Harry said with a faint sigh. "How bad is it really?"

"...Bad." Padme replied, almost all the energy and good humor leaving her instantly. She and Eirtae both seemed to collapse almost, their expressions darkening even as Eirtae finished undressing, moving around the sofa to join her friends.

Padme continued, her tone somber now, weary beyond belief. "It is getting more and more vociferous every day we hold debates about it. The last time the Senate met there was a bomb scare that both sides are blaming the other for which forced a recess, hence why I'm home on Naboo at all. We'll be meeting again in a week, but only after the security for the building has been reinforced under the direction of several Jedi."

With a shake of her head Padme seemed to throw off her fell mood, leaning forward. "But enough about me, what about you two? What can you tell me about your adventures out in the great beyond?"

None of them got any real sleep that night. But they also felt it was well worth it, to reconnect with old friends.

OOOOOOO

In terms of appearance, Shaak Ti had not changed overmuch in the five years since she had taken up permanent residence at the Serenno trade center. She had not grown overmuch, save perhaps in her chest area, the length of her lekku and montrals, but not her height or the width of her shoulders. She still wore her akul tooth necklace on her forehead between her montrals, and favored an even more Spartan robe than most Jedi wore most of the time. Even her underthings, which she was currently wearing as she danced around the dueling area, was bare bones, made of some coarse fiber and barely covering her waist, thighs, and chest.

Yet in terms of skill and poise, she had changed greatly. Where years ago she had been known as a very good duelist for a Knight, Jedi Master Shaak Ti was now known as one of the five best duelists in the Order. Her mastery of the so-called new techniques also stood out from the rest of the Order. Not so much in terms of power, or the fact that she could use them at all. Most Jedi by this point could use at least a few of the main three. No, her known mastery came in that Shaak had experimented with them to an incredible degree, using them in ways both large and small, and also could do a few things that most Jedi couldn't.

That thought was running through padawan Zule Xiss's mind as she backpedaled rapidly, flipping through the air and using her own Force Shields to defend herself after her attack had been thwarted by a Force Shield, a tidy little thing appearing between Zule's lightsaber and her target. *She didn't even have to gesture, by the Force it didn't even look like she had concentrated at all!* Since Shaak Ti had been among those Jedi first introduced to the Clan Saa techniques Zule had known she could use them, but it was the subtle ways she did and the fact she incorporated them into her lightsaber style so completely, that was startling.

Zule and Master Glaive had both been injured on a recent mission to retrieve a kidnapped family from some pirates out of Vinsoth. It turned out though that the pirates had been hired mercenaries from a rival family, which they found out when they returned the family to Vinsoth only to be caught in a crossfire in a very crowded spaceport.

They had fought their way out and had done so without any murdered civilians thanks to Force Shields. They had even captured the attackers, and eventually their employer, but not before Zule's and her Master's legs had been badly injured by a hidden mine by that went off right below them during the initial battle. It had been a choice of Force pushing the civilians away while jumping away themselves, or using Force shields and let the Eviscerator Mine, a deadly antipersonnel weapon, kill dozens of people. They had chosen the first.

Afterwards the master and padawan duo had been ordered to Serenno for recovery. It was closer than the Temple, and the Council of Reassignment had another job for them in the Lahara Sector nearby.

Landing on her feet, Zule rolled to the side, bringing around the lightsaber in her right hand and thrusting forward with her left conjuring up a stunning bolt. But not from her thrusting lightsaber's tip as she had a few times already in this fight. Rather the red blast of Force power came from the hand holding that lightsaber and instead of being shaped into a wide angle beam, it flashed out in a sphere coming out of her hand.

Even so, Shaak wasn't in range any longer. Instead of attacking, she had backed up quickly, raising her single lightsaber to her forehead in a salute. "Your use of the Jarkai is good, but you need to work on your footwork. Every time you have to backpedal, you are redirecting just enough of your attention to that as to give me an opening. And your use of the Force techniques is broadcasted so much in the Force so that I can pick it up in my precognition easily," the Togrutan master lectured, her voice almost stern but not quite, a twitching mouth and twinkle in her eye softening the words.

Then Shaak leaped straight upwards, twisting around and bringing her lightsaber around to block Master Glaive. The larger man attacked ferociously, using all of his speed and the full weight of his massive frame's strength to try and there down the shorter Master Shaak with his style of Djem So. If he could pin Shaak in place her style of Makashi could be overcome. Knowing this Zule instantly darted forward, her lightsabers flashing.

Between the two of them, they should've been able to press Shaak backwards, and they did but it turned out only because she'd let them. It was very obvious to Zule as she tried to fling herself this way and that around Shaak trying to box her in but never quite managing despite her extensive use of the Jar'kai/Ataru form. Master Glaive continued to try and batter her defenses down, but the woman was his better when it came to a lightsaber.

An instant before Shaak was about to punch through Glaive's attack Zule once more brought out a new technique sending out a stun bolt. She then conjured up a rock underneath Shaak in order to trip her as she flipped herself backwards away from a blow from Master Glaive instead of attacking as Zule's Force Precognition had said. *Darn it, going to have to step this up a notch.* With that in mind, Zule concentrated and a bolt of fire appeared to the side of her which she gestured with a lightsaber blade, lashing it forward.

But Shaak moved out of the way, looking almost like a dancer on a stage, a blast of water appearing instantly and turning the fire to steam. The steam flared out around Zule who flung up a Force Shield while Shaak flung herself forward, engaging Master Glaive in a series of sharp economical blows. Each of them took the larger, more powerful Jedi's lightsaber out of position until he was open for a thrust, which tagged him in the chest.

She then twisted away, spinning to the side bringing around her lightsaber to block first one then the other of Zule's, swiftly forcing them into a lock position. "That was better," she said, almost conversationally despite the exertion of a second ago. "But when you bring in element attacks like that, you need to coordinate with your partner to take the best advantage." Her lips twitched into an actual smile as she went on in an apologetic tone. "Also research a bit about

the individual you're fighting. Fire is a destructive technique, but rather useless against someone who relies on water as I do."

"As for your attempt at conjuration, I cannot argue with the size of the rock you conjured..." She suddenly leaped back, nothing about her body having told Zule or even the Force that she was about to. This sent Zule stumbling, and her foot caught on a large boulder that had not been there a moment ago. She then looked up as numerous tiny needles flew her way. She blocked more than half of them with her lightsaber, the solid needles being burned just enough to change their trajectory. But some got through to hit her chest, bouncing, their points blunt. None of them among would've had much stopping power in any event, but combined they would've been very, very painful.

"Just your use of it," Shaak finished, delivering another smile to Zule. Disconnecting her lightsaber, she looked around the sparring ring. "Your legs seem to be on the mend, but your teamwork still needs a bit more work. If your mission from the Order is not time sensitive, I would like to work with you more on that," She said looking over at Master Glaive.

"It is time sensitive, and we've spent enough time here playing these games," Glaive said grumpily as she disconnected his own lightsaber and marched away.

This left Shaak with the younger Zule. Staring after him thoughtfully Shaak slowly placed her lightsaber on her belt and turned to look at the younger woman. "He cannot use the new techniques?"

"Master Glaive can use Force Shield but nothing more," Zule said, bowing her head. "It is a point of contention between us. I've offered numerous times to help him, but he refuses to take instruction from me. Worse is the fact that I have been requesting the chance to take my knighthood trials. He says I'm at least two more years away from that I'm not certain I agree."

"You're uncertain you have anything more to learn from him," Shaak corrected, looking at the girl closely. "I do not doubt that this has been difficult to deal with Master Glaive, his attitude is very... prickly. But that does not mean he has nothing left to teach you. Set aside your own pride in your knowledge of the new techniques and your abilities, and retain an open mind as you remain with him. As for his learning the new techniques, I will speak to Glaive further on that score. He will no doubt take instruction better from myself, Komari, or Master Yoda than from you."

Zule sighed but nodded. "Yes, Master Ti."

"Good. Just think of it as a lesson in patience," Shaak said with a faint smile, which grew as she heard Zule groan. In her time with the padawans of Clan Saa, she had gotten used to their more emotional ways, and enjoyed releasing her sometimes low humor on them these days.

The Togrutan led the way out of the dueling ring, before pausing staring upwards. Not the sky Zule realized, but beyond into space. A second later, as the half-Falleen stretched out her own Force senses she began to grin so wide it actually hurt. "They're back!"

Moving a little quicker now, the two of them moved over to grab up their robes, pulling them on. They made their way inside the training center, where they met with Komari Vosa and Master Yaddle. The diminutive alien nodded at them all. "New arrivals, we soon will have. But reason to cancel classes for the day they are not. Finish your class, you should, Master Vosa."

Shaak bowed to the council member. "My extra training with padawan Zule and Master Glaive is finished for the day, so I will prepare to meet our friends." She then went on more hesitantly. "I... do not sense Master Fay with them."

Yaddle frowned, looking up words and thinking deeply. "Warned I was of their arrival. Informed of Master Fay, I was not. Assuming before learning of the facts, dangerous it is. In the Force, we must trust."

The other two Jedi nodded. While Komari moved out to meet the youngling class she was scheduled to work with that day, Zule excused herself to go get a shower before her friends arrived.

OOOOOOO

The spaceways around Serenno was even more bustling than it was when they left, and from the looks of several of the icons on their scanners, it looked as if the Council of Counts had continued its starfighter-based military buildup. They had added to this with several large in-system patrol craft. They looked a bit larger than a normal example of those ships, and far more bulbous. "I wonder what those are," Quinlan muttered, tapping one of their icons.

"The route the locals have asked us to take won't pass any of them near enough to get a visual," Micah said softly. "Still, I could ask. Often the simplest method is the path to wisdom."

Rolling his eyes good-naturedly at the older man's homily, Quinlan nodded. "There's only ten of them in the system from what I can see. They could have more hiding behind the various planets away from us, but why would they be hiding them from the angle we came in from? I'm also reading at least eighty squadrons worth of starfighters spread out across the system."

"There are," Harry spoke up from where he had also been looking over the data, glancing at Aayla as she did the same.

"The plan for the starfighter Serenno Defense Force was to have a hundred and twenty starfighter squadrons eventually and to keep twenty in the field at any given time, out protecting their various shipping concerns, two to a convoy. It looks like they were able to build

up to that size. These ships though, I have no idea what they could be." Aayla finished the dual thought.

Micah spoke into the com once more with the Serenno Space Control. They had been noticeably leery after their initial arrival, then thawed noticeably once they registered the IFF code of the ship, and received a call from the Jedi Master aboard it. "Those are our missile frigate's Master Jedi. It's a new concept. Those ships have no energy-based weaponry at all, they simply have a few dozen missile launchers and massive magazines of proton missiles and concussion grenades."

Quinlan blinked then began to chuckle as Aayla giggled. "They took that idea you used against that slaver base and ran with it," she said, nudging her Master in the shoulder.

"Apparently," Quinlan said, still chuckling. "I should be flattered."

"I wonder if you should be getting royalties," Harry said.

"I also wonder if that means they halted construction of their bomber design. If so, we might want to look into purchasing it and maybe even hiring the design team. The Tyrant's Bane's offensive punch is going to have to be largely made up of our starfighters after all." He sent to Aayla, who sent back an affirmative response.

A second later they turned their attention back to the communications console when a voice on the other end of the line spoke up once more. "Master Jedi, do you have Padawan Potter with you? I have just been asked by a representative of the holdings of Count Dooku if that is the case."

Micah answered in the affirmative, glancing over at Harry for a moment as he did. The cagy older master had an idea where this was going, but it was evident that Harry did not. *Dooku, I hope you knew what you were doing because even if the Veil would let me I doubt I could discern the outcome of this.*

"Very good, I will inform the representative." The line went silent for a moment and then came back. "Please inform padawan Potter that there will be a representative arriving at the Dooku training center shortly after your own landing there to discuss some important matters about Count Dooku's will.

Given the amount of traffic in the system, the large Lucrehulk moved into position over Serenno slowly. This gave Harry and the others a chance to get a visual of the local starfighters. They were slightly larger in length than the Falcons that Harry and Aayla flew, with the same kind of flat, dagger shape as the Sprite 6's. They didn't have as much offensive punch, relying on two blasters set on their wings, and what looked like a concussion missile launcher slung underneath the nose. But those lasers were on mounts that could twist and turn, so they would be very good to use in a dogfight. The starfighters, whose name they didn't know yet, had

shields, and the way they moved showed they were highly mobile, with large engines, hyperspace drives, and thrusters on the back of their wings.

"Fast, mobile, and with guns that can track independently of the fighter's course. Those things are starfighter killers. But the Concussion missile might give them enough punch against pirates, but against a real warship?" Harry asked.

"There they would probably rely on the missile frigates," Quinlan replied, his voice laced with good humor.

As the Tyrant's Bane settled into orbit as directed the bridge crew all put their stations on autopilot and exited, heading down to the hanger bay. "Should we take the starfighters?" Aayla asked. "And should we ask the Verpine if any of them wish to take time to see Serenno? It is the first new planet they will have ever seen after all"

"I asked their leader that question earlier. We will set up a rotation for those interested, though I doubt most of them are. The Verpine are more interested in perfecting the technology we have aboard and trying to figure out exactly what kind of technology we used to expand the ship's interior spaces. A week aboard and they still believe it's some kind of technology rather than the Force," he said with a chuckle.

"We might want to keep an eye on that," Harry cautioned. "If they can come up with a technological method of creating a space expansion technique thing, that knowledge will leak and spread quickly, and our monopoly of it will die a fiery death. Which will create all sorts of negative consequences."

"True, but I doubt they'll have much luck in that," Micah replied.

The Jedi were currently speaking of a group of a hundred Verpine crewmembers they had taken on at Jadein as well as a team of businessmen brought along in order to broker new deals for their system. Specifically, they were tasked to organize a trade deal to bring in hyperspace engines. Hyperspace engines were fiddly things that required special, very specific metals to create, which Jadein had not been able to supply despite its massive homegrown industry. Worse, several of the hyperspace capable ships they'd had on hand had been lost on forays into the surrounding area in the years following the system being cut off from its fellows thanks to the spread of the nebulae and all its gravitonic anomalies.

In return, the Verpine would help the Jedi finish all of the internal upgrades and changes they required to the Tyrant's Bane. That was still an ongoing process, but Harry estimated that they would be finished within six months or so. The actual work anyway. That didn't include the need to gather resources such as the sheer number of droid starfighters the Tyrant's Bane could now house, or the parts to build that armada from their onboard factories.

As they boarded their starfighters, Aayla sent, *"I feel Shaak and Zule down there! I didn't expect any of our friends to be on hand to greet us."*

"I know that's kind of amazing, or maybe Force-sent. But at least this way will be able to touch these particular, and then attempt to reach out to our other friends. I have to wonder about Mak and Kass in particular. Are they doing well, or did they get fed up with the Order stopping them from being open about their love?"

Aayla winced. *"Yes, that would be rather sad. They weren't able to form a bond like ours though so their emotional attachment to one another would have seemed a weakness to most of the Jedi Order. Just look at what happened to Githany before the New Sith Wars. Still, their connection to us and the fact the Order allows for physical affection now will have hopefully gained them enough understanding for them to deal with the Order's concerns over their love."*

"Maybe. We'll have to see. If not, if they've left the Order, then looking for them might have to become our first priority." Harry replied.

Moments later, the four starfighters exited the Lucrehulk, flying down through Serenno's atmosphere. To their surprise, they were not directed to the capital, but directly down to Count Dooku's former estate. Once they got close enough he realized why. A landing pad large enough for two Consular-class sized ships had been built there on a raised metal frame, replacing the far smaller landing pad for local shuttles. All four starfighters were able to touch down without needing to wait and did so.

Exiting their ships they were met by Master Yaddle and the welcome sight of Shaak Ti and Zule, with her Master looming behind her. Glaive was the first to speak, his voice brusque as he stared at them. "Micah," said nodding to the councilor, who took no offense at the man's lack of formality. Then he looked over at Harry and Aayla. "So, these two are the ones that started this Force technique revolution. I expected them to be bigger, more imposing."

"Physical strength, not everything it is," Yaddle said, looking up further up at the towering Glaive. "Need a lesson in this do you wish to have?" she asked with a faint smile on her wrinkled face below her still brown hair.

Glaive grumbled but subsided. *Not, Shaak thought, that he really has any grounds to think either of these two aren't strong.* They were both still very obviously fit and Harry was quite tall, barely a few inches shorter than Glaive own towering height, though nowhere near as wide in the shoulders. *He has grown to be quite handsome,* Shaak thought with some amusement, feeling the bond between these two.

That bond had deepened and grown still further in the years since she had last seen them, and the love between them was an almost visible thing even when she wasn't using her Force senses. The bond between them was like a stream of bright light between them. It pushed away the Dark Side, and Ti smiled feeling it, nodding to Aayla and then bowing to Master Giiett

slightly. She wanted to talk to her young friend but that could wait for later. There was no need to become overly effusive in public.

For her part, Zule had no desire or inclination to control her own reactions. Moving forward she pulled Aayla into a tight hug before stepping back her hands on the other girl's shoulder. Aayla hugged her back, then smiled brightly up at her taller friend.

Aayla was rather on the short side, being only about five feet five inches, all of it trim and fit, the fit of a dancer or fencer. Her legs were taut, toned, from what Zule could see, and her chest somewhat smaller than Zule's but very perky. Her face had aged somewhat but there were no new scars there or anywhere else. Her smile was as bright as her eyes.

For her part, Aayla thought Zule had continued to grow into the beautiful woman Aayla knew she would be since they were children. Her brown hair fell loose to her shoulders save for the padawan braid and a ponytail at the back of her head. Her red skin, a shade lighter than Shaak Ti's, shone with good health, and she stood taller by a good four inches than Aayla. Her body was built a tad heavier than Aayla's, but for the most part that weight went to her chest, which was at least a full size larger than Aayla's. Her green eyes sparkled with good humor now, though there were slight frown lines around her mouth.

"You look good. Five plus years out in the boonies seems to have done you no harm," Zule eventually, then glanced down at Aayla's chest, one eyebrow rising in question.

Aayla laughed, looking a little embarrassed as she leaned in to whisper. "I, um sort of changed my body permanently. Harry was able to figure out a way to stop himself from growing hair, so it seemed fair."

Zule laughed at that and then turned to hug both Harry and Alecto tightly. Then they all turned to their attention to the conversation among their superiors. "Yes," Master Giiett was saying "Master Fay is alive and quite well. It is simply... a set of unusual circumstances that keep both Fay and Lily on Ruusan."

"So you were able to find Ruusan?" Shaak asked. "I have attempted to see through the Force how well your mission was going several times, but like so many other things these days, The Force is silent on such long-term matters."

"We succeeded in far more than finding young Harry the lightsaber crystal he was destined to have. But I would prefer to wait for the arrival of Master Yoda and the other councilmen coming here to arrive before going into detail. That way I only have to explain things once."

"Sensible that is. Wait we will," Yaddle said, gesturing them all to follow her as she turned abruptly away. They all moved to the edge of the landing pad, where an open-walled elevator waited. But to a being the Jedi ignored it, leaping off the edge and using the Force to control their descent.

Inside the former mansion of House Dooku, Aayla and the others saw that the training center had changed some besides the elevated landing area. Much of the artwork and ostentatious furniture had been removed. The artwork had been replaced by a few busts of ancient Jedi and the paintings, many of them landscaping paintings that the younglings who came here had done during their time on the planet.

Yaddle explained that the majority of the rooms had also been changed. Those rooms had been very large single rooms for guests or with bunkbeds for servants. They were still technically speaking single rooms, but most of them had been cut in half, allowing each Knight or Master to have their own small room in an environment more conducive to the Jedi mythos. One of the wings, which had originally been made for servants, had been redesigned to house the younglings on the planet to learn the Clan Saa techniques.

"They are still called that?" Harry asked in surprise, as they stepped out into the backyard. There was a lesson going on as Komari taught a youngling clan. She was using many of the same tricks that Harry and Aayla had used, causing both of them to smile appreciatively. Yet they made no move to step forward and join the lesson when Komari indicated with a twitch of her head that such would be welcome.

"Yes. Names, stick they often do." Yaddle looked at them closely then asked shrewdly, "Once your knighthood trials are over, join the training center, you will not."

"No Master I don't think so," Harry said for them both, with Aayla nodding silent agreement as she took Harry's hand. "We feel the Force is calling us to other things."

Aayla smiled thinly. "What Harry is trying to say is that the Force seems to like using him as a trouble-shooter. We find and remove boils on the surface of the galaxy and if that is what the Force is calling us to do, we can't be stuck in one place."

That caused Glaive, Shaak, Zule, and Yaddle to look at them closely before sharing a glance with one another. Only Zule seemed unsurprised by that comment and what it meant. If anything, she had a small, almost imperceptible smile on her face as she led the way into a large sitting area, where they all moved to take seats.

Turning to the young knights-to-be, Yaddle said aloud, "See clearer you do than most can. The Dark Side, closed in it has in the past years. The Order, reactionary it has become in many ways, but still here. Master Yoda, keeping us together he has. Master Rancisis, pushing for more preparation always. No one, arguing over the Clan Saa techniques after the past two years there are."

Glaive cut in at that point. "What she's saying," he said roughly "is that there's a war coming. The secessionists and centrists are saber rattling, and butting heads every time the Senate meets. Terrorists favoring both sides have appeared and cost lives with their actions. Kuat and the other shameless opportunists are building ships and selling them to the highest bidders.

The Secessionist fleets are always on the move and even the few remaining Ord defense fleets are becoming anxious. And the Order seems unable to stop this gradual slide towards anarchy."

"Though it is not for lack of trying," Shaak said softly. "The Order has lost ten Jedi protecting senators from various assassination attempts in the past two years, and seven more throughout the Republic in the same timeframe. To say nothing of the death of Master Tholme and several others a few years before that."

"What? Quinlan asked in shock and no small amount of sudden grief. "Master Tholme is dead? How?"

"As part of his work on trying to follow up on the assault on Naboo, Master Tholme tracked the being we now know as Darth Maul to a planet in the Corellian sector, but he was ambushed there and overcome," Shaak said. "The Order sent out Master Koth and several others immediately after he stopped checking in, and they were able to hunt Maul down and even learn his name. But we are under no illusion that he was anything but an apprentice if that."

She looked over at the silent Glaive and Zule, who had moved to sit with Aayla, Harry, and Alecko in a move that was too natural to have been anything but instinctual. It also moved her well away from her own master. "That, and a certain other piece of odd information is why more of us have been read into the secret that the Brotherhood of the Sith might still be around.

At the looks from Micah and the others, she went on. "Strangely enough, his appearance matched that of the Dark Side user that Master Windu dealt with on Naboo. In every detail. What that means, or even how it was accomplished is beyond my understanding."

While Harry and the other youngsters didn't realize the significance of that, Micah did. "Correct me if I am wrong, but isn't it impossible to clone someone with Force powers?"

Yaddle shook her head. "Unknown, if that is the case. A possibility only it is. Twins there have been before, both able to access the Force." Her tone was cautious, and also analytical. "Also, evidence there has been of Dathomiri training. Dathomir, known to have many Force users. Fall to the Dark, too many do, known to become mercenaries they are. An easy source for recruitment they would be."

When Shaak turned to look directly at Yaddle Aayla realized they were now seeing what was an old argument reiterated once more for their benefit. She communicated this to Harry while Shaak spoke. "I understand that. I am simply stating unwilling to ignore the concern that someone might have discovered a way to clone individuals with Force powers. That has never occurred **ever** as far as I know. If you know differently, I will bow to your superior knowledge of history."

Shaak waited and Yaddle harrumphed, gesturing the Togrutan woman to go on. "But it seems to me as if whoever this is would need to find something new or different to add to the cloning process. Further, those clones would have to be cloned slowly or else they would be driven insane. Whatever else can be said about this mysterious leader of the Sith, he most certainly believes in control. He would not want to deal with an insane Dark Side user any more than anyone else."

"That makes sense," Harry said, frowning thoughtfully. "But it has to be something very difficult to acquire or use for some reason." The more senior Jedi looked at him and he smiled, his expression somehow both whimsical and grim. "Think about it: While Shaak might be right about the time it would take, if the Sith has access to cloning at all, they could then clone this Maul fellow hundreds of times over by now. What Sith, however controlled, could ignore the idea of having an army of these Assassins if they could create one?"

As the others took that in, Harry went on, his smile disappearing. "I'd bet anything you want that this fellow was a clone he believed he was the original. That he believed he was this Sith Master's true apprentice and had a will of his own. When the reality would be anything but." Harry shivered. "Cloning is just one of those things that always makes me shiver. The idea of creating custom-made people, of programming them in the womb? That is a kind of slavery that is beyond the kind that merely forces you to obey through pain or fear."

The force of Harry's words took Glaive and Yaddle aback. Glaive had never met the young man before, while Yaddle had only met him briefly during Harry's confrontation with the High Council. The force of his personality, the forthright way he spoke, still had an impact on the Jedi, who routinely thought in terms of the law, the Order's edicts, the Force and the Dark Side, rather than simple right and wrong.

In that, he and young Anakin are much the same. But where Anakin always speaks of a need to control and remove those who would take slaves or do wrong, Harry speaks of freedom, Shaak thought, looking at the face of Aayla and seeing stark agreement with her lover's stance there.

"I think that you're right Harry," Quinlan said thoughtfully. "So let us combine that with what Master Ti said: something must have been added to the cloning process, some technological device or, or addition to the formula, a chemical of some kind, in order to allow them to accurately clone someone who could use the Force. I take it that the trail of whoever might be behind the assassin is long cold?"

When Yaddle nodded, Quinlan went on. "So, this might give me a means somehow try to track them down."

"Other Jedi, tried to do the same," Yaddle said. "Found nothing they have."

"Perhaps, but they are not me," Quinlan replied.

Yaddle looked at him sharply at that as did Glaive, who had been looking at where his padawan had sat beside Aayla, squeezing into a small sofa rather than do the same with him, with Harry and Aleto to sit on another sofa, though they had not seemed put out by this. "No offense to those Masters or Knights, but Master Tholme trained me exclusively in moving through the underbelly of the galaxy, unseen and invisible until I had to strike to take out my target. Other than the Dark Woman I am probably the best the Order has left when it comes to finding a long cold trail. If there is a trail at all to be found, I will find it."

"...Knight Komari, go with you she will," Yaddle said, her eyes closed as she entered a sort of half-meditation, the like of which she and Yoda routinely used to both touch the Force and to sort through her own thoughts. "Like a caged animal she has been for past few months. Teach she can, but a teacher she is not, joy in it she does not take any longer. Your arrival, sign of the Force it is that her time here, over it is."

She opened her eyes pinning Harry with her aged eyes, and she was no longer seeing young Padawan Potter, son of a group of Force users with unusual abilities. She was now seeing someone whose Master had stated he was ready for his trials. Harry did not flinch or look away from the weight of that gaze or the Force that came with it, a kind of pressure pushing at him from all sides.

Yaddle questioned each of them closely about their training and abilities, feeling them out with her Force sense as much as she could. Both were even stronger than they had been, with Harry radiating with the Force even beyond young Anakin, with Aayla slightly weaker seeming than that gifted youth. She could also still feel the bond between Harry and Aayla of course. It was so obvious now she doubted even if they both used Force Cloak they could cover it any longer.

Yaddle was one of many Jedi still struggling with the idea of the Light Side of the Force being separate from the Force in general at all. To Yaddle there were simply two sides of the Force, the Force, and the Dark Side, not three. But she had long been questioning that belief and seeing the bond before her now, she could not argue with the fact that she was wrong. She still did not believe that allowing such attachments was a good idea for the Order as a whole, but she would not make waves here.

But the one who most surprised her was young Aleto. He was stronger and more centered than he had been the last time she had seen by a wide margin. Gone was the chip on his shoulder, as humans would put it. Gone was his well-hidden feeling of inadequacy. In their place was a grounded serenity, a certainty of self that was not arrogant, simply accepting of both his strengths and weaknesses. Coupled with his strength and knowledge of the Force, Yaddle agreed with Micah that the young Duros youth was ready to become a knight, along with the bonded pair. *Indeed, faced their own trials feel I do they have.*

Flicking her eyes from Aayla to Zule for a moment, she wondered about the many ways people could travel to the same destination. Where Micah had gently led, cajoled or even cheerfully kicked (Yaddle knew Micah quite well) Aleto along the path he had taken. Zule had been

forced to find her own path under the far harsher regimen of Master Glaive. *Yet ready they both are. A sign, this return is for more than just Knight Vosa.*

She had barely finished her questioning of the trio when a youngling who was on duty at the communications room entered the room. "Masters," The youngling said, bowing deeply. "There is a shuttle from Carannia requesting clearance to land. They are apparently bringing a lawyer to speak to padawan Potter."

"I am so going to enjoy not having to be called Peepee any longer," Harry murmured internally to Aayla.

She sent back a mental giggle before asking, *"I wonder what this about. What do you think Master Dooku left you?"*

"I have no idea."

Yaddle nodded, gesturing to Micah and Aleco. "Tell us some of your journeys you will. Padawan Potter and Padawan Secura, on the second floor another sitting room you will find."

Moments later, Harry and Aayla met the lawyer in a sitting room on the second floor, one of the few rooms which hadn't changed over the last few years. Even the furniture in her was the same, old, very well made and expensive but worn.

The lawyer was a thin, spare man with a cool, calculating gaze behind a pair of ancient-looking spectacles and he moved with a sort of prim purpose. He sat down when Harry asked him to, staring at Aayla as if her presence was not wanted here but said nothing. "Padawan Potter, I represent the holdings of House Dooku, and I am here to make certain that certain requests of the late Count are met. Among them is the request that you take up his mantle as Duke of the House."

Harry had just formed the idle thought that as officious as the man was the fact he didn't find Harry's title funny was a positive when the rest of the man's words registered. "Wait, what?"

The man explained how Dooku had bequeathed his rank and holdings to Harry on his return to Serenno. He said the Komari Vosa had been named regent for a time, in a very limited manner: that she had controlled the mansion and the resources needing to run it from the rest of the count's holdings. But Harry would have complete control of all those holdings which was, in the lawyer's bland tone, "Considerable."

"I did not see this coming," Harry murmured internally, while Aayla remained silent. She seemed to be getting over her shock quickly though. "I, I'm a Jedi, am I, is this, I mean is this even legal?"

"It is indeed legal, or it was at the time Count Dooku's will was created. Afterward, I understand the Jedi Order made moves to make it against your codes to do something similar in the future." Here the lawyer let a small sneer appear. "Though of course, even that would not technically speaking be legally binding without the Senate's approval. Nonetheless, this is indeed legal, Count Potter."

"Can I say no? That is, what happens if I don't agree to take control?"

"I am afraid that will not work. The moment you landed on Serenno you became a Count. You could choose a successor and then abdicate. However, your chosen successor would have to pass a panel of counts on his or her acceptability to the position, there is precedent for that kind of move. I cannot say with any certainty that anyone you choose would pass such a review. If not, then all of House Dooku's holdings, including this mansion and everything around it, would be seized and legally split up among the other Ducal Houses."

"Harry, I agree you need to agree to this," Aayla said through their mental link. "Dooku would not have chosen you for the job if he didn't think you could do it. And recall that you and I actually do have some experience acting as his representatives."

"Yes I know, and I think I would do a decent job too, but... is this what the Force wants us to do?" Harry asked her in the same manner. He was reluctant to be tied down like this, to be a leader on this scale.

"I cannot make a decision on this just yet," he said aloud, as Aayla did not reply to that.

"There is no real decision to make here," the lawyer replied. "Law if not precedent is clear. You are now Duke Potter, all that remains is how hands on you will be."

"But be that as it may, how I discharge that duty is indeed in the air," Harry said firmly. "I will not rush into anything just yet. Leave the paperwork there, I will meditate on this," he ordered, sounding like a much older man for a moment as he stared the lawyer down.

The lawyer scowled but nodded. Many lawyers did not like Jedi much, believing that they sidestepped the law in too many ways, making their own learned knowledge superfluous and their jobs harder. So he simply nodded and stood up, setting the paperwork down, as well as two data stick, containing all the information on the count's holdings before abruptly turning around.

"Do you think that Master Yaddle and the others knew this was coming? Do you think we should ask their advice?" Harry asked as he stood up, picking up the papers and leafing through them. This was a big decision, and he really would have liked to have Master Fay or someone else to ask for advice on this.

"I think that they did. And that this is a choice we have to make on our own." Aayla said slowly.

Harry's eyes narrowed at that and he turned to stare at her. "Another test? They want to see if my loyalty to the Order will overcome any urge I have to power and possessions? Haven't I proven that I agree with much of the tenants of the Order, even if I don't agree with all of them?"

"No Harry I don't think so. Oh, some master might have set it up that way, but not Master Dooku. I'm... not certain how the Order would react if you decided to take up your position fulltime, or even like Dooku did, but this offer is genuine." Aayla returned.

At that, Harry nodded and slowly sat back down, pulling Aayla into a loose hug as he did. *"I know, I just wanted you to tell me this wasn't another test."*

If anyone had been there it would have seemed very odd, the two of them just leaning against one another as they set aside the paperwork and looked straight ahead, not meditating but communing silently as they thought about what this meant.

They both understood that if they took this, the two of them would be under even greater scrutiny than they had been from the order. Many of the Jedi, even their own friends might look at them askance for taking this on. They would still be Jedi, and still would ostensibly be under the command of the High Council, but they would have split loyalties. That would not sit well with many, maybe not even their staunchest supporters. It would harken back to the time of the New Sith Wars and the Jedi Lords.

"This is going to be dangerous on many levels. Worse, this kind of move will no doubt bring even more attention our way from the Sith too. Are we ready for that?" Harry asked as the two of them strolled first through her mind then his, the time inside their minds passing far slower than the time outside.

"I think we are Harry," Aayla said. *"I think you are. Other than that, let us look at our concerns: First how much **more** scrutiny can we be under from those Jedi that do not already understand why we are different, why we do not follow the new Code?"*

"Point," Harry replied wryly, a large check mark appearing above them in his mental realm, causing her to giggle

Aayla concentrated for a second before a list of all the concerns they had about this idea appeared to one side of it. Harry's large check mark moved into the list, resting alongside the appropriate line. *"Next?"*

"We can't think of it as split loyalties." Harry mused, the visual aid allowing him to organize his thoughts more. *"Regardless of anything else, I would use my power as Duke to foster peace and justice just as we do as Jedi, if in a more roundabout manner. So instead, we should look at it as if we have a foot in both camps. We are both Jedi and the counts. Yes, that might pull us in different directions, but it will also open us up to new and different ways to make a difference."*

"And it wouldn't just be for the citizens of the Serenno or the larger Republic that benefits. The Jedi really lack a true economic powerbase of their own. The Farming Collectives sustain the Order in terms of food and clothing, but nothing else. Admittedly alone House Dooku, or if we do this Potter, would not be able to provide much on our own. But combined with the rest of Serenno? After we are put into a position where we can make deals with the Jadein delegates, and through them trade with the rest of the Ruusan sector?" Aayla said. "We might be able to pull the Order away from its dangerous dependency on the Senate."

"And that doesn't consider the military side of things. With Count Dooku's resources and the resources it will allow us to gather, we can finish the Tyrant's Bane and give it the offensive punch it needs as well. And again, having a military force of our own, one that isn't tied to the Republic could be huge." Harry supplied, his thoughts on the conflict they all could see coming. "If we only knew with any certainty what form that conflict could take, we could make more actual plans!"

"Enough of that Harry, we just need to answer one question right now. Do you accept the charge Dooku set before you?" Aayla asked.

The answer to that was something she already felt, but he needed to give it voice, if only in this mental plane. But there was one thing more they needed to do as Jedi before they could agree to this: they had to see if the Force could offer any guidance.

After so many years moving through space using only their Force powers, all three padawans had become far better at reading both the future and the present in the Force. The Veil of the Dark Side was a major issue here, having become stronger since they had left, a cloying, blinding thing to their senses, something the storms that the Thought Bomb had caused had shielded them from. Harry idly wondered what it felt like to Fay's senses: was it pressing in on her or did she not feel it at all?

Setting that thought aside Harry joined with Aayla and they both attempted to push past it, their hands gently clasping. They didn't search for an answer, they took a page from Master Fay's book and instead, simply waited, beating back the Veil as best they could to allow any moment of insight to come to them. They saw a few vague images, but nothing concrete, save a vague feeling of rightness, trying to fight its way through the miasma of the Dark Side.

With that, they came back to the physical world and Harry breathed in deeply, nuzzling into Aayla's neck as he did. "Very well, but if I do this, I will do it my way. And that means we have a lot to do before Master Yoda and the others arrive. I would like my assumption of the Ducal seat at the very least to be a done deal before they get here. If they censure us, we'll deal with that as it comes."

Aayla sighed, wanting nothing more than to take the rest of the day just of themselves. Reaching out together to the Force like that always made them feel even closer and got them in the mood for some fun. But they couldn't. "Then I suppose we'd better get to work."

After informing the others about what they had been offered and the fact they had accepted, Harry and Aayla were of course faced with some censure from Yaddle and Glaive, but not from their friends or teachers. Micah seemed resigned, Quinlan surprisingly happy for them, and Alecto understanding. Zule brought up all the points they had brought up to one another, but when they shot them down one after another she simply nodded, satisfied this was not a spur of the moment decision.

Glaive and Yaddle simply shook their head and said that it was against the Code to be so attached to material possessions and a single planet. Komari looked happy, if only because this would further allow her to leave her current position at the training center without worrying about anything happening to it.

Of them all, Shaak stayed silent simply looking at them as the others spoke up. Her mind was still on one thing that the two lovers had talked about before. "Did you ask the Force for guidance on this?"

That silenced Glaive and Yaddle. Glaive scowled as if disliking the idea that anyone would think to do so and also that two so much younger would be able to receive any such aid through the Veil when he could not. Yaddle however paused, considering. The youngsters all looked thoughtful, and Alecto looked at his friends. "Well?"

"We did. We received no set guidance, just a feeling of vague rightness. Like this was a step we could take and good things would come of it. That's all. It's such a big thing which can impact so much that was the best we could get." Aayla replied.

"Bah, this is ridiculous. It's obvious the padawans have been blinded by the Order's acceptance of their perverted Force bond. No one so young could see through the Veil like that when even such learned masters as Yoda cannot," Glaive growled.

"Perhaps, or perhaps they are simply asking the Force in a different way," Zule said, looking at her Master who swelled up in outrage, but said nothing as Yaddle spoke up again.

"Believe I do, feel what you did. Believe also, Bond of Light, allow you to be tricked it would not. Still, a momentous decision this is. Talk we must with Yoda upon his arrival." Yaddle smiled wanly. "Affect only you this will not."

"We realize that Master Yaddle and we hope to prove that it was the right decision. We will strive not only to better the Dooku holdings but to also use them as best we can to help other people, including the Order." Harry said for them both. "Ultimately, with the Force nearly silent unless the Order tells me I cannot, I will have to follow my conscience. As any Jedi can."

"Gainsay this now, I will not. Await Yoda and the council's concerns, we will." Yaddle said at last, once more impressed by the self-control and serenity that these two held within them. *Question this decision I do, question their preparedness to face the trials, I do not.*

Shaak smiled once more, then her eyes shifted to Zule, her head cocked to one side, considering.

From there, Harry and Aayla got in contact the other counts. All the counts were happy to see the two of them back and even happier that Harry had accepted Dooku's request where they each filled the two of them in on what had occurred in Serenno and with their own holdings since the two of them had left the planet.

Serenno's navy was nearly fully built-up, but they were still adding their new missile frigates into their order of battle. These they were actually building in their own space instead of buying them from anyone else. This slowed their construction down quite a bit, but kept the secret of their design safe at home.

The missile frigate concept was a revolutionary idea, based as they had surmised upon comments from Master Dooku and Quinlan Vos after the battle against the slavers and the fact that Serenno could build their own missiles at cost. They could project strength, but could not take ground. They had no army to speak of, though each house kept a few companies of troops, and their capital ships besides the missile frigates were few and far between. On the other hand, they could absolutely wreck the day of any other military force out there.

Discussions on that score took a few hours. Discussions on the economic side of things though took far longer, deep into their first night back and then resuming the next day. Serenno now had trade ties to Naboo, Kashyyyk slightly, all of its all old holdings throughout the sector and beyond and several dozen more planets which had begun to make trade agreements straight with them rather than through the Commerce Guild or the Trade Federation. They had slight ties to both of those groups, and were discussing with them the idea of deepening those ties. They were also talking about politics, alas.

Serenno had also been hurt in several ways. New tariffs on trading outside their sector, tensions among their neighboring sectors and of course the larger secessionist vs. centrist crisis. Both sides had their proponents elsewhere in the sector, and there had been a few demonstration marches on Serenno, but no outright violence just yet.

To a man, the counts wanted more autonomy from the Republic but they were also leery of the Trade Federation, who was one of the three biggest proponents of the Secession concept. The other two they didn't have many problems with. The Techno Union had holdings in Serenno, and they did quite a brisk business with them and the Commerce Guild. But their relationship with the Trade Federation was quite frosty, and would probably remain so.

On the other hand, they **loathed** the Republic's Senate. The very idea of being controlled by anyone out system struck at something deep within anyone born on Serenno. The latest issue on this point was that the Senate had declared a vote taken within the sector to move the sector's capital away from Da'astan to Serenno illegal. It had been blatant partisanship at its worst, and the locals deeply resented it. Da'astan had barely a tithe of the economic strength

Serenno had and what it had was mostly based on old money and the few local mines that were still producing.

On their second day on Serenno they talked to Komari, who had been acting as caretaker for the holdings directly involved with the training center. Harry formally removed her from that post as she requested, bequeathing the training center to the Order in perpetuity including any and all upkeep. Master Yaddle would maintain that for now as headmistress, and whoever came after her would do the same. The house was still Harry's and would be their home base of operations, but the Jedi would always have access to the mansion and the training center.

By the time the Jedi arrived, Harry and Aayla were almost caught up with local conditions, but still had a ways to go to understand everything else going on in the Republic since they had been out of contact. But even with the anxiety of how the ancient grandmaster would take their recent decision and the concerns they had about how it would affect their knighthood trials, both of them knew by then they had made the right decision. Something about going through this, and the meeting they had with the representatives from Jadein, told them what they were doing was the right decision: that this way they would be able to help people even more than they would have as simple Jedi.

Along with their other friends, they greeted Master Yoda as he and the others walked down the ramp of the Consular-class they had used on their trip from Coruscant, bowing deeply. "Master Yoda, welcome to what apparently is my home," Harry said without any preamble, knowing that Yoda was aware of what Dooku had left him.

Yoda chuckled at that, wagging his gimer stick at the tall if still young human male. "Home it might be to you, but home it is also to others present. Let it give you a big head you should not."

"Of course not," Harry answered rather blandly, causing chuckles all around.

Soon enough, the crew from the Tyrant's Bane were sitting in front of the now gathered High Councilmembers. With Yoda had come Master Galia, Plo Koon, and Saesee Tiin. Yaddle was also there, and so were Master Shaak Ti, Glaive, and Zule at Master Gielt's earnest request. Micah was sitting with his fellows from the massive ship rather than with the High Council because his actions were also in question here.

"Talk we will about your resumption of Dooku's title. Walk us through you will your journey now." Yoda ordered.

This discussion took even more time than it had for Aayla and Harry to get a handle on the local economic and political outlook. The entire day disappeared, and they had barely touched the surface of what they been doing in the past four plus years. After several days' worth of questioning however, Yoda and the others were caught up as to what had happened. The tale of Master Fay, the Force nexus, and the fact that Harry and the others had exorcised the spirits

of the long-dead Jedi Knights and Dark Side users involved in that conflict was astonishing. The questions on that portion of the report took a long, long time, with Alecto, Quinlan, and Micah fielding just as many as the two bonded, with Micah taking the lead.

The fact that they had been able to talk a few of the Dark Side users into giving up and allowing themselves to be dissipated - or permanently killed - was very telling. When they heard that part in particular about Githany and how they had talked her back into the Light, many a look was exchanged that Harry and Aayla did not quite understand but were all too afraid they could guess at. *"It looks as if the debate about feelings and emotions is ongoing."*

"Agreed, and I'm afraid it probably always will. There'll always be people who prefer to take the easy path rather than the hard. Even among those who will not fall to the Dark Side, which is the easiest at all," Harry replied to Aayla's comment.

"Your thoughts on the Dark Side you will give," Yoda said abruptly, interrupting the internal conversation and turning back to them from his own silent conversation with the other councilmembers.

Harry blinked then shrugged. "I believe that the Dark Side seems to be the easiest path to power over the Force, but it is a trap. The more times you allow anger, hate or fear in the harder it is to keep them out. Give into your anger, give into your hate or rage or fear and eventually, those emotions are all you feel. It's just not worth it in the end. Those emotions are always with us, but you need to know the difference between justifiable fear with an all-consuming personal fear, mere anger with righteous anger, and never let hate find a home in your mind or heart. You have to acknowledge them, give them an outlet, but never let those emotions power your actions in the Force or fester within you."

"Githany was able to come back to the light as she did because of her guilt as much as the fact that we accepted that she had fallen for reasons beyond her own control. That, and Githany didn't want to become so petty as to destroy what she had hoped to find for herself," Aayla said. "The bond Harry and I have astonished Githany and opened her up for further discussion. Then, when we both commiserated with her fall rather than condemned her, but that Githany had to acknowledge her fault for everything afterward; that seemed to get through to her. She fell to the Dark side because of resentment and hate towards the Order, but it never blocked out her guilt, or made her forget the love she had once felt and was always searching for after."

"Agree you do the Dark Side, a trap is?"

"Yes Master Yoda," the young Rutian Twi'lek said simply. "Those emotions are always going to be within everyone, whether we admit it or not. But it is our choice to give in, to give them control. That is what the Dark Side takes away most: control of ourselves. It is not about power, it has never been about power, it is always about control. I feel anger, I feel fear, I do not allow them to dictate my actions, and I balance them with kindness and courage."

Yoda's gimmer stick rose to point at Alecto and he slowly spoke. "Anger and fear are duplicitous emotions, they can seep in through a want to change the universe around you, or through feelings of inadequacy. A person can slide into the Dark Side in that manner. But they can turn back. There is nothing the Dark Side can offer but empty promises. A person who feels fear will always find more reasons to be afraid, to hide away. Inadequacy can evolve to self-hate, and be self-destructive. Only through acceptance of your faults and weaknesses can you reject that kind of a trap, and continue to grow as a person or in the Force."

Again the councilmembers all looked at one another. This time it went on for some time, with Gallia and Saesee Tiin seeming to frown at those words while Yoda, Koon, and Yaddle took them in stride, Koon even seeming to approve in particular of Alecto's words. Then Yoda simply nodded once more with all the finality of a judge's gavel. "Agree we do that the three of you, ready for your knighthood you are. Past ready you are. Trials, unnecessary they are. At sundown, ceremony we will have tomorrow."

The Trials for ascension to knighthood were designed to test different aspects of the Jedi mindset and skill needed to act alone with no one to guide their actions.

The physical tests Courage and Skill tested a padawan's ability to face dangers in combat and other situations as well as their general combat skills. These tests had slowly lost importance over the centuries since the New Sith Wars ended, but had become more important in the past decade since right before the invasion of Naboo because of all the conflicts that had started to spring up around that time. Rancisis had pushed for that even harder upon his rise to Master of the Order to the chagrin of the majority of the Order's prospective Consulars.

Given the fact that these three had stopped a barbarian invasion, been skilled enough to fight ancient Sith masters with their lightsaber skills, and had mastered Force techniques far beyond the norm for those their age, it was no wonder that Yoda and the others felt that those tests could be waived here. The same went for the Trial of Flesh. This trial was made to test the upcoming knight's ability to deal with loss, physical pain and general hardship. Unlike the first two, this one hadn't lost any of its importance in the centuries of peace. But once more, Harry, Alecto and Aayla had all proven an ability to deal with such things over their time as padawans and in the past few years in particular.

Those trials were often seen as completed by prospective Knights but the last two, the trials of Perception and Spirit, were never put aside. Yet here once more the skills the padawans had shown during their time in the Ruusan sector showed they had passed them. In terms of the Trial of Perception, their ability to help find a way forward through the nebulae, and to deal with the mental aspect of fighting the Sith and Jedi spirits showed they had the ability to perceive truth from reality and to read the Force to a degree few experienced Knights could match.

The Trial of Spirit was often called 'Facing the Mirror'. It was supposed to make the prospective Knight dive into his own psyche and face his greatest, most hidden thoughts and fears. During

this test, there was a real danger of the padawan diving so deep he was unable to find his way back out, which was why a master was always present.

Here the battle against the Sith and Jedi wraiths stood them apart. They had met spirits, thinking, experienced Sith who attempted to undermine their minds from within, and succeeded in beating them back. It could be argued that was because of their skills in the new mental technique called Occlumency, but even so, to turn such an attack around and talk Githany and at least one of the maddened Jedi spirits out of attacking them spoke well to Harry and Aayla's self-knowledge. Alec's ability to cast aside his feelings of fears of inadequacy and being left behind by his friends and his ability to actually take command of his mental 'body' enough to block the blows of his enemies' lightsabers showed this as well. Asking the three their opinions on the Dark Side had just further reinforced this understanding of the ways a Jedi's own emotions and thoughts could travel down dark paths.

"Tell us more about Master Fay's new ability? Can she really open the way back into the Ruusan sector for any Jedi who reaches out to her?" Master Tiin asked, eager to turn the discussion to what he felt were more important matters.

"Master Fay seemed to believe she could," Micah said, to whom this question had been addressed. At Yoda's nod, Micah moved from where he had been sitting with the others to sit with his fellows in the council, and continued to speak. "It is frankly astonishing and somewhat worrying how much control she has in that area space. Yes, she'll be able to clear the way for any ship that is able to contact her. In fact, I believe Master Fay could do the opposite as well: she might be able to gather enough gravitational anomalies to block any fleet or ship that attempts to cross that space without her leave."

"Yet trapped there she is," Yoda said with a sigh, "Knew I did, see Fay again in the flesh I would not. Still, alive she is. Pleased for this, I am."

"Yes, but even more than Master Fay's survival is what this means for the future," Master Gallia said, looking at Yoda. "An entire sector to retreat into like that if the worst comes to worst, that is a tremendous asset."

"We could actually do better than that Masters," Harry said. "Oh I agree that we should probably prepare for such an eventuality, but..." he looked over at his friends who smirked back at him. "Well, you should probably come with us to see the Tyrant's Bane."

"We have all seen the interior of a Lucrehulk class before my young friend," Master Koon said looking at his friend thoughtfully his masked head tilted quizzically.

Micah smirked. "The Tyrant's Bane is not like any ship you have ever seen."

"What better time than now?" Master Gallia asked, standing up and looking over fellow Masters. She knew something about what had been done to that ship and was interested to see

these runes Yoda had spoken of so longingly a time or two in action for something other than the pensieve which was kept in the High Council chamber under guard at all times.

About thirty minutes later, they entered the Lucrehulk all of them having taken the Consular up to it for simplicities sake. Twenty minutes after that, Master Gallia and the others were in complete and utter awe in what had been done to this ship it, and what it represented. Halfway through the tour, they watched the Verpine building the droid starfighter factory, listening as Harry described the shield generators and the defenses of the ship.

"It is almost literally unbreakable. Our shields are strong enough to turn aside the firepower of an entire fleet. Nothing short of something that could crack a planet could even bother our shields at full power. Our offense isn't so good just yet, but even there the number of turbolasers we have would make us formidable like any other Lucrehulk. We couldn't win any battle on our own quickly, but would eventually win through even a full Ord fleet."

When it came to the rest of the ship Shaak, in particular, was in complete awe of the jungle, a wide smile on her face, the widest smile Aayla had ever seen there. "Amazing," she gushed, stepping forward into the jungle, staring around her. "Utterly amazing. I will have to travel with you if you take this ship," she intoned, not looking away as a bird alighted on a nearby tree branch. My own education in runes stalled when you all left, and this, all of this shows the potential that they have."

Yoda grumbled a little at that, musing aloud. "Step down I could from Grandmaster. Join you too I could then."

"I don't think so!" Master Gallia said rather firmly with Tiin and Koon echoing her, the one sounding stern, the other amused. "This ship is amazing Harry, but why did you see fit to mention it during our earlier discussion?"

"We could put a number of training clans in here Master, turn over two of the enlarged areas to them and their teachers entirely," Alecto said simply. "Indeed, we can probably house the entire Order in this ship once it's finished if we have to."

"Get the Order to agree to such as that last, we could not. Still, an idea it is. Make plans we will, in the event of war. Send all the younglings and unassigned padawans to this ship we will."

From the glances the masters all shared, Harry understood they were truly becoming worried about the coming war. The fact the crisis about the Secession concept was still growing was one thing, the fact the Sith were still out there another.

"The Republic might well be doomed one way or the other, Masters," Harry said, with Aayla and even Alecto nodding agreement while Zule remained silent.

Aayla elaborated. "There just seems to be too much 'me first', too much bureaucratic nonsense, too much corruption, and far too much of the Core Worlds getting their own way simply because they have the larger populations, giving them a larger voice in the Senate than their actual importance should allow for. We looked at some of the arguments in favor of the dissolution of Republic, and while we have a lot of problems with the people bringing them up, if we look at them objectively, you have to admit they have a point."

"Objectively not the issue. The Dark Side, its hand in this crisis we feel."

"But you have investigated Master C'boath?" Micah asked. "I can't recall ever meeting the man."

"Investigated him myself I did," Yoda replied. "Free of taint he was or seemed to be. Not enough evidence did I have to try to keep poking. Now, always meeting with the secessionists in public he is. Unwilling to meet with us any longer in person. Suspicious that is, but not enough."

Harry looked at Aayla as she started to lead the way to the ship's commissary, which was built off the original. "We do have a few suggestions of ways to fight the Secessionist platform, and others to fight the Centrist's policies. But you probably won't like them."

Over the past few days, Harry and Aayla had been making extreme use of their Occlumency skills in order to process as much information as they could as fast as they could. This had included numerous internal discussions about what to do about the great debate that was dominating the Republic. After numerous such conversations, their own stance on it was very different from the stance of the Order. What they would do about that was still up in the air, but weakening both sides was a good start.

"Hrhrhrm, many things in this universe I do not like there are. Speak you will," Yoda said pointing at them all one after another with his gimer stick.

"From the Order's perspective, we are extremely leery of the Trade Federation correct? And we tend to be wary of the other two members which combined with the TF are the real powers behind the secessionists. But they have been joined by hundreds of other planets, and one or two entire sectors in their push to break away from the Republic. "Has anyone attempted to meet with those members on their own?" Aayla asked.

"We're not novices at this Padawan Secura," Master Gallia said, looking a little inscrutable as she tamped down the urge to roll her eyes. "Of course we attempted to talk those groups around to dropping their demands."

"Yes Master Gallia," Harry said respectfully. "You attempted to talk them into not breaking away from the republic, not convince them to break away from the Trade Federation and its allies yet retain their demands."

"Explain," she asked, suddenly interested.

"I am no diplomat," Harry began, pausing as Alecto let out a guffaw to glare at the Duros. When even Micah and the other masters smirked at him and Harry rolled his eyes.

"Alright, so that was an understatement. But Master Fay was an excellent diplomat, and she taught me that the first point of any negotiation is to admit that both sides might have some honest reasons for their position. After admitting they have legitimate concerns, I would simply point out to them that the Trade Federation is one of the most corrupt entities in the Republic. They can hardly then turn around and profess to be a paragon of virtue. Even with how much it can impact what is reported over the Holonet through various ways their depredations and in particular the invasion of Naboo years ago have to be well known."

"True, but what does that gain us?" Gallia asked, still looking at him thoughtfully. This was a side of the young man she had not expected, and it intrigued her.

"We appeal to their sense of duty, not to the Republic but their own planets or sectors. Convince them that you have no stake one way or the other in the crisis really, but you are deeply concerned about the Trade Federation and the others, and the idea of using violence to achieve political goals. Then ask them what their policies be in regards to the Jedi going about their business within their system or whatever and see what happens." Aayla said taking over from her lover so seamlessly it was obvious to the Jedi that they were communicating mind to mind even as they spoke aloud.

"There are many planets within the secessionist movements that are keenly peaceful, others that have axes to grind like Serenno, and still others who as you said had legitimate concerns. It would certainly damage the movement's unity of purpose in. Yet it would also hurt our relationship with the Senate, and suddenly changing our stance like that would be difficult..." Gallia mused.

"Centrist position, you also said you would attack. Worsen the impact this would on our position in the Senate. Yet explain you will." Yoda ordered. He looked over to Koon, who was listening intently, while Tiin had turned away, looking at what the commissary had on hand for dinner.

Harry led the way to the chairs around the centermost table as he spoke. "Beyond the veneer of a need for more central authority, the Centrists are also pushing a Core Worlds first policy, correct? That the population numbers matter more than the number of planets or individual system's needs. But the real reasons for this is the fact that many of those planets are themselves mired in corruption, graft and governmental bloating."

"I like the last term, though I've never heard it so described. You mean that the governments of those worlds provide more and more of the daily needs for their civilians rather than the civilians themselves?" Gallia asked.

"Exactly." Here it was Alecto who spoke up for the first time since the conversation turned to politics. He had been very enthusiastic about talking about the ship though, as had Quinlan. "When they pointed that out to me, I understood why the Centrists were pushing that platform: that kind of, of a welfare state is impossible to keep going without infusions of capital from outside the system itself. My own planet of Duros nearly fell into that kind of trap ages ago while we were trying to recover from the environmental disaster which nearly ruined our ecology. But changing from a system like that once its got its hooks in is very difficult, and requires an educated and willing populace."

"Which many Core Worlds like that don't have and further don't want. I see where you're going with this." Gallia said, going over her mind about the reports from those worlds she had seen. Jedi weren't very welcome on many of those planets since they routinely pointed such problems out, or removed corrupt officials, turning them over not to the local authorities but the Senate. "Say that they are backing the Centrist position not out of a sense of duty or desire for actual centralized authority, but to continue to suck off the resources they need to keep their own corruption going. It won't make us popular, to say the least, but it could severely weaken the Centrist's ability to work together."

"Couple it, we could, with connections to conquerors like the Mandalorians." Yaddle suggested. She was a historian and researcher first rather than a diplomat, so she understood the historical ramifications of what was being talked about now that it had been brought to her attention. "Conquerors, did so to bring in resources in that manner to keep their systems going they did."

"Further, if you take the stance that Jedi must stand for peace for all rather than the unity of the Republic, you might be able to sell our new stance," Harry said, smiling sadly. "I don't know. Maybe that will weaken both sides, maybe not. It won't be enough to deter the chaos of a war between these two factions, especially considering the military aspect of this debate."

Harry was talking about something that anyone looking at a map of the Republic and where the secessionists' holdings could tell. The Secessionist and Centrist factions were all muddled together. There would be no frontline, no clear border. And in that kind of chaotic situation, conflict would spiral out of control, no matter what anyone really wanted.

"But if the Jedi can stand on principle and not take sides in the secessionist and centrist debate, we might be able to mitigate some of the damage it causes by simply being neutral," Quinlan said.

Chuckling Yoda waved them all to silence. "Hrhrhrm, ready you all are your Knighthood for certain. Long-term pictures you can see. But forget you do one point."

"The Sith Master?" Harry asked. "If there is an enemy out there, how might they act against us?"

"Hrhrhrm, yes. Will take your words under advisement, a new policy we could reach. But must think, we do, about the Sith's reaction to such a change." Yoda fell silent then as the others enjoyed the fair the ship's cooking droids offered, his eyes closing as he slipped into his half-meditation.

This seemed to be the cue for the Jedi to break up into smaller conversations. Gallia and Micah both started talking about the food now, setting aside further political discussions for later. In particular Master Gallia was thinking about some long-term plans there and this ship and what it could mean. Koth, Glaive, and Tiin started to press Harry and Micah for more information about the Ruusan sector in general.

Aayla sat by Zule at one end of the table, and seeing this, Shaak joined the general discussion, moving slightly to allow the two young women some semblance of privacy. Zule had been quiet for most of the walk through the ship, looking around in as much awe as the others but remaining silent as they asked questions, and Aayla, with her empathic skill, knew the reason. "You're unhappy about still being a padawan while the three of us become Knights Zule. Don't be." Aayla said in a near-whisper.

"Why shouldn't I be unhappy?" Zule asked in the same low tone. The Half-Falleen padawan looked a tiny bit frustrated, though her mind and connection to the Force did not show any sign of wavering. "I might not have faced the number of tests that you all have, but I think I should be able to take the Knighthood Trials. I just don't know what else I can learn from Master Glaive that would be enough to get him to agree. And so long as he doesn't, I'm stuck as his padawan. And that is a position that has begun to rankle of late."

"He still isn't listening to you?" Aayla asked, hiding a wince. Her empathic ability was able to tell a lot more than what Zule's words would convey, and she could tell this issue was far worse than what Zule was letting on.

"He's never been willing to listen to me. Oh, he mouths the words in front of the High Council or other masters who call him out on it, but the moment we're out in the field, it always goes back to the way it was." Zule's lips almost twitched into a scowl, but she stopped them quickly. "I don't deny that I had a bit of a temper at first, and Master Glaive helped me through that, and some other issues I didn't even know I had. But lately, he's not been teaching me anything beyond lightsaber skills and some observation skills, which isn't enough to offset the frustration that he doesn't trust my understanding of the Force."

That near-accusation hung between the two old friends for a moment, and Aayla had to once more hide a wince at the emotions that came with it, which carried to her easily despite Zule's incredible self-control. That was a big deal, as was the fact that there didn't seem to be much in the way of a connection between the two at all. A master had to be willing to see that the padawan had a connection to the Force and that it could differ in scope or vision than his own. If Glaive wasn't willing to do that, then there might indeed be a problem with the two of them

staying together. "Have you received any feelings through the Force like you said you did when I was in trouble all those years ago?"

"A few times, though they were even more ephemeral than they were then," Zule admitted. "Twice when we were assigned to protect a Senator from possible assassination, and once when Kass Alee ran into trouble on a mission. That time I tried to talk Glaive into checking in on her, but he didn't. I..."

Zule looked at her master, making sure the large man couldn't overhear. "I believed in that vision so strongly I contacted the Council of Reassignment directly. Master Billaba believed me and went after them. It turned out the terrorists knew they were coming and had ambushed the two Jedi with a nerve agent, taking them both hostage. Master Billaba rescued them, but I never spoke about my part in it."

"And for yourself, and your own path forward?" Aayla asked while inside she exulted. Once more it was looking at the Force through the kaleidoscope of her Light Side emotions and connections which had allowed Zule to catch these glimpses through the Veil of the Dark Side. It was a sign that embracing those emotions while keeping the Dark Side at bay was the way forward.

"Nothing. At least..." Zule looked at Aayla then around the ship. "At least not until you all arrived. Since then, I've been getting the feeling that I'm supposed to join you all on this ship, whatever you choose to do with it."

Aayla nodded, then looked around as she felt eyes on her. She saw Yoda watching the two of them, his ancient eyes staring at and then through them. Slowly the ancient Jedi nodded, and she nodded very slightly back. Whatever this was, it looked as if Yoda was now aware of the issue, and Aayla could leave it in his hands. With that in mind, Aayla turned their discussion to the ship in general, and Zule's piloting skills.

Later that evening, as the sun set, they returned to the training center below, where they found that Komari had prepared the mansion for the knighthood ceremony. Three rooms had been prepared for the three padawans, everything but a small mat on the floor within them removed. Here the padawans would remain from now until sunset tomorrow, fasting and meditating alone on their path forward.

Or at least that was what it would have been like for most padawans, and indeed Alecto did fast and meditate. But while they too fasted no planetary distance or wall could obstruct the bond between Aayla and Harry. Since they hadn't had much time for themselves, even in their bonded mental worlds, the two of them took this time to simply be with one another. They made love in their mental realms or just sat and gazed at their joined memories for hours on end. They also talked about what they would do from here on, which technically speaking was what this period was for even if they were not going about it as the Order assumed.

As the three of them were going through this period of isolation, Yoda summoned Master Glaive to a private conference. "Zule Xiss, ready she is for the knighthood trial." He said without any preamble as he stared up at the large human master, sitting on a small chair as Glaive stood in front of him. "Perception, skill, courage, she has shown. Spirit and Flesh, she must be tested for. Yet ready she is."

"I disagree," Glaive said, scowling. "She has still much to learn about perception and her skill with the lightsaber is barely adequate. I do not believe she is ready to be knighted."

"Perception, yours is, distorted by personal feelings. Letting irritation at her skills in the Clan Saa techniques cloud your judgment, you are." Yoda said, shaking his ancient head, his eyes never leaving Glaive's face. "Further, impacted by her Falleen pheromones you have been. See it in your presence I do when around her. Beneath you this is."

Glaive's eyes widened and the bald man seemed to tremble, his hand falling to his side where his lightsaber resided. If it was anyone else who had dared make such an accusation, Glaive might well have reacted either by bluster or verbal assault. But this was Yoda, and there was no condemnation in his eyes, just knowledge and certainty. He wasn't making this accusation lightly, but he knew he was right, and Glaive, now that it had been spoken of, could not avoid the fact Yoda was right. He had often felt stirrings around Zule, things he should not have felt given his Jedi training.

Breathing deeply, the large man nodded slowly. "Very well Master Yoda, I will agree to nominate her for the Trials of Knighthood. I admit it will be something of a relief. Over the past year or so we have been clashing on numerous topics and while I would be fine with that, the nature of our clashes has changed. Which, now that you press me on it, I cannot say with certainty was all her fault."

By the time Harry and the others came out of their isolation, Zule had passed her trial of Spirit. She was rather shaken by it, but was still game, ready to begin her Trial of Flesh. This, a week of fasting, deprivation and exposure to the elements, would begin the day following her friend's ascension to Knighthood. Buoyed by their success, and the knowledge that her own opinion about her skills had been proven correct, she was eager to face it. But right now, she watched with her former Master, Quinlan, Komari, and Shaak Ti as her friends went through the ceremony to finish their ascension to Knighthood.

The three of them stood in the center of the patio a circle drawn on the wood below them. Around the trio was the High Council and the other masters present, their lightsabers in hand and activated, filling the air with the thrum of their blades. Yoda stood directly in front of him, also holding his lightsaber to the side and down, no sign of his gimer stick in sight. None of the trio was armed with their lightsabers. Those were on the floor in a row in front of them and the direction they were facing.

"To the Order you came, seeking understanding of the gift within you, the Force without. Hrrhrhm, your places in the universe you searched for. The Order, helped you in this search we did, taught you we did. Passed tests you had to, in order to prove your worth, to prove your sense of self, and understanding in the Force. At that point, a hurdle passed you did, moving from learners to padawans. To learn further, a Master was assigned, to guide you, educate you in the ways of the Order, and the universe. Before me, see padawans I do. Wish to become knights they do. Their masters, speak now they shall on this."

Master Giiett stepped forward, raising his blade up in a salute to the rest of the circle of Masters. "I speak as Master for Alecto of Duros."

Across from him, Quinlan Vos Stood forward, his lightsaber also coming up in a salute. "I speak as Master for Aayla Secura of Ryloth."

Directly behind the trio of prospective Knights Shaak Ti took a step forward from her former position, her green lightsaber activating as she raised it in a salute. With Fay unable to be here, someone had to speak as Harry's Master as part of the ceremony. And tradition dictated it could not be someone who was already speaking for one of the other padawans. It came as no surprise to any who knew her that Shaak had volunteered. "I speak for Master Fay, the teacher of Harry Potter of Earth."

"Attest you do, that these padawans, passed the Trial of Skill?" Yoda asked.

"Yes," Shaak, Micah, and Quinlan responded. "With the Force guiding their hands, they are proficient in their chosen styles of the Lightsaber," Quinlan went on, being the least senior of them.

"Passed the Trial of Courage they have?" Yoda asked.

"They have faced the turmoil of combat, both planned and when it came upon them when they were unprepared," Shaak replied after the chorus of affirmatives this time. "With strength in the Force, they have passed the trial of combat."

"The trial of the Flesh, passed it they have?"

This time after they all replied it was Micah's turn to elaborate. "They have faced the depredation that comes through lack of food, the hardship of wounds and pain. With the aid of the Force, they have passed the trial of the Flesh."

At that point, the three masters stepped back and the other masters raised their activated lightsabers to a salute, the hilts in front of their faces, the blades pointing up into the sky. As the sun set, the lights of the plasma blades started to cast a few shadows around them.

"Padawans, the ability to perceive truth from falsehood do you have?" Yoda asked, addressing the trio directly.

For this part, the padawans were supposed to answer in turn, with the oldest first. In this case that was Alecto by a bit more than a year. "We have. Through the Force and our own senses we were able to tell fact from fiction, the lies spoken in our presence for what they were."

"Through the Force, we were able to discern friend from foe, our true goal rather than the one we thought we had to achieve," Harry said in turn.

Then it was Aayla's turn. "When we reach out to the Force we perceived our course forward, where we had to be and where we had to go."

"The Trial of Spirit, hardest and last it is. Faced your inner fears, have you?" Yoda asked, his voice now coming out almost dark and demanding rather than the stern tone he had been using.

Once more the three young people had to speak for themselves, but this time it was in reverse order, with Aayla first. Although, here while the words were somewhat the same as it would be for any perspective Knight, they didn't quite match their own trial of Spirit or the normal ceremony. "We have. We have faced the mirror, our actions turned on their heads, right and wrong changed, and overcome with trust in the Force."

"We faced our darker selves, emotions which would have tried to control our minds and bodies, and come through wiser, but still ourselves. We know that the Dark Side will ever be with us, but can be overcome with trust in ourselves, one another and the Light Side of the Force."

At that, more than one of the lightsabers around them wavered. The idea of the Light Side of the Force being seen as different from the Force as a whole was highly unusual even now and more than one Master there had issues with it still. But the faltering lightsabers came back up to the salute position quickly.

"We have faced our own inadequacies, our inner fears and bitter anger. They have no hold on us. They are illusions, which can be cast aside with trust in the Force and our own abilities." Alecto said for his part.

Anyone assembled, gainsay what has been said here?" Yoda asked, his eyes raking over the other Masters.

One or two there standing in for the High Council along with Tiin and Gallia looked a little bemused by the wording. But none of them, even the Masters there for lightsaber retraining said anything. Unfortunately for them, their confusion and concern were not going to go away quickly.

Nodding at that, Yoda gestured, and the lightsabers laying on the patio's floor flew through the air toward their owners. "Recite the Oath you will."

When they spoke, the trio spoke as one, with Zule nearby whispering the words to herself unheard by any over the hum of the lightsabers. "There is emotion, yet peace. Ignorance, yet knowledge. Passion, yet serenity. Chaos, yet harmony. Death, yet the Force."

This was the Old Oath, which had not been used since the Ruusan Reformation. It allowed for relationships, for a Jedi to go closer to the edge of having and using emotions, than the New Oath, while also showing that the Jedi in question believed in harmony both of himself and of the Force in general. Even though many there had known the younglings of Clan Saa had stated they would take this version of the Oath, hearing it spoken aloud was startling to even the High Council, let alone the others.

But Yoda had known this was coming and chuckled internally at the idea that Harry and Aayla at the least would choose to take the New Oath. "Then take up your lightsabers anew you now will. Jedi Knights you now are."

Standing up the three pulled the lightsabers from where they had come to a stop in front of them in the air. Raising their lightsabers, they activated them and saluting back to the assembled. Many an eyebrow rose in surprise at the color of Harry's lightsaber, a pure white color like nothing any of them had seen before. Using his lightsaber Harry then removed his padawan braid, before deactivating the weapon and setting it on his belt, the ceremony finished as the circle of Jedi around them followed suit.

Tomorrow the rest of the universe would once more intrude. Tomorrow they would once more have to come to grips with the changes in their status and their jobs as Count, semi-official countess, and Jedi. But whatever happened, Harry and the others would face it now as full-fledged Jedi Knights. And right now, that was enough.

End Chapter

Yes, I know the ceremony there doesn't match anything in the books or comics, or even cartoons. Since none of them match one another, I felt I could get away with creating my own version.

This is not the chapter I had wanted to write. First, it's shorter than I had hoped, covering far less time and events than I had hoped. Second, some of these scenes fought me from start to finish. Third, I am not altogether happy with how I portrayed C'boath's leaving the Order. I'll be interested to hear everyone's opinions on that score. Hopefully we won't have to wait as long as we did before this story wins the SW crossover poll again, since I would like to play around with Padme more, and she is not a main character in my other crossover. But regardless, the

next chapter will take us from now to near the start of the Clone Wars and I get back to showing more then telling/talking.