

I am not Disney, nor a British lady.

This was the winner of the HP poll, although it is a shorter chapter than I had hoped. But for only three days it's not bad. And I have to say I'm happy with where I was able to cut it off... heh. It has been edited by me with Grammarly, but I don't doubt despite the small size there will still be small mistakes. If you see any mistakes of that type or places where I contradicted myself, please tell me, and I will correct it.

This chapter doesn't have a lot of Harry-centric stuff, but the rest is quite important, so I hope you enjoy it regardless.

Chapter 26:

Fighting the urge to bite her lip and concentration, Ahsoka held a tile of durasteel armor in front of her where her Master was working with the Force, watching avidly as he used a plasma torch to smelt the final rune of a small runic array, trying hard to memorize the shapes of the rune as she watched. Ahsoka had started to learn more about runes before the Tyrant's Bane had begun to build up for Operation Trident, but she was four or more months away from putting down any permanently like this.

It had been months already since Harry had taken her on as a padawan, and Ahsoka still got a strange little thrill at watching runic work like this. It was so unusual, so strange and almost wondrous to see the Force used in a way that her previous teachings as a youngling in the temple had never even hinted at. Not even the various element-based defenses and attacks she'd learned quite matched it, although those were currently more fun than the rote lessons about runes. *Ugh, by the time I'm ready to step away from the sand tables, I'll hate sand as much as Skywalker always says he does.*

Nearby, Aayla worked on several more panels while a trio of Jedi from the Bane helped her along. The Jedi in sight were vastly outnumbered by the number of astromech droids trundling around everywhere, using magnetized treads to trundle along the surface of the Tyrant's Bane as if it was the surface of a planet despite the zero-G gravity of space all around them. The little flashing lights the droids let loose as they talked to one another while etching the runes that they could put down before the Jedi came around and added specific runes into the matrixes caused Ahsoka to smile every time she saw them. For some reason, the R2-D2 units were so weirdly alive that it was just funny.

Yet Ahsoka couldn't let her mind wander at the moment because her Master had decided to make this a learning experience in terms of multitasking. She was currently holding the plate of durasteel in the air in front of her Master while also memorizing what he was doing

and had been told she would be quizzed on it later. Concentrating on two extremely different tasks like that was actually surprisingly more difficult than concentrating on multiple tasks of the same type. *And isn't that weird? I would've thought that battle precognition would carry over into less violent areas, but I can concentrate on more than a dozen blaster droids and my Master's lightsaber attacks now, but I'm still having trouble memorizing what he's doing while only holding up one plate! Weird.*

Ahsoka was also fighting the urge to look around from one second to the next as she felt the movement of the droids and other Jedi all around her but knew that if she did, her control of the tile of durasteel would waiver, and even a single movement of it would make her Master have to redo the rune he was currently carving into it, maybe even mess up the rest of the runes on the tile. It was a sign of his trust in Ahsoka that he had created this particular exercise, but Ahsoka felt she could have done without that sign of trust. Especially now after several hours of this exercise. *Ugh, this has been torture! Torture, I say!*

"We are nearly done for the day, Ahsoka," Harry's voice came over the private intercom she shared with her Master, even as Aayla finished work on a nearby tile. "I can feel your growing need to move, to do something physical. Don't worry. We'll be done soon, then I'll test you on whether or not you've correctly memorized the various empowerment runes I've been working on, and then you'll have the rest of the day to either go down to the planet and help the various rebuilding projects, or spar with Knight Larima."

Arjun Larima was one of the better starfighter pilots aboard the Tyrant's Bane. The Nautolan woman was also a decent lightsaber duelist, who specialized in Soresu.

"Master, is this your equivalent of the carrot and the stick?" Ahsoka asked jokingly, even as she renewed her concentration on what Harry was doing, watching the flowing script of the runes slowly take shape. "Because if so, it's kind of working. I'd just prefer more carrots."

"Such is your lot in life as a padawan," Harry laughed, his hands steady with the welder. "Trust me, there were many times when I was a padawan to Master Fay that I thought the same thing."

Ahsoka smiled at that, remembering meeting Master Fay, the strange, ethereal Jedi Master who protected the Ruusan sector with the power of the Force Font on the eponymous planet. She kept her concentration on the durasteel plate and watching her Master before she saw a group moving behind them. For a moment, her attention almost wavered, but Ahsoka regained control of it and heard her Master's hum of approval through their intercom.

The group behind the durasteel plate Ahsoka held on its side in the air was putting a new turbolaser battery in place. It wasn't one of the large ones, the type that would normally only be based on a planet that was part of the primary offensive weapons of the Tyrant's Bane,

unfortunately. Polith didn't have any of those. The ones on Thyferra's moon base had been destroyed by the occupying droids before they had been cleared out, and the planet itself never had any.

It was an oversight that would probably be changed in the future, among many other things. Going forward, Ahsoka felt that the vratic and humans of Polith would probably not be as certain in their own untouchability ever again. However, the locals did and could produce regular-sized capital ship turbolasers and ion cannons to help the Tyrant's Bane rebuild its denuded secondary weapon systems. And they had already taken on as many proton torpedoes and concussion missiles as the star system had in its stores and then some.

In fact, Ahsoka had watched her Master argue with Anakin on that score because Harry had requested the transfer of **all** of the proton torpedoes and concussion missiles from the entire relief fleet on top of the ones the locals could give them. Anakin had demanded why they needed so many because they surely didn't need them to fill a single Lucrehulk's magazines. Only they did because the Tyrant's Bane was in no way a normal Lucrehulk.

Some secrets had come out after that conversation, secrets that Anakin had vowed to keep even as they had astounded him. For some reason during the conversation, though, Ahsoka had felt Aayla's concentration on Anakin, as if she was watching for something. Eventually, Ahsoka felt that Aayla was satisfied, pleased that she hadn't found whatever it was.

Looking back on that conversation, Ahsoka wasn't certain what that was about, but she also wasn't going to inquire. When it comes to reading other people's emotions, Master Secura's empathy was scary, and Ahsoka trusted it fully. Yet the sight of the group working on the turbolaser batteries brought to mind something else she had been meaning to ask her Master about. "Master, since Operation Trident was scrubbed, what're we going to do next?"

"After we're able to leave Polith, you mean?" Harry asked, smiling as he turned off his plasma torch and shifted away from where he had been working. He held up a hand to indicate that Ahsoka should keep the durasteel plate where it was for a moment, watching as the last line of the rune he'd been carving cooled quickly in the coldness of space. When it was finished, he touched that rune lightly, and it began to glow as he pushed some of his Force power into it. That glow quickly spread to all of the other rooms in the array on that piece of tile.

He stepped back and without being directed, Ahsoka lowered the tile into place. As she did, she saw that blue glow transfer to the other tiles all around it until the sides of the one she was moving obscured the glow of the Force.

Two nearby astromech droids quickly turned from where they had been working on another piece of tile, shifting over to seal the one Harry had been working on into place with

their own plasma torches. As they did, Harry turned back to Ahsoka, moving to stand beside her as Aayla also finished her work for the day.

Almost as if they planned it, Ahsoka thought with a giggle inside her helmet.

"To answer your question, Ahsoka, if by 'we' you mean the Tyrant's Bane, we're going to be out of any direct action for a while. Without our planetary-class weapon systems, we lose a great deal of our offensive punch as you know, and those weapons will need to be replaced before we either restart Operation Trident or look elsewhere for a target that will let us really hurt the CIS. We'll act as Senator Amidala's ship to Tanaab, since we need to head there too. Padme will take part in a symposium on the growing taxes being imposed on agricultural worlds as a representative of the Senate, and we will meet Princess Chume of the Hapes Cluster in person."

"And Padme will be there to see us refuse Ta'a's overtures of a more personal connection," Harry said to Aayla, who answered in the affirmative with a feeling of ruefulness filling their connection for a moment, which Harry replied to with a bit of wicked anticipation. Looming back on it, Harry decided he hadn't really enjoyed the undertone Ta'a's flirtations had toward him, and a small part of him was looking forward to seeing Padme put the other girl in her place. It was a small, petty part of him, but Harry had to acknowledge its existence before releasing the feeling into the Force.

"We've also already purchased and paid for shipping the planetary-class weapons systems we need to that planet from Balmorra," Aayla added, while hiding an internal snicker at Harry's thinking. "Although, installing them will be a little difficult. The locals don't have the space-based ability to place them on starships. Still, the Force will provide."

Ahsoka slowly nodded at that. While she had known that, Amidala had been given the task of becoming a liaison with the GDL and her Master in particular, she hadn't heard that Harry and Aayla would be meeting with Princess Chume on Tanaab before as the trio began to bounce over the surface of the Tyrant's Bane towards the airlock. She remained silent as they entered, waited for the interior airlock to finish cycling, and to enter the ship before slowly pulling off her helmet.

"That sounds well and good for us personally, Master. But what about the overall war effort? You've been keeping me hopping since you left the bacta tank, and I haven't had the time to check on the news or the daily briefings you've been sent."

"If you pass my test on whether or not you memorized the runes we were just using, you'll have that time tonight," Harry said, placing a hand gently on her shoulder, then moving it up to her horns, running his finger up and down her small horns in a paternal manner that

caused her to smile. “Which I have no doubt you will. I could feel your concentration, even split as it was.”

Ahsoka nodded, looking over to Aayla, who winked at the young togrutan, also pleased with Ahsoka’s growing mental abilities. Her mental acuity and ability to create an Occlumentic realm of her own, complete with personal protections, had been the main thrust of her training over the past few days, along with the work on the Tyrant’s Bane. “Harry’s right, Ahsoka. You’ll have time tonight to catch up. Whereas Harry and I, we will be taking part in a meeting with our High Command over the Hypercom. If you wish to join us, you may.”

True to the two older Jedi’s prediction, Ahsoka passed her little test a few moments later with flying colors. Her barely formed Occlumentic realm allowed her to memorize new concepts like runes easily, although turning that into practice would be much harder. Regardless, Harry cheerfully handed her off to Knight Larima for some sparring time.

Normally, he would’ve handled that himself, but Harry had decided that he and Aayla could spend a bit of time simply together that day. This they did after taking a shuttle over to Warm Welcome.

The space station that served as the center of the Polith system’s government and society was almost back to normal now, having been the first space station to finish repatriating its civilians from the surface. Live had returned to the point where food stalls, restaurants and other things had all opened up again.

Deciding to just walk around and spend time together like this, the two of them stopped at a food stall run by a yellow-scaled Aleena, his appearance reminding Aayla of Master Tsui Choi. *“His food always tasted good to me, although he had this strange ability to make it taste at this good as your own feelings would allow. If you ate his food while feeling bitter or angry or condescending, it would taste of those feelings, bringing them to mind more starkly. It was a very strange sort of power, although even his best food didn’t taste as good as yours, my love,”* Aayla said mentally as the two of them walked along, sharing the memory of one of those meals with Harry at the same time.

Harry chuckled at that, putting his arm around her waist lightly, sighing at the feel of Aayla gently pressing into his side, her lek twitching against his side. Even dressed in Jedi robes and as famous as they were, the station was so busy at the moment that the two of them hardly drew more than a few respectful nods or awed glances and thankful bows. This was extremely nice in comparison to the first day Harry had been out of the bacta tank. The one time he’d gone out that day, he’d been nearly mobbed by well-wishers.

Now, finished with his own meat stick, Harry leaned in, kissing Aayla very lightly on the neck, then up to her ear, letting his lips glide over her ear and up the base of her lek.

Aalya shivered a bit at his touch, running her tongue over her lips and sharing some particularly dirty thoughts with her lover for a moment as they continued to walk along, any sign of arousal hidden beneath their Jedi robes. They hadn't had much time together over the past few days, instead concentrating more on having romantic moments with Padme and Zule and working on Harry's leg to the point where it was once more back to normal, something that even with the Force helping them had taken a few days.

"Tonight, though, after the meeting with the high command is over with, I am going to ride you into the floor!" She thought, pulling Harry into an alleyway for a moment before leaning up to give Harry a brief but intense kiss on his lips.

Harry replied ardently, flashing the image of Padme sitting beside the two of them on the bed with Zule watching from her lap as Harry and a fully clothed Aalya made out. This image won quite a bit of approval from his blue-skinned lover, who quickly shifted the image to Padme laid out underneath Harry, all four of them naked as the day they were born.

"Careful love," Harry murmured against her lips before continuing the kiss even as he spoke mentally to Aalya. *"We all agreed that we wouldn't go that far until we were away from the Polith system and on towards Taanab."*

"Oh, but building anticipation can still be nice, Harry. And I can feel... in many ways... that you don't exactly disapprove," Aalya replied with some amusement before slowly pulling away physically from Harry.

The two of them continued on, with Aalya leaning into Harry lightly as they continued the conversation mentally. For several blocks, the conversation remained on the four lovers, both of them well pleased with how their personal time had gone over the past three days. All four of the new group had been able to devote at least a few hours every day to one another, with Harry going on dates with both Padme and Zule and Aalya doing the same while Harry spent time with his padawan while at night, the two bonded spent time together in their shared mental realm.

In public, Harry and Aalya had to be careful to keep their interactions with the other two on a seemingly friendly level, but Zule and Padme had quickly decided that the two of them didn't need to be as careful, building up to a story of the two of them getting together. Since Zule had taken the Old Oath and had passed the test the High Council had created to see if a Jedi who wished to have a lover could do so without being in danger of falling to the Dark Side back on Coruscant, both of them felt that would serve very well. It would give the paparazzi something to buzz over. Although fearful now of painting Padme in any kind of negative light, they would undoubtedly come back again to plague her as they did all public figures. Yet, hopefully, it would also hide the overall relationship.

Harry had frankly loved having that time with Padme and Zule both.

In Zule, Harry had found a wicked sense of humor, one that was far drier and more acerbic than Aayla's, as well as someone who was far more willing to be a little dirty in terms of flirtations than Aayla would be in public. Aayla had to be really worked up to be that openly flirtatious in public normally, but the one time that Zule had been certain that they weren't being observed? That had been an eye-opener. Zule was also extremely insightful in terms of logistics and, surprisingly, had followed a few things on Coruscant that Padme hadn't been all that interested in, making for some very interesting conversations for both Aayla and Harry.

For Aayla, the connection to Zule came incredibly easily. Their long-term friendship and semi-serious girl crushes merged into affection and love quickly once they began to actually build on those emotions over the past few days, just as it had with Padme once she, Harry and Aayla had resumed communication years back. Zule flirted with all three of the others differently. With Harry, it was mostly verbal with a few subtle touches. With Padme, she liked to put her own body on display in equally subtle ways, with little winks and touches. With Aayla, it was a bit more overt, with Zule touching Aayla's lekku, rear, or legs whenever she could get away with it. In return, Aayla was fascinated with Zule's skin color. Not a night had gone by without her exploring Zule's back, side or face with her fingers... or lips.

In contrast, both of their time with Padme was mostly behind closed doors. In public, Harry and Aayla had to be very careful to not seem overly friendly with the acting system governor, and Padme had decided to simply make it so that they didn't have public romance time. No going out to restaurants except as a larger group, and no flirtatious actions or words at all in public.

Yet when Anakin was busy with his duties as the commander of the local defense force, the married Wookies off on their own and Ahsoka training or meditating in the Bane, Padme made up for that big time. Not a single meal Harry cooked had gone by without Padme 'putting the moves' as it were on him or Aayla as she stayed in bed while he was off in the kitchen. Padme also positively loved the little gestures that both of them made in turn, such as Harry clandestinely buying a bouquet of flowers for her and putting them in her bedroom, or Aayla, when they were bathing together, taking an important amount of time cleaning Padme's hair.

That was something she and Zule both had in common despite the fact that Zule had hair of her own. In turn, the half-falleen loved the attention that Harry and Aayla paid her hair, and Harry knew that Padme had hoped to buy her a bracelet of some kind to signify their connection that day.

However, after a few blocks, the conversation turned to the greater galaxy as a whole. As much as Harry, Padme, Zule and Aayla could try to sometimes pretend it didn't exist, their

positions as leaders of the GDL did not allow them to forget. First came thoughts about the fact that the *Tyrant's Bane* would be up to leaving Polith soon and that Padme would be relieved of her acting governor duties following the elections that were even now going on.

For the first time, a vratrix might well end up in charge of the whole star system, something that was long overdue in both Harry and Aayla's minds, although the election itself had not gone as smoothly as any of them could have liked. Putting in place the logistics needed to have it in the first place had been hard, and surprisingly, a certain amount of inter-hive rivalry had suddenly sprouted, up where before there had been only unity. That had been fascinating to watch, but in terms of the greater galaxy, even that was small change, and neither of them was not looking forward to that night's meeting with the High Command.

The war had essentially hiccupped for about a day and a half after news of the assault on Thyferra had spread across the Republic and Confederacy. All sides had reacted in their own ways, but now, those reactions had simmered down, and the war had once again picked up. Indeed the violence across the thousands of fronts out there had risen to a nasty crescendo as the CIS and the Republic committed atrocities on one another, with the Republic coming out the loser more often than not simply because the CIS used droids, and this cut down on the number of living sailors or soldiers that could be killed by, say, a Republic admiral ordering his troops to shoot up escape pods to fire on a civilian space station because the CIS had done the same thing.

The GDL hadn't done any of that, thankfully, but Harry felt that was half because Harry had always stressed the need to keep the moral high ground and half the fact the GDL was not in a position any longer to go on the offensive with Operation Trident canceled. *"Although, hopefully, the trickle of attacks behind enemy lines that our cloak-capable frigates began recently will become a flood soon."*

"Given the report passed to Master Yaddle from Master Gallia about how many frigates Freedom's Fence has finished refitting with the cloaking array, and placed under Rafael's command, yes, I think it's about time," Aayla agreed. *"If Garm agrees they've finally gotten to the point where we can use them on a strategic level, anyway. But even so, it'll be a while before those attacks have any real impact."*

"What was it the analysts said? Another year and a half before the Republic's logistical superiority will finally be able to match the numerical superiority the CIS built up in peacetime?" Harry shook his head. *"If we didn't already know that everything was being orchestrated by the Sith, the fact that the CIS hasn't yet taken advantage of their numbers appropriately would be enough to prove it. If they'd simply piled everything into attacking Corellia and Serenno..."*

“True. Although perhaps the planetary defenses of Coruscant would be enough to hold up in time for reinforcements to arrive?” Aayla asked aloud, although Harry had no answer to that point. The power of a planetary shield was based entirely on how many power plants could link into the various shield generators. On a planet like Coruscant, that was an exorbitant amount, but would it be enough to keep the shield in place against an armada thousands of capital ships strong? Who knew? It wasn’t as if planetary bombardments on that scale were an exact science or had been studied in depth at any point.

But really, both of them were allowing their minds to wander over such what-ifs and the war effort as a whole to stop themselves from concentrating on the one up front that truly mattered to the Galactic Defense League at present. Or rather, one of two, although the second one was being handled far more easily. Attacks on the various Hypercom Relay Center within the GDL had begun to build up again, both in terms of the number of attacks and how large those attacks were, pinning more and more of the GDL’s mobile units in place to defend against such, peeling off divisions of capital ships to remain in the various star systems that housed them.

That aspect the various fleet admirals had been somewhat prepared for and a large majority of the prewar defense fleets had been slowly added into the GDL fleets in charge of defending those specific star systems. There’d been a great deal of howling from the local admirals on that score as they found their personal power bases shrinking dramatically, but Harry and their political leaders had sat on them very firmly to make certain that howling was all they did.

The other front was much more worrisome. The CIS Grand Fleet, a name the GDL analysts had created for the massive armada pushing into the Corellian Sector, was single-minded in purpose. Despite losses equal to many a prewar Core System’s defense fleet, they simply kept pushing forward, regardless of how many hyperspace traps they ran into. The Bpfasshi admiral in charge of the assault had seemingly halted all other offensive operations, which was good for the other star systems in that sector and in the surrounding sectors, both Republic and GDL. Yet his fleet had basically hammered up to the second to last defensive line around Corellia.

And even with the massive shoals of mines defending that system, the attack here on Polith and the resulting Republic offensive into Oulanne had shown that any attacker could break through such defenses if they were willing to pay the price in capital ships to do it or could plan well enough to deal with the mines.

More personally, both Harry and Aayla knew that their friend Alecto was part of that defense. Both of them knew that their rock would not retreat regardless of circumstances if he

felt a last-stand type of tactic was warranted, and the bonded lovers worried about the vision of the future Alecto had the last time they'd meditated together with Harry and Aayla's Force Constructs pushing the Veil back.

The only bright side to that front was the fact that going by the latest report they'd had the previous evening, the two Lucrehulks that the *Tyrant's Bane* had captured and which had been sent on to Corellia for 'special' refit were nearing completion. The battle here had proven that one such ship might not be able to turn the tide against a determined enemy with their own dreadnaughts. Two, however? Working in tandem with a far, far more potent fleet to back them up? That was going to be another story altogether.

It was now a race to see if the CIS grand fleet would break the defenses of Corellia or if those ships would be online before they could. After that, while it would probably pin both ships in place, Corellia would be defended against any foreseeable assault.

They deliberately set aside those musings for a time in the elevator that would carry them up to the suite where Padme was currently residing, instead concentrating on one another, simply kissing and hugging one another until they reached the door leading into her suite.

Opening it, they found Anakin sitting on the floor, meditating as his lightsaber hilt whirled in the air in front of him. That was a somewhat odd meditation technique, but Harry wasn't one to comment.

For Aayla, the feeling that she was getting off the younger prospective Knight was one of wry amusement and sadness. To the rutian twi'lek, an expert at examining emotions for meaning, it felt as if Anakin was finally letting go of a dream for reasons he had never seen coming. "Anakin, are you well?"

"Define 'well,'" Anakin said, opening his eyes and twisting around to look up at the other two Jedi as they sat on the nearby sofa. "I am physically fine, but mentally? Ehh..." the Tatooine native chuckled self-deprecatingly. "I have just taken a hit to a long-cherished dream, one that has made me decide to give it up unfortunately. It's been a long time coming, but the final blow came from a direction I did not anticipate."

Harry gazed at him quizzically while Aayla blinked, staring between Anakin, and the closed door to the fresher as the pair of them felt Anakin's attention shift in that direction even though his eyes remained on them. That was enough of a clue for Aayla to understand what was going on here, and she quickly filled in Harry, although Harry did not allow his face to show any of his sudden feelings of amusement.

“Padme?” Aayla asked aloud. “You harbored a, I hesitate to use the word crush considering you are a Jedi, but...”

“But that term comes closer than anything else. My Master helped me work through it several times, but given her unique feel in the Force, and our connection, the fact that I can point to her being there as the reason why I was freed from slavery? Both of those things combined whenever I was around Padme, something that happened a lot, to make my one-sided attachment to her flare up again. However, I have just spent the last thirty minutes or so letting such go.”

The wry amusement that Aayla was feeling from Anakin dominated then, the last vestiges of sadness leaving him as he laughed, staring at Harry and then Aayla. Along with relief, oddly. Where that was coming from, she had no idea.

“Although, now I am feeling very much like a fifth wheel here,” Anakin continued with a smirk. “I don’t suppose your padawan is going to arrive soon? At least her arrival would, if not give me a partner of my own, at least cut into the feeling a bit.”

“Ah, I take it you have realized that Zule and Padme are a little closer than you thought?” Harry asked, shaking his head commiseratingly as the younger man stood up and moved to sit on the nearby sofa, grabbing up a data slate as he went.

“Chewbacca let me in, probably not knowing the two of them were together, and I was just in time to watch the two of them head into the fresher together. Now, I know that girls tend to be much closer physically speaking than boys, but even so...” Anakin drawled, shaking his head. “Yes, after that, I truly understood that I was the sole single person in our little group. Admittedly, as a Jedi, it isn’t a feeling that I haven’t dealt with before, but it hit harder.”

Harry chuckled dryly at that, shaking his head in commiseration once again, recalling what Aayla had talked about with him about her and Anakin’s conversations about his desire to find someone to love, to have a family in the future. Harry wasn’t certain if Anakin would be able to pass the test the High Council had devised for those Jedi who wished to take permanent partners, but he wasn’t going to go out of his way to discourage such an attempt either.

Deciding to instead keep the humor of the conversation going, he said jokingly, “Well, if you’re cut loose from the defense force here before the 501st can join you, you might be able to come with us. Then, we could introduce you to Ta’a Chume. That could perhaps solve your current issue.”

“Who?” Anakin asked, brow furrowing.

“Princess Ta’a Chume of the Hapes cluster. She is a silent ally of the GDL at present, and we are going to be meeting with her to formalize that connection. Although it will not also

involve a **personal** connection between us. The two of us have talked about it, and despite the fact that she hinted strongly that one needed to go with the other, we're not going to go through with that," Aayla explained, making it seem as if it had been a decision between her and Harry, rather than Padme putting her foot very firmly down on the idea of some random woman joining the relationship, or even having a physical-only relationship with the three of them.

That was entirely a different thing in comparison to Zule. Padme had come to love her constant companion and guard in her own way and vice versa, thanks to the amount of time the two of them had spent together since first being introduced.

Anakin blinked and then very visibly went through the information he knew about the Hapes Cluster before chuckling and shaking his head. "Sorry, but that's not really for me. For one thing, my duties certainly won't let me come with you. The rest of the 501st is due to arrive tomorrow morning local time, and I'll be leaving with them as Master Tiin takes those holocrons we found back to Coruscant. For another, I'm not into being dommed, thank you."

That had been a decision of the High Council soon after Aayla and Anakin had reported about the holocrons they had found in Master Jerec's room. However, Saesee Tiin wouldn't be going straight back to the temple. Instead, he would remain with the Tyrant's Bane until after the mission to Taanab, which would let them all have the time they needed to speak to the Force enneagram of Nomi Sunrider. The Jedi needed to know what Jerec had been researching, and the knowledge of fighting the Sith that Nomi had would undoubtedly help the whole order. It just made more sense from a logistics for Harry and the other Jedi aboard the

Anakin and Harry exchanged a laugh at the younger man's words while Aayla rolled her eyes before quipping that Anakin might be surprised. "Many a woman who is in a position of authority in society might enjoy releasing that control in private."

That caused Anakin to blush and for Harry's laughter to become a little louder even as the door behind them opened as Ahsoka did, in fact, join them as Anakin had wondered about a few moments before. Harry and Aayla's romantic walk through the space station had taken four hours, letting his padawan catch up to them here in hopes of a Potter-made meal.

Looking at the three laughing Jedi, she shook her head and headed into the kitchen to grab a snack. "Why do I think I don't want to know?"

"They were making fun of my... Shall we say, lack of romantic hopes at present," Anakin explained. "Not exactly a normal thing for Jedi to joke about, but I suppose none of us are normal, are we?"

Ahsoka snorted at that, hearing the water turnoff in the refresher station and realizing what had perhaps brought that up. She was perhaps the only one outside the quartet who understood that they were a four of a kind rather than two pairs, but the young togrutan wasn't about to bring it up, understanding that her Master wanted to keep that private.

Instead, she loved over to Harry, holding up a nutrition bar. "I don't suppose you're going to make anything for dinner, are you, Master?"

Harry glanced at the clock, then realized that he did have time to whip up something simple before the meeting with Iblis and the rest.

As he began work on that, the door to the refresher station opened, and Padme and Zule came out dressed in casual clothing. The two of them paused as they stared at Anakin, who had turned his head to look at them, one eyebrow rising.

Padme stiffened a little, then shrugged her shoulders and very deliberately left her arm where it was around the other woman's shoulders, while Zule did the same around her waist. "You have something to say, Anakin?"

"Nope. I am a Jedi, and I have been well-versed in when to keep my mouth shut," Anakin drawled back. "As well as what is and what isn't my business."

The others all laughed at that while Aayla felt a tiny tingle of jealousy from Anakin, although it was a far more general thing than she had feared. It looked as if he had indeed finally let go of the last vestiges of his attachment to Padme, despite the fact that Padme still gleamed in the Force as a unique being to any Force user's senses. *"Not a Jedi, not a Force user of any kind, but still unique. Regardless, it's a good sign. And I know for a fact that Bariss Offee decided to take the Old Oath despite her Master's opinion on attachments... Hmm.. that could be interesting. And it seems to me as if Anakin would need a counterweight to his own flail-like personality,"* she thought to Harry.

Harry very purposefully had no reply to that, not knowing the padawan in question personally, or indeed anything about her other than the fact that she was due to be raised to Knighthood soon and specialized, like her Master Luminara Unduli, in Force Healing. After the twosome had found themselves in a battle that had gone against the Republic, the Jedi Council had decided that the pair did not have the proper mentality to remain in a military role. And even that, Harry only knew because there was some talk of them being assigned to the GDL a few weeks back, only for that to not happen.

The moment of humor passing, Padme thanked Anakin for his consideration, while Zule simply nodded to the other Jedi, wordless approval of his stance in her eyes, before Padme shifted the conversation to the ongoing election, which she had been overseeing that day with

Zule and a few of the other Jedi acting as her eyes and ears on the planet and other space stations to make certain that none of the corporations that still existed within Polith attempted to somehow rig it one way or another.

Doing so now, with the eyes of the senator to watch over it, would've been particularly stupid. To say nothing of the fact that she now had several hundred Republic bureaucrats working directly for her on this point, along with the Jedi that Harry had loaned her from the *Tyrant's Bane*. Yet stupidity, inherited wealth, and ego often went hand-in-hand, and there had been a few attempts.

From there, Anakin took up the conversation while Zule moved to join Harry in the kitchen. While Aayla was his normal partner in such things, she honestly did not have Harry's flair for cooking. Zule did, although her tastes ran far more to the spicy than Harry's. And unlike Padme, who turned every time they were cooking into a chance to flirt, Zule was able to keep it professional. Other than a quick feel of Harry's rear hit into the others by the intervening island, anyway.

Soon, however, such conversations fell to the wayside along with the meal that the two prepared, as it came time for Harry and Aayla to contact the GDL High Command.

Master Yaddle and Bel Iblis's faces appeared on the Hypercom set into the central table of the suite, nodding their way. Those two faces quickly shrunk as they were joined by several dozen others, as more and more of the high command checked in from various places across the galaxy. However, two faces, in particular, were not there just yet, a lack that Garm explained once everyone else who was supposed to finish logging in for the conference. "Admiral D'Richelu and Knight Aleto won't be joining us. The CIS forces pushed through to point Ten-Omega-Two earlier today and are currently attacking tri-omega-epsilon. Under his own cognizance, Admiral D'Richelu decided to bring his full fleet into action against the forward elements of this CIS forces."

The GDL categorized the various hyperspace traps that protected League space by size, category and distance between the point and the nearest type 1 planet that the trap was supposed to defend. Size implied the type of gravitic anomaly that the trap was built around. Category was linked to what kind of specific trap it was. An omega-type trap for example had fewer mines and weapons satellites than a delta or beta. Alpha was the category used to describe a trap that had actual space fortresses accompanying it. Those were, perforce, few and far between.

Similarly, a size ten trap, like this one, had a larger gravitic anomaly than a four would. And as a 'two', the hyperspace trap the Confederacy had just run into was in the second to nearest defensive point in a straight line to Corellia.

The GDL's First Marshal allowed those words to sink into his listeners before going on briskly. "With that in mind, gentle beings, let us turn to the ongoing attacks on our Hypercom Network Systems and then to logistical matters. Admiral Dulnor, Admiral Fend, please inform the rest of the high command what's been going on there, and tell us if..."

OOOOOOO

"it would be very nice if we were the only ones learning as this war goes on. Alas, it seems as if that is not the case," Alecto mused as Unyielding charged forward with ten other Audacious-class destroyers all around it. Ahead of them, space lit up as the ship's prow-most defensive lasers fired at the vultures ahead of them. The vultures returned fire, and then the rest of the formation's defensive guns opened up on the Vulture swarm as they tried to push their way through the truly massive combat air patrol that their true targets had put out.

Far too quickly, hence Alecto's observation. Somehow, the Lucrehulks that had just been pulled out of hyperspace at point tri-omega epsilon, the largest of a series of interconnected hyperspace traps, had launched far more vultures in an instant than they should have been able to, at least three wings apiece in the time it should have taken them to launch one. Alecto had heard a term for it, hot launching, but had never seen it in action before.

It wasn't a perfect system, as his ship's sensors detected small explosions very near the Lucrehulks carrier doors where vultures who had yet to put their shields up had crashed into one another as they were launched from the fighter bays. Yet even so, it put a significantly larger number of vultures into space they would otherwise have been the case. *And considering how many Lucrehulks are here, that is truly saying something.*

"I wonder how it was done, Master?" His young padawan, Sanstish asked. The selonian slowly stroked one hand down the fur of his chest in thought as he stood beside his Master, not having anything to do it the moment until the ship started to take damage. "I'm not a fully trained engineer, but it seems to me as if there can't be something like that without even more severe penalties than simply losing a few vultures as they smack into one another upon exit."

"Perhaps, but it matters not right now. Tactical, get me a full sitrep. How many ships are we facing right now?" Alecto asked as his pilot brought them in to attack the side of a munificent class, the two capital ships exchanging fire. *Far too blasted many. I hope the admiral doesn't wait too long before reinforcing us.*

"Forty-eight Lucrehulks, three of them damaged from coming out of hyperspace too close to one another. Segments of their shielding are down," the tactical officer reported crisply, listening intently to the sensor officer as he voiced what the sensors were telling him. "Twelve CIS dreadnoughts, no damages reported. Sixty-seven Munificent-class cruisers. Twenty-two of them seem to have lost their hyperdrive engines from being pulled out of hyperspace

prematurely. One hundred and eighty-two Diamond-class frigates. All of them looked to be damaged in one way or another, with the loss of engines the damage we're seeing the most."

Alecto nodded grimly at that. Hyperspace traps like this, which were built around something with a large enough gravity well to pull ships out of hyperspace, had proven to be extremely dangerous to smaller ships on all sides of the war, whose engines were not designed to meet such. Alecto likened it to running into a wall when you didn't realize the wall was there.

Lucrehulks were built to survive such things, something that Alecto had seen on the Tyrant's Bane in person numerous times when the Force Gestalt led by Master Faye had proven to be not quite up to the task. The CIS force, an extremely large one, had run headlong into this trap, one of the larger omega-type traps, and their smaller ships had paid the price. If more than a dozen of those diamond-class ships were in any position to even take part in this battle, Alecto would be surprised. *Well, at least when it comes to doctrine, we are still well ahead of the Confederacy.*

The trap that had pulled the advance force of the CIS fleet out of hyperspace was one of the largest such traps that the Grand Fleet pushing into the Corellian sector had run into, hence the greater amount of damage that their lead echelon had taken when they suddenly found themselves running into it. Alecto also knew that the four large, moon-sized asteroids that had been used to create it had a series of... surprises built into them by the ever-resourceful Corellians who had put it in place, but at the moment, those would remain a final trump card.

"And the ships who did that work should be appearing just about..." Alecto murmured to himself before breaking off and shouting out a command to his communications officer. "Immediate order to Ruinous Cost, juke upwards and to the left, sixty degrees left minimum!"

One of the ships accompanying them shifted up and to the left of its previous course, avoiding a broadside from one of the enemy dreadnoughts by the skin of its teeth as Alecto's Battle Precognition warned him of sudden danger from that score. However, the Veil of the Dark Side was such that he couldn't predict everything, and a moment later, one of his other ships exploded under fire from a second and third dreadnought as they pushed through the Munificent screen that had come forward with the swarm of vultures. Their fire almost idly targeted the Audacious-class destroyer before they began to exchange fire with the far larger and far more durable Mon Calamari cruisers that had been fighting it out with the Munificent-class before, dodging the spinal mounted turbolaser fire of their enemies to close into their own range, turbolaser and ion cannon batteries battering against one another.

Behind Alecto and his force of cruisers, forty-two of the new Archer-class destroyers came out of hyperspace in a wave. A moment later, the first of many salvos launched from those ships, flashing through the vulture swarm towards a scattering of different targets. Five

Munificent-class lost their shielding and exploded, the capital grade proton torpedoes and the Confederacy cruiser's weaker shields proving a match made in the fiery pits of hell once more.

The dreadnoughts that had just destroyed one of Alecto's ships simply took the proton torpedoes that smashed into them. Since the Archers were out of their range, they ignored the fire from the distant destroyers beyond simply rolling in place as they kept up fire on the Mon Calamari heavy cruisers who were doing the same.

Moments later, those destroyers were joined elsewhere by other forces jumping in, and as Alecto led his forces up and away from the regular plane of the battlefield prior to coming back in, Alecto had to smile grimly. Admiral D'Richelu wasn't ever going to order an all-or-nothing battle, but it was very clear, as more and more divisions of capital ships came out of hyperspace, that he had decided to gamble on whether or not he could wipe out this force before it could be reinforced by the rest of the Confederacy Grand Fleet attacking into the Corellian sector.

Alecto felt that he probably wouldn't have made that call, but it was not his call to make in the first place.

Two hundred and twenty destroyers of various classes came out, either firing from their present position or charging forward. Six hundred and eighty Braha'tok class gunboats and a few of their larger, frigate-sized cousins zoomed forward, creating an outer ring around the larger capital ships as they began to do battle with the vultures, almost lazily smashing the drifting diamond-class frigates into flinders as they did. Sixty-six calamari heavy cruisers, every six-ship division was surrounded by their smaller brethren.

And four dreadnoughts, ships of a size if a different design type than the twelve dreadnoughts of the enemy fleet. Three of those were of Corellian make, the jewels of the previously mothballed fleet led by The Wall. One was a Kuati-make and had previously been owned by another member of the GDL. Those four ships came into the battle space from below, racing upwards and into combat with the Lucrehulks at the center of the enemy global formation. The enemy dreadnoughts had already been pulled out of position to engage the heavy cruisers elsewhere along the outer defensive envelope of the enemy fleet.

Ten Munificents died even as Alecto took a moment to look over the overall battle followed by two Lucrehulks that had found themselves at the bottom of their formation. As those blips disappeared from the tactical scree, Alecto ordered his own force back down and into the fight ahead of a division of Gozantis. That division of light cruisers quickly folded into Alecto's command, forming up with them along with three wings of Archers.

For several moments, Alecto had no time or mind to devote to the overall battle. He was no Master of Battle Meditation, able to keep a finger on the pulse of even the most incredibly

complex battlefield like this via the Force. It was all he could do to command his now enlarged combat group, and watching him, Sanstish wondered how that was possible even with the Force. He was nowhere near being able to concentrate on that many different things at once, especially when you included the distance of the various ships into it.

However, the young selonian soon had too much to do to wonder about such things as the ship began to take damage.

Space battles, especially large ones like this, were not quick affairs. Capital ships, most of them anyway, had far too heavy shielding for that to be possible, even with the Archers hurling out capital-grade proton torpedoes at range as if they were going out of style. The battle went on for hours, therefore, but within the next forty minutes, Alecto knew that Admiral D'Richelu's gambit had failed. The enemy force had shrunk into itself, making the battle a slugfest at the capital ship level while vultures continued to flood out of the Lucrehulks.

The defenders still hurt the enemy fleet, but there were still two dozen Lucrehulks and ten of the dreadnoughts still fighting when CIS reinforcements arrived. They came in the form of sixty-two more Lucrehulks, coming in so close that two of them actually interpolated, a fact that almost shocked Alecto out of his concentration on his portion of the battle via the Force.

He held it, though, and a moment later, several of the destroyers that adjoined his force shifted their positions enough to survive the attention of a dreadnought that had suddenly come up and over the wreckage of a Lucrehulk, firing down at his formation. That fire went wide because of Alecto's orders, and the ship took heavy fire from the destroyers, but none of them were Archer class. They did have enough shielding to get back out of enemy firing range of the dreadnought as a group of Mon calamari cruisers shifted their attention from a nearby Lucrehulk to that ship in turn.

One of those ships paid for it, the Mon Cal heavy cruiser's shielding finally failing before it could twist around, aiming towards an empty portion of space and jumping out. But the dreadnought lost its own shielding, and a pair of distant archer classes instantly shifted their fire to take advantage of it in turn.

The overall battle instantly began to go against them, and Alecto was not surprised a moment later to hear his comms officer shout, "Sir! Admiral D'Richelu has ordered Bugout!"

Alecto had barely time to nod before another wave of Confederacy reinforcements arrived. This force consisted of Munificent class, Diamond class frigates, and Hardcell gunboats.

Most of the ships in this wave came out behind the League fleet. If the League had thought to stay and fight, this would have been the second half of a deadly trap. But as most of

the league fleet was already retreating, it meant those smaller ships faced ships well out of their weight class coming straight at them.

This allowed a large amount of the GDL forces was able to start smashing those ships out of space even as they started to pull away from their counterparts. Yet even so, most of those ships were too deep into the gravity well the four giant asteroids had created this trap.

Which was when Admiral D'Richelu sent the signal to remove that obstacle.

Above and to the side of Alecto's current position, the four moon-sized asteroids, practically enveloped in the Confederacy fleet, sat. They had been towed into position by the Corellian dreadnaughts. Each of them was large enough to create a small-scale gravitic trap on its own.

And now, they exploded.

Alecto had no idea how much explosives each of those moons had been filled with, and it didn't matter. Only the effect did, which was to turn each of those moons into rapidly expanding fields of debris. Debris, which smashed into and, in many cases, through the shielding of dozens of CIS capital ships. Suddenly, the enemy fleet had far more to concern itself with than trying to hold down the GDL forces and smash them into pieces.

And just as suddenly, the gravity well keeping those ships in place was gone. With the Confederacy's newly arrived light units, the only still-organized force between the retreating League units and respite.

Not ten minutes later, the last of the Corellian dreadnaught jumped out escorted by a group of destroyers, leaving the CIS fleet in command of the battlefield, mauled, yet with their larger ships still in the main, intact. The second wave, the one consisting of Lucrehulks, had won the Confederacy the battle. Yet the enemy had paid an exorbitant price for that victory.

As Alecto's ship dropped back out of hyperspace and reports of the other ships who would come with them began to come through, the Duros Jedi could only hope that, while they hadn't been able to win the battle out right, they had at least been able to do enough damage to achieve the strategic objective that Admiral D'Richelu had set: gaining Corellia enough time to finish work on the Tyrant's Tears and Tyrant's Downfall. *Four days more, just four more days and the enemy will lose this campaign. And then we can turn our attention to pushing them back, and maybe making my vision of the future into a lie...*

OOOOOOO

Admiral Kul'teska gasped, the Bpfasshi's throat constricting as if a wookiee or trandoshan had just wrapped his hands around his throat, squeezing the life out of him despite there being

no one there to physically do so, here in his personal quarters. He even felt himself being lifted out of his chair as he stared with bulging eyes into his pickup at the hologram of Master C'baoth. The elderly-seeming human's expression had faded from its usual grim, determined, or even grandfatherly expression to one of raw contempt and fury.

"You have failed me for the last time Admiral Kul'teska," Dominus growled, feeling a thrill go through him at doing the same thing to someone else that Sidious had once done to him: reaching across the galaxy thanks to the Veil and the visual of the individual he was targeting to Force Choke him. "You were told that time was of the essence. That you needed to break into Corellia weeks ago. I accepted your excuses twice before this. And now you appear before me telling me you have lost the better part of your escort-type capital ships and cannot push forward without them? That a full third of your capital ships are need of refit before being of further use? I am a lenient lord, but even I have my limits, which you have now surpassed."

Soon, the man found himself now almost floating entirely out of his chair, trying desperately to claw at nothing, his eyes and veins bulging under the Force Choke of the Sith Lord. Keeping a bit of his attention on that attack, Dominus let his eyes shift to either side of the man. There, he could see the silhouettes of two other people in the pickup. "Step forward."

A moment later, the hologram expanded to show two other Confederacy officers. One was a human, the other a Neimoidian. Both of them looked utterly terrified, although it was interesting to see a Neimoidian standing instead of sitting in one of their normal hover chairs. Nor had either being tried to run away or shout for help. "Your names and ranks."

"Captain Archibald Grant, captain of the *Crusher*, Master C'baoth," the human said, saluting crisply, staring directly above the hologram of Dominus, trying hard not to let his eyes stray to where his admiral was still choking between himself and the Neimoidian.

"r, rear admiral Fello Taako," the Neimoidian stuttered, doing a far worse job of not looking terrified than the human was. Yet he still looked into the pickup at Dominus, which earned him a few points.

"And did you countersign on the admiral's report to me about how it would take nearly a week and a half to bring together more escort ships for the final push into Corellia?" Dominus asked silkily.

The fact that his words were accompanied by a final crack as Kul'teska's spine broke under his Force Choke made Dominus's words all the more sinister. Releasing the technique as he felt the man's fear deadline like his heart, Dominus watched as Kul'teska's body slumped back down into his chair with a thump. It twitched spasmodically as it landed until it finally lay still.

"I, I did, sir." Fello stammered, trying hard not to stare at the corpse that had just been killed through invisible means from across a galaxy. "Our prewar tactical doctrine did not call for nearly as many such ships as we need. Our vulture and starfighter doctrine are excellent, and the Providence-class dreadnoughts have filled in the role of capital ship killers, but our losses in the smaller capital ship classes are far ahead of what we estimated we would see in every prewar scenario. Even in the middle class of ships, against the GDL especially, we have come out the loser time and time again."

Seeing that Dominus was actually listening and not lashing out, Fello's speech gained speed and confidence. "Our full fleet tactical doctrine is continuously updating, but our logistics stream hasn't quite caught up with the needs of the front, especially on a front like this one. I doubt I need to explain to you the impact gravity-based traps and mines can have on ships of medium or low-scale tonnage. If you wish, I can show you the recommendations that Admiral Harch and Admiral Tonish put together. Both of them have become experts at retaining their smaller ship classes and using them in conjunction with our typical vulture swarms and line of battle."

As Fello finished speaking, Dominus allowed the pair of them to see his anger subside, almost entirely shifting back to his normal persona of the determined, stern grandfather that he portrayed to much of the Confederacy's public. "No, I do not need that. I've recently begun reading Por Tonith's analysis on that myself, although it is extremely dry and quite in-depth. Summarize for me from your own perspective why it would take so long for you to recoup your losses. That is the aspect that most concerns me."

He smiled then, his persona now entirely back to normal despite the fact that the body of the former admiral still sat in his chair between where the two officers stood. "Please, use visuals for those of us who are not as at home with numbers as you Neimoidians are."

The rear admiral hastily complied, with Grant interjecting a few points as they went over which nearby Confederacy star systems could supply the needed ships, why they couldn't do so quickly, and what damage would be done in various other fronts in the surrounding sectors by pulling those ships off of the line of battle or from defensive formations. The man appeared extremely cautious, a little too timid in terms of anything but personal courage. Useful, but not nearly good enough to step into the command position of the grand fleet pushing into Corellia.

By this point, that fleet had nearly ten percent of the CIS's vultures and capital ships assigned to offensive actions. That was a tremendous investment of tonnage, and Kul'teska's failure could not be repeated.

The rear admiral was much the same, except he was also a personal coward. He seemed incredibly at home with numbers and detail work, an excellent second-in-command, Dominus judged. Yet he could no sooner wield the sword correctly than the captain.

Eventually, though, Dominus, with one of his many robot aides helping him along from outside of the Hypercom's pickup, realized that the dead Kul'teska had been simply telling the truth about how long it would take them to rebuild the losses they had taken in this last battle to the diamond class and other small to medium-sized warships. He did not regret killing the man, as it had been his own mistake as to why he lost so many, but that was still aggravating.

Yet the combat droid that Dominus had commissioned to act as his personal logistics officer had a few solutions, flashing them up on a screen underneath the hologram for Dominus to share with the two men on the other side of the Hypercom transmission. Showing he lacked any kind of spine, the Neimoidian didn't even argue with many of the suggestions, although it would leave two of the Confederacy's Core Worlds without those ships to defend them, on top of having already stripped them of a tremendous number of vultures to refill the grand fleet's stocks. This would open them for reconquest by the Republic, an inevitability without retaining control of the orbitals. Yet doing so would undoubtedly bleed whatever army was sent in to take control of the surface of the planets in question.

The other moves were too large and outside of the Neimoidian's focus, which Dominus judged was fair enough. They were built on other plans, future campaigns that Dominus wished to build toward now so that he could launch them in the future.

Sidious might still think that I am a beaten dog, obeying his Master faithfully now that he has been put back in his kennel. But I have my own plans, oh yes, of which this is just a small part.

"Very well, we have done enough planning on the score. We will be able to resume the offensive into Corellia in four days, not the ten that your previous admiral thought. Fulfill these plans for us," Dominus ordered magnanimously. The subtle Force Domination he had been doing on both individuals' minds throughout the conversation meant his simple words of semi-praise caused their brains' pleasure centers to flare, and both bowed obsequiously, almost completely bent to his will, as it should be.

Yet even so, the kernel of ambition within the human had him speaking up. "As you will it, Master C'baoth. But who will command the grand fleet when we resume offensive operations?"

"I will," Dominus said simply. "This campaign is too important to let to anyone else now. Furthermore, given the number of Jedi that the opposition can call upon in that one theater, you will need a Force user in overall command to offset them. They will learn," Dominus went

on, his eyes lighting up like a fanatic as his public persona slightly slipped. “They will all learn that there are Masters, and then there are **Masters**, and the Force is not nearly as limited as the Jedi think.”

With that, he ended the transmission, turning to look at the corner behind the central holographic projector. There, Grievous stood next to two of Dominus’s robotic aides, one of whom had been the one doing all of the number crunching for his own part of the conversation a moment ago. “You heard.”

“I did. Now I’m wondering why you wanted me here to hear that. Aren’t I supposed to still be... what is the phrase that politicians use, still under official displeasure?” Grievous growled, stepping forward, his body letting loose small hisses and clanking noises as he did. “And for simply following orders and making certain that everyone understands the stake in a war such as this.”

Dominus had explained to Grievous previously why he had to be put out to pasture after his assault on Thyferra and, more accurately, the galaxy’s only source of bacta. But even now, Grievous simply did not understand the need to play to the masses. Not when eighty-five percent or more of the overall war effort was manned by droids, both in terms of combat units and in terms of logistics. In his opinion, the civilians of the Confederacy would do what they were told or perish. And frankly, if they perished, that was no skin off the Kaleesh cyborg’s nonexistent nose.

“You are under official displeasure. However, that will not last. Tell me, your new fleet, how close to being ready for deployment is it?”

“I’ve only had four days to work on it,” Grievous protested mildly. “Much of the ships were already gathered, but I still need to receive an allotment of dreadnoughts, and our vulture stores are woefully thin across our capital ships. It will take at least another week, or so my own logistics officers tell me, to finally pull together the last disparate units.”

“Good. The movements of those units are going to be shifted, as is your own command position. Your entire fleet, in fact, is going to shift to here...” Dominus reached out with the Force, manipulating the hologram so that it turned on and began to show a new segment of space, one along the Perlemian Trade Route. It then zoomed in, showing a slice of space off the beaten path, a single star system without a planet to its name, and a brown dwarf star. “We’ve taken a page from the GDL’s book on this one. I shifted a few of our logistics resources into this star system to build a temporary supply depot. It will be for your fleet although once you begin offensive operations, you will not be able to rely on it overmuch.”

Grievous cocked his head thoughtfully at that, striding forward further into the room to stand on the other side of the hologram. Without asking, he began to manipulate it, drawing it

out, then looking at the supplies on hand and the supplies that would be built up in position by the time his fleet arrived. Soon, his strategic mind saw what was being done. "You are using the reinforcements sent to create a new fleet to offset the recent moves by the Hapans to cover the movements of my fleet. It could work, but you're right. We won't be able to build up the supplies needed for an extended campaign without Republic spies catching wind of it in that area."

He looked across the hologram at his Master, one metallic claw reaching out to tap the equally metallic mask the cyborg wore. "At least, not an extended campaign of conquest."

"Indeed. While I take command of the campaign into Corellia, you will build up your fleet. Either on the heels of our victory there or during the campaign, if something slows even **me** down, you will launch your own campaign into the Colony and Core Worlds of the Republic. Burn and pillage and slaughter until you are forced to retreat. I want a terror campaign fit to put the fear into the entire Republic and even the GDL."

Dominus once more manipulated the hologram, zooming out and then back further down along the Perlemian Trade Route into areas of it controlled by the Republic. Four star systems, in particular, gleamed, two of which were supposed to be empty. One of the others was home to an ecumenopolis and was an important building and infrastructure center for the entire Republic. The fourth was an Ord system named Ord Carida. "These four star systems will be your targets."

"..." Grievous fell silent, staring at the image, then slowly nodding. "Guns, armor, weapons systems, even full shipyards and a world known to be one of the training centers for the clone army. We will be able to hurt the Republic very badly with this if it succeeds. Why though? Why not attack Kamino directly? If we attacked it with as large a force as the grand fleet you'll be leading against Corellia..."

"The defenses on that planet are tremendous, second only to Coruscant and Kuat, and even then, only because they lack mobile units, they make up for it in moon bassets. Perhaps if we had known where the clones were coming from from the start, we might've been able to do so before those defenses were fully online. At the moment, though, that is an impossibility," Dominus said, waving that off. "Attempting to do so would horribly weaken the rest of our fleets in that area of Wild Space and would leave still more logistically vulnerable."

The clone army was one of the fundamental portions of the overall Great Plan. While Dominus had issues with who precisely would benefit from that plan, the overall thrust of it was still sound. No, the Republic needed to continue to rely on clones. In fact, they needed to continue to build a dependency upon them for now.

It was the overall war effort of the Republic that Dominus wanted to hurt. Furthermore, he knew that at least two of those planets had senators who were in Sidious's pocket. Thus, the attack would hurt Sidious nee Palpatine on the political front.

"You're underestimating the Corellian defenses," Grievous said abruptly, taking command of the controls once more. "The admiral in charge of their defensive campaign has worked incredibly well to keep his own ship losses to a minimum, and repairing ships is a far easier task than building them. Corellia will cost you far more to take than you believe. I also thought that we had all agreed that concentrating on the GDL was a mistake. Yet this whole campaign is centered on doing so and is pulling more and more of our strength from elsewhere."

"There are strategies within strategies that you do not know. Besides, once I am there, perhaps the goal will change," Dominus said with a faint, vindictive smile. "We will see."

OOOOOOO

Twenty minutes after Grievous left, Dominus dismissed his robotic aides, and they had moved off to either input more data or power down in one of the energy cubicles. One of the ones that did this connected itself to the power coupling that would recharge its onboard batteries, completely unaware of a small programming kernel activating as it did. That programming kernel downloaded a recording of the conversation he had just been present for into the ship's databanks, where it was copied by another hidden program. That copy was then sent out attached to a routine message.

If this communique had been sent near one of the many fronts, or worse, to Republic or GDL-held space, the counterespionage and ECM officers of the Malevolence would have discovered it quickly. It was not, however. Instead, it was sent to the flagship of one of Dominus's newest disciples, the former Dathomiri witch, Asajj Ventress, over the planet of Saleucami. The size of the communication was logged, but only as routine data. No living eye noticed it.

The true apprentice of Darth Sidious was not on her ship at the time it came through. She was instead down on the surface of Saleucami training with Bok. The planet was a rather diverse place, with hundreds of small, diverse habitats that had grown over time despite the amount of asteroids that had assaulted the planet from the otherwise lifeless star system.

Bok, however, was even more unique than the planet. He had, up until a year ago when Dominus discovered him, been the only living member of the Morgukai, a sect of Nicto warriors. The sect had been around for thousands of years, with training that allowed them to fight Force users, much like the Eshani martial artists. Only in the Morgukai's case, they used weapons and hated both the Sith and the Jedi in the past. In the thousand years times of peace following the

New Sith Wars, their numbers had dwindled until finally, Bok and his father were the last. They had been used by Dominus in an attempt to unsettle Ryloth years before the current war began, a plot that ended with the death of Bok's father and his losing his arm to Master Tholme. This had filled Bok with a raw hatred that had pushed him to accept Dominus's offer of becoming the genetic father of a new, greatly expanded order of Morgukai.

The small, cloned force, now around six hundred strong, had been trained by Anzati and Eshani warriors brought in for the purpose along with Bok himself. Ventress had been brought in to help finalize their anti-Jedi training and to eventually lead the majority of this first batch into battle. It was a truly fascinating time, and Ventress had also taken the time to do what she could to shift their allegiance from Dominus to herself and her Master, doing so with Bok by the simple expedient of explaining how he and his father had been set up for failure years ago on Ryloth.

After a hard day's training the clones, the former Dathomiri witch returned to her ship. Finding the message, she analyzed the information within, smiling thinly as she prepared herself to speak with her Master in real-time for a scheduled weekly briefing. *He will be well pleased with this. Or rather, Sidious will be well pleased with me. Dominus, on the other hand, is still acting far too independently. Another example might need to be made, one far closer to home.*

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Dominus was Force Choking Kul'teska, Sidious was deep in a meeting with several senators, debating and rewriting a new bill that would be put forth to the Senate soon. He had been essentially forced to set aside his growing concerns with the strange sense of anxiety he had been getting through the Dark Side for now, as his work as Chancellor waited for no one. Every day there were dozens of demands on his time from before the sun rose to well after it set, and this simply did not let him have enough time to meditate. Even doing without sleep to do so had not garnered him any specifics. There was just a growing feeling of something unraveling, but what and where eluded The Sith Lord entirely.

This particular bill was a subtle thing, but it dealt with a vastly important topic going for the Great Plan, one Sidious needed to have a finger on, hence why he simply could not hand it over to Sate Pestage or Sly Moore, both of whom were also extremely busy. The bill was intended to normalize educational goals and systems across the Republic at the middle and high school levels.

This topic was a particular area of interest of Senator Wessel of Carratos. Prior to his winning the Senator position, which in this case also served as head of the planet's government, Carratos had fallen on hard times. He firmly believed that education was one of the things that could raise the masses up out of such hard times and had already revamped the elementary

schools of his planet. This bill would set aside a certain amount of the Republic's overall revenue to help bring up to a set standard those planets that had trouble meeting such for whatever reason.

It also called for standardized educational principles in history and current events. So, in Senator Wessel's words, "No one planet or system can spin the history of the galaxy to marginalize or villainize another star system, polity, or race."

For Sidious, the idea of standardizing education as ordered by the Senate was a way to start brainwashing children. At present, the bill only demanded that middle and high schools across the Republic reached a certain standard, that standard based on the industrial capacity of the world in general. But that could be expanded upon in the future. As could the history being taught...

This conversation took a while, but he was still on time to meet with his apprentice via the Hypercom for their weekly briefing. Ventress, or Darth Noctis as she was known to Darth Sidious, had been in Dominus's physical presence several times by this point, and real-time communication was needed to check that Dominus had not broken her mental defenses. If that happened, her use among the CIS would end instantly, which would be unacceptable, or she would become suborned under Dominus's incredibly advanced Force Domination, which would be even worse.

Taking off his Chancellor's robes and replacing them with the far simpler black robes of his real identity, Darth Sidious allowed his persona as Chancellor to fall away as he climbed down the ladder leading from his Chancellor's office down into his personal throne room. Sidious knew he would have to return soon, but later today, he would have a small treat, the return of one of his most intelligent, dedicated servants. That knowledge, which had arrived with the dawn, had brightened Sidious's day tremendously. Despite the ongoing niggling at the back of his mind whenever he was away from his protective Ysalamiri warning him of some kind of danger unseen and unplanned for.

Despite that niggling, Sidious was in a relatively good mood, or as good as his mood ever got, when the call from Noctis came in mere minutes after he reached his throne. "Your report?"

"My work with Bok proceeds apace. More importantly, Master, I was able to lodge a ghost program into one of the droids that Dominus uses to keep track of the overall strategic picture of the war. It isn't able to share raw data with me, the sharing of actual data is behind several dozen protective layers of programming. However, sharing audio files, that it is able to do. And this one, I feel, is important, if not for what it contains, then because of what it might imply," Noctis explained.

The audio recording began to play, and within minutes, Sidious scowled angrily. While Dominus did not know it, Ord Carida was an important planet for Sidious's future plans. At the moment, it was one of the planets where clone troopers trained above and beyond Kamino, helping to add to the speed with which the clones could be trained, equipped, and sent to the front all across the galaxy. The Caridans, although fierce merchants whose need to make a profit made the Neimoidians seem tame, had a skill with programming and miniaturization that were both fascinating in terms of what they might birth in the future.

There was also the fact that both the locals and the human settlers were already fully turned against the Jedi Order, a rarity within the Republic at this point. A small think tank on the planet was even looking into a nanotech-based weapon to use against the Jedi.

At the moment, the loss of the system would not be horrendous, but it would be damaging and in a direction that Dominus had no right to be aiming towards. "Well done. This is important information, and I can use it very well indeed."

Like Dominus, Sidious was a master of reaching through the Dark Side over tremendously long distances to either manipulate or assault a target he could see. Indeed, Sidious had been the one to teach Dominus that little trick, although Dominus had run with Force Dominate far more than Sidious, almost becoming addicted to its use. He did so now as his voice soothingly washed over Noctis. "But as you have been in Dominus's presence, you know I need to make certain that he has done nothing to your mind or Force presence, Noctis. This will hurt, but it will be brief..."

As she felt her Master's power probe into her, Noctis shuttered visibly in the pickup, a mixture of pain and pleasure appearing on her face as she bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. That line was very thin for the Sith, particularly for women who fell to the Dark Side. Sidious, thanks to his using Sly Moore as an outlet for a little over a decade now, knew how to use that to his advantage and did so now.

As Noctis began to shudder and gasp, Sidious discovered what he had feared he would find. Dominus had already begun to slowly manipulate Noctis's mind. It was a subtle, long-term thing, but Noctis would have been completely subsumed to Dominus's purpose soon. Luckily, Noctis, unlike his other acolytes, had been prepared for such an assault, and her mental defenses had kept Dominus's Force Drain and Dominate assaults from gaining too much ground. *And he does not seem to have probed her mind over much either.*

Good. Alas, C'baoth, your old tendency as a Jedi to believe everything you feel from the start without probing deeper is still prevalent, Sidious thought, making Dominus's original name a sneer in his own mind. *It will cost you.*

Now, Sidious removed what was there, the pain of it causing Noctis to gasp before shuddering with pleasure as Sidious allowed her brain's pleasure centers to light up as if she'd just built up to a sudden orgasm. The woman slumped, and Sidious allowed himself a faint, unseen smile. *The need to feel such pleasure will build into a dependency on me, another method to control her. Excellent. While Noctis was never my first choice of another apprentice, the need to run with Dominus forced my hand.*

At that, Sidious thought about Anakin. He had felt yet the young Skywalker's anger, the power of it during the battle of Thyferra. He had felt how close Anakin was to falling forever. Since then, he had not had the time to check in with 'his young friend' to see if the aborted efforts of Jerec to finally rid the galaxy of Potter had added or defused that rising connection to the Dark Side. *I will need to make time soon. I must subtly bring his attention to how strong the power of anger made him, how it allowed Anakin to merely take vengeance instantly upon Grievous, the mind behind his Master's death. With Windu out of the way... ah.... And wasn't that a tremendous victory for the Sith!*

For a brief moment, Sidious's own pleasure at the memory of the Blade Master's death showed on his face almost as much as the pleasure he had brought Noctis did the former witch's. Yet he wiped it away quickly, concentrating on more important matters going forward. *Skywalker must be ripe for the plucking, or at best near it. Turning him against Potter further will hopefully be a simple matter.*

That would be immensely satisfying on many levels. For one thing, Skywalker's power in the Force was incredible, with only a few beings in the galaxy equaling it. Noctis herself was powerful but not up to that level. For another, his apparent semi-friendship with Potter would perhaps give Sidious the one thing he had lacked since Potter had first reappeared on the galactic stage: eyes near that damned man who could report to Sidious what he was up to when the Dark Side failed him.

Eventually, his work on Noctis's mind was finished, and Sidious slowly pulled his presence back and away from the woman. "Continue your work with Bok. Your ongoing efforts to make him and his army of Jedi killers more loyal to you than Dominus is important. I will prepare to halt this move by Dominus from my position as Chancellor, bloodying his nose. I may also send aid into the GDL to help in the Corellian Sector so he cannot gain any kind of martial glory."

"Yes, master," Noctis said breathlessly, composing herself with difficulty.

With a final nod, Sidious cut the connection, leaning back in his chair. Glancing at the clock on his computer system, he noticed that he had ten minutes to get ready before needing to be once more in his office. He took his time preparing, and when his next conference began

ten minutes later, there was no sign of the Chancellor being anything but his normal, hard-working, grim-faced self.

When that meeting ended, Sidious smiled faintly at a knock on the door and the sight of one of his bodyguards sticking his head in. "Sir, your seven-thirty meeting has arrived."

"Excellent. Send him in."

For those who knew the man, Kinman was looking a little scruffy around the edges, yet he had very obviously taken the time to clean himself up enough to not stand out among the various officials and aides that were forever on the move within the Senate district. As always, the master spy could fade into the background with an ease that passed muster even from Jedi like Yoda, Rancisis or even, before them, the Jedi Shadows like Tholme and the Dark Woman.

He bowed respectfully towards Sidious, and when his Master gestured him into his seat, instead made towards the drink bar to one side of the Chancellor's office. The Chancellor nodded his thanks when the man made him a cup of recaf just as he liked it and then sat down without further preamble, staring back at his Master with respect but little fear. Like Sate Pestage and Sly Moore, Kinman Dorianna knew precisely what Sidious was, but more than those two, Kinman understood who Kinman was in relation to the other man and felt no resentment or fear about that fact. That knowledge gave him strength when in the position he was in now that the other two lacked. That, and the man's sheer capability.

"You took your time to return. I know you well enough to understand that that was probably necessary, but I believe that you are also capable enough to have used that time well for our purpose," Sidious said, looking over the man thoughtfully. "Tell me what you have discovered of the GDL, Potter, the missing younglings, and anything else of interest you might have looked into your time away."

"Of course, Master. With your permission, I will leave my precis on how often I attempted to create a dedicated spy ring to the side for you to read at your leisure. I was able to purchase the services of more than a thousand people across the GDL who will send us useful intelligence of the 'watch and share' type, but every time I attempted to create a more stable and more ambitious spy ring, the GDL's Specters stymied my efforts. I have no doubt that your other agents have been doing much the same and running into much the same problem."

"Far too many Jedi have found a home in GDL counterintelligence," Kinman continued ruefully. "Worse, they have begun to learn from the spies as much as they help them. That has led to the Jedi learning more of the tricks of the trade than I am happy to see."

“Truly. I will read your report obviously, but as you say, that is nothing new,” Sidious agreed, taking the first of two small data chips from the man and setting it to the side with a clink before raising his cup to his lips again.

The wordless order to get on with it was understood, and Kinman smiled thinly, sliding over another data chip. “I have discovered several small gems that might not have reached your ears. First, on that chip is a list of the Jedi aboard the Tyrant’s Bane. I was able to create the list by looking at Jedi that has been seen since the last time the Tyrant’s Bane was spotted visiting places like Corellia and elsewhere. The vast majority of them come from the Green Jedi, but there are a few others of note. Master Adi Gallia being the most prominent.”

“Master Windu’s former apprentice who served on the Council before the war began. Yes, that is an interesting facet. Official inquiries into her position had been met with a bland report of her joining the GDL. I had thought she was serving alongside Master Yaddle as part of their anti-espionage experts. Yet your mentioning her here means she is not, correct?” Sidious hummed, wondering what that could mean. Gallia was not exceptional by any means, but she was well-respected and dedicated.

“She is not. She was seen on Serenno at one point while the Tyrant’s Bane was in orbit, and never again. Like with the rest of the missing Jedi, the process of elimination tells me that she is wherever the GDL has found a source of gas. Even if she was just on the Tyrant’s Bane, she would have made an appearance since.”

“Especially recently on Thyferra,” Sidious agreed. “Another master of her caliber would have forced Jerec to stop his ultimately futile attempt to rid of us, Potter.”

“On that score, I was able to ingratiate myself with a few planetary leaders a time or two over the past few months and discovered that among such people, there is a belief that the GDL has a single planet or star system that is able to provide tibanna gas. I was never able to learn a name but through low-key probing of various spacer that had been in port with the Tyrant’s Bane in several planets, that wherever it is has a local population of Verpine. The Verpine apparently make up a large percentage of the Non-Jedi crew of the Bane.”

“Interesting. That could, perhaps, help us narrow it down. If for no other reason than that the Verpine, like most other insect-like aliens, are very rare, and their known colonization projects had been washed by many eyes in the past,” Sidious mused.

“Continuing on reports of the Tyrant’s Bane, I had a video recording of this ship taking on **far** more in the way of parts and supplies than it should possibly have been able to do so over Corellia. I have other videos of them dropping off material that should have filled their holds to bursting before going on and doing it again in far too short a time to have returned and been loaded with more goods.”

“The expanded interior, yes, I’m aware of that concept.” For the first time in the discussion, Sidious’s voice went sour as he thought about how that knowledge had come to be, the loss of the first group of Clone Commandoes he had suborned for his own uses. “Let us move on. What of the younglings? Do you have a target I can pass on to Dominus, perhaps?”

“The Jedi children are either on the Tyrant’s Bane or with Adi Gallia wherever she is. No youngling was ever seen within GDL space. Not on Serenno, not on any of the other stops that the Tyrant’s Bane have made in the past since the war began,” Kinman answered simply. “I have kept a log of my research into that score as well if you wish to read it. But I am clear on this point. No youngling has shown up, whereas a large number of Jedi and Jedi hopefuls that had previously been part of the Agri Corps have, mainly as part of the GDL’s counter-intelligence apparatus.”

“...I will have to take your word for it. I have long reconciled myself to the fact that the Jedi have seemingly discovered some way to hide themselves from my sight well beyond the Force Cloak... although perhaps distance alone...” Sidious scowled as that thought occurred to him, but he regained control of himself. “Never mind. That touches on topics that you are ill-suited to comment on. Anything else?”

“A few nuggets of information. The Mon Calamari shipyards have stepped up security on a large swath of their docking area and have recently welcomed an influx of several Jedi that are also on that list from the Tyrant’s Bane. I wasn’t able to discover more than that, but imagination can fill the gaps there.”

“New ships based around the expanded interior concept or whatever was done to the Bane. Blast it. We also know of at least two captured Lucrehulks in Corellia, but none of my spies have been able to report any Jedi involvement in their refit,” Sidious agreed, frustration threatening to boil over but held back by his self-control.

“I also discovered that the slicer clans of Corellia and a few other sectors within have made an agreement with the GDL. They’re not willing to take offensive action, but they are willing to pass on interesting bits of data and are willing to help defend the GDL on a programming level when called upon,” Kinman continued.

“Interesting. That could be a PR disaster for the GDL if it comes to light. No one in power likes those clans of strange recluses,” Sidious murmured. He waited a moment, staring at his operative thoughtfully before declaring, “But you have nothing truly actionable, do you?”

“None at present, my lord. I feel the information about the shipyards is important and might be passed on to your puppet, but I have to admit that my time away wasn’t nearly as fruitful as I could’ve hoped,” Kinman stated.

“At least you’re not trying to make excuses,” Sidious answered, allowing himself a snort. “And you did better than most. Gallia and Verpine angles are interesting and had not made their way to my attention before. I will put one of my analyst droids on the Verpine aspect. That may give me a name of a star system where the GDL’s source of tabanna gas could possibly be. If we can cut off that source of gas, or even just discover its location, that will be huge both for the overall plan and the Confederacy.”

Sidious allowed a faint smile to appear on his face as he gazed at Kinman, more than willing to repay loyalty and competence with small favors. “Take a few days off, sort yourself out, rest. I have no doubt that I will have need of you in the future.”

“At your will, lord,” Kinman answered, standing from his desk and bowing deeply.

Sidious had a few moments to set up that search, as well as send Kinman’s other information to those who needed it, downloading the information about the number of passive agents Kinman had created within the GDL to the droid, which acted as the center of his personal spy ring. Obviously, controlling something of that nature was a full-time project, and he could not spend nearly enough time on it to truly make it work as well as it should. But it worked admirably enough in that regard, even when faced with such new variables as Vosa and Vos’s own growing clandestine efforts against Sidious’ influence throughout the Republic.

Then he had three more meetings, each of them somewhat brief, before retiring for the night at his normal twelve-thirty local time.

Finally, for the first time that day, Sidious was able to spend a lengthy amount of time meditating, which he did eagerly. Letting the darkness of his throne room sooth his rage and hatred for the Jedi and all other things, he spent some minutes there simply breathing in deeply before reaching out to the Force. The touch of the Veil of the Dark Side further soothed his mind, allowing the anger and hatred of the galaxy to fill him, feeling the power of it.

Where Jedi always likened the feel of the Veil to a thin layer of slime between them and the true force, to Sidious, it was akin to the physical touch of dark velvet on his skin. Seductive, smooth and promising.

Yet, from the start of his meditation, that niggling at the back of his mind grew. There was a **danger**. A danger that had previously swum under even his radar, too small, too obscure to be discovered even by a Master of the Dark Side. Yet now, fueled by the hatred, anger and role violence that the assault on Thyferra had created the galaxy over, the Veil was stronger than ever. With that power buoying him, Sidious probed the future, via the Force as well as the present, throughout the galaxy, the Dark Side carrying his concentration outward while his Force Stealth, hiding his mind from all others, including Yoda, as always up and active even later than the Chancellor.

More than an hour passed until his consciousness was pressed outward, out into the Wild Regions in some directions and further out toward Hutt Space in others than he had been able to devote time to for a long while. And for the first time, perhaps thanks to the ever-growing strength of the Veil, Sidious felt the edge of... something. An area where the Veil was not. Where the Force to his senses did not exist.

But it was not beyond where the Veil should be. In shape, the Veil was a globe, equally encompassing all areas of the Republic within it. Yet here, it was as if a Ysalamiri bubble the size of a sector of space had appeared. It had not been apparent before because, simply put, the Veil did not exist there. Yet now, with the Dark Side ever stronger and more responsive, he could feel out the edge of it.

There was a... a presence there. A calm, determined, all-knowing presence at the edge of the Veil. To probe it, he would need to leave the Veil behind to press on with his own strength into the area of the Force controlled entirely by that presence, bearding the lion in its lair.

For a brief moment, Sidious felt the urge, the near **need**, to do so. And yet, even as he did, he could tell that the danger did not come from this new awareness of an area within reach of the Dark Side that could not be touched by it. No, as Sidious pulled further back from that other presence, let the Veil of the Dark Side once more fill him with its power, he suddenly realized that it was the Veil itself which was in danger.

With that sudden revelation, Sidious once more began to probe the skein of the future. And as he did, that awareness allowed him to see visions of the future that had been beyond his understanding before. As he watched, the Veil of the Dark Side unraveled, and with it, the present was dramatically changed. Neither the Veil nor the Great Plan broke down entirely, but both were weakened tremendously.

If Sidious was able to remove his personal arrogance from his visions of the future, at this point, he might well have understood that the Great Plan could never succeed any longer. The younglings were well out of reach. The GDL and its lack of clones would mean he could never make a quick, clean sweep of the Jedi as the Great Plan called for. Even if everything else began to go the way it should have, there was no way that he could succeed.

But Sidious could not do so. For all his self-control, a control that set him apart from even beings like Bane and Plagueis for it included control of his cruelty and own passions to a far greater extent, Sidious still could not ignore his own ego to that extent. Sidious, unlike many Sith before him, knew he was fallible and could not do everything. Yet he still thought that he was the 'chosen one' of the Sith Order. The one who could put the Great Plan into fruition and wipe out the Jedi at last. Sidious could not look past his own desire for power to see what he had lost.

Sidious concentrated on the visions, realizing what he was seeing, the point from which those visions of the future differed from those he had seen before. *The pylons! A Jedi or, or someone else perhaps, has found one of the pylons. How?! How has such a danger to the Great Plan been hidden from my sight before this!*

With that new awareness filling him, Sidious pulled his concentration into himself once more before reaching out to each of the Dark Side pylons that the Order of Two had created over time to craft the Veil of the Dark Side, the creation that had slowly but surely blinded the Jedi to the future even as the Jedi themselves started to look solely towards the Unifying Force rather than the Living Force.

I must find the threat. I must! If the Veil is weakened, the Jedi will be strengthened. My own position will remain inviolable thanks to the hundreds of cutouts between me and everything else the Sith have done, plus my own Force Stealth. Yet the Great Plan itself could perhaps be in danger.

Sidious ignored for the moment several other flares of warning from the future, possibilities crossing his his mind of other dangers that had also been carefully hidden from him, other things that might weaken his position or perhaps the future of the Sith as a whole. There were a few he would need to follow up on, and he noted them, but at present, they could not grab his attention from this, the true danger.

He realized as he did so that he had been too busy with the Senate, too busy with the weakening of his spy network from Vos's actions, the GDL and Potter to realize what had been hidden, much like Harry himself had been hidden by master Fay prior to his bursting upon the scene as leader of the GDL. *My own hubris cost me here! Two small lights broke off from the multitude and I missed it. Dark Side swallow them whole!*

Reaching through the Veil of the Dark Side, he finally found it, the threat to the Veil itself, on the planet of Vjun. At one point, a source of great victory and hilarity for the Order of Two when Viscount Malreaux, a descendent of Sith breeding with the local populace and an unfound Force User, performed experiments on the Force of the planet that drove the entire populace of Vjun insane, leading to a chaotic outburst of violence that turned son against father, neighbor against neighbor in a bloody orgy of Dark Side energy. Thanks to the raw power of the Dark Side on the planet and the still-living monsters that had once been Vjun's populace, it had been a perfect place for one of the final pylons needed to spread the Veil of the Dark Side across the galaxy.

And now, now two sources of the Force, two unknown Force users were there, their presence like tiny, tiny pinpricks of light on what should have been a canvas of beautiful blackness. From here, even through the Veil, Sidious could not probe those individuals without

a visual aid of some kind to discover their identities. Their presences did not feel at all like any of the Jedi he had personally met or even seen before. Possibly young Jedi, altogether unremarkable... except for the fact they were where no Jedi should be, threatening something the Jedi should never have found.

“No, **no!**” Sidious snarled, his voice amplified by his Force Power, reverberating in his throne room like a sonic boom, the Sith Lord barely keeping his Force Cloak in place as his power threatened to break his mental control.

Even worse was the fact that they were not just on the planet. They were near the pylon itself.

Hastily pulling his consciousness back into himself, Sidious shook and shivered for a moment in aftereffects from the amount of exertion he’d just been doing, clenching his teeth and reining in his temper with a difficulty that made even the various issues Potter had created over the past few years seem small in comparison.

When he recovered enough to not lash out with the Force or physically, he snapped his fingers, calling for one of the communication droids lining the walls of his throne room to come towards him. Many of them had been damaged by his earlier shout, and Sidious idly noted the ground of his throne room had also cracked in various places and would need to be repaired, as would the ceiling and the walls. Even the carefully crafted, perfectly hidden window out of which he could see the Jedi Temple had cracked.

Yet still, one droid was intact enough to respond and skittered on its spider feet over to Sidious.

In his haste and fear (although Sidious would never admit that, even to himself), Sidious almost sent out an open communiqué to Dominus, but long-ingrained reflexes halted that action before he could finish. Pulling his hands back from the controls on the spider droid, Sidious slowly gathered his self-control once more, then input the necessary orders to open a line of communication with Dominus through several hundred different cutouts scattered across Coruscant and then the galaxy at large. In this way, even without the direct control of the Hypercom Network Sidious had hoped to have soon after the war began, he could be certain it would never be traced back to him here on the capital world of the Republic.

It took some time. Several hours, in fact. Yet even so, Sidious was still feeling a powerful wave of fear and unease as his wayward apprentice’s face appeared in the pickup.

The man’s habitual, half-challenging, half-obsequious expression faded as he saw the look of barely contained panic and fury on Sidious’s face. Before the man could speak, Sidious shouted, “Somehow, the Jedi have discovered one of the Dark Side pylons on the planet of Vjun.

There is no way for me as Chancellor to order any ships to that planet, given how deep it is into CIS-held territory. You must do so in our stead. Send a force there, quickly! The Veil itself is in danger, and with it, the great plan!”

End Chapter

Heh. I know that's a bit of a cliffhanger, but it is also a great way to end a chapter, as I mentioned above. Next chapter, the pylon issue will come to a head, the reverberations of which will cause a lot of issues even as the story shifts back to Harry and the girls for a bit on the journey to Taanab. Happy Halloween, everybody!