

The Legends are the true canon, and I still don't own either SW or HP. That is all.

Funny thing. For some reason, while misogynist comes through clearly with Dragon NaturallySpeaking, misandrist doesn't? Not once. I tried twelve times in a row to get that to work just for my own amusement, never did. I couldn't even train it once I found it in Dragon NaturallySpeaking's dictionary. Funny.

Anyway, more seriously, I had finished this by Halloween, but it hadn't been Grammarly checked or anything similar. I posted it to my patrons, and asked them to look it over, which they did, pointing out two big mistakes. I then lost most of the weekend due to RL, so going over it took me several days. Sorry.

With that said, here's the chapter. It doesn't cover as much action as I wanted, nor as many events, but it does move things along...

Chapter 28: Gaining Ground, Gaining Allies

Six days after the *Tyrant's Bane* jumped out of the Polith System, Harry sighed faintly from where he sat in the captain's chair as the *Tyrant's Bane* came out of its final jump into the Taanab system, named the same as the one habitable planet within the system. The solar system's gravitic well was a particularly large one, as the star system's sun, Tive, was a large orange star. Further making short, in-system jumps more difficult was the fact that the system had eight planets, five of which were gas giants. Each of which had its own systems of moons ranging from twenty-eight, a massive number, to four.

Taanab was the second planet out from the sun and had only one moon. Directly after the New Sith Wars, Taanab had become important to the Agri-corps, although that had faded centuries ago. Since then, it had, thanks to the Taanab system's place on the Perlemian Trade Route and the Hapan Spine, remained important to the Inner Rim as a commercial hub and a major agricultural planet.

Indeed, several moons of Mase, one of the gas giants, had been made into space stations and trade posts, most of them outright owned by the Commerce Guild. Since the start of the Separatist Movement, though, Taanab had bought those stations out and heavily fortified itself, if in a very up-and-down manner, in Harry's opinion. The locals had brought in heavy cruisers and gunships, ten heavy cruisers and several thousand Kuati-made gunboats, while building several heavily defended stations on twelve moons around the gas giant Stamia, which was the largest in the system and had a total of twenty-eight such moons.

A ridiculous number, in Harry's opinion, made even more interesting by the fact that those moons had been the sight of the Republic's efforts to reinforce the local defenses. In this

case, much like many of the moons in Polith, they had spread out at least ten more bases in those moons, each of them housing at least a wing of starfighters, if what the Bane's sensors were telling him. Since those bases had scrambled their fighters the moment the Lucrehulk came out of hyperspace, and Stamia was the closest planet to their egress point, that was quite a lot.

Deeper into the system, the sensors reported several dozen large ships built along the lines of the Lucrehulk, or perhaps a bit smaller, many in orbit around Taanab. These would be large freighters designed to move agricultural goods in large amounts, along with perhaps a few more cruisers sent into the system by the Republic. Taanab itself only had a few space stations, but even setting aside the true giant-sized ships, there were a lot of other ships in orbit, ranging down from that size to a group of freighters.

And including a Hapan battle dragon and two Nova-class battle cruisers, I see. Seeing that information come across the screen, he pointed it out to Zule and Padme, who were on the bridge with him at the moment, sending that information over their link to Aayla, who wasn't at present.

"Hmm... I wonder if the Hapans will agree to change to League terminology if Ta'a Chume and you all finish hammering an alliance together. Admittedly, their battle dragons are interesting, and their use of ion cannons means pack tactics are quite deadly against larger enemies, but their size means they aren't equal to our heavy cruisers in terms of defense or durability. Offensive firepower is closer to what I see," Zule murmured. "Their Nova-class is also okay, but I don't like what I am seeing about their shield strength, nor their armor. Even the battle dragons are somewhat like glass cannons, I think."

"True," Harry murmured. "That is partly why we already shared our Arrow and Vulture designs; their starfighters are subpar, and they need better shielding tech, which we've also shared. But look at it this way. Those ships could be an amazing addition to any existing GDL force in a naval engagement. If this war has taught us anything, it's that a proper mixture of units is definitely the way to go."

"As fascinating as the inclusion of the Hapans to your line of battle might be, I am more interested in what those three ships represent on a personal level," Padme muttered, shaking her head before the communications officer called her. "If you will excuse me, I suppose the locals would prefer to talk to a Republic official rather than her transportation, heh."

"Ouch," Harry snickered, miming a wound to his chest. "I see how it is, you just use me for my ship."

Padme smirked, looking Harry up and down for a moment, then looking over to Zule, doing the same thing, causing the half-falleen to actually blush a little. "Oh, I definitely don't use you just for your ship~."

Zule was also on the bridge not only because Harry and Padme were, but the fact that Zule would be following Padme around. For some reason, that had made Harry smile, while Zule had teased Padme gently about how odd it would be to not follow Padme around everywhere. "Looking on the bright side, though, I doubt that even Hutt space will be as dangerous as bodyguarding you was."

"I feel as if that's a personal attack, yet I can't exactly argue," Padme had drawled back, and both of them had burst out into giggles, the twins' sounds causing Harry's smile to widen into a grin even as Aayla basked in the feelings radiating off both girls and her connection to Harry.

Chuckling, Harry subsided now, standing up for a moment from his chair as he moved around the bridge, checking in with the sensor operator. Even as he did, though, a mixture of emotions continued to go through him as they had since jumping into the Taanab System, all of them tightly contained by his Jedi training, of course. On the one hand, he was grateful that the travel had finally passed.

With all the hyperspace trade lanes and a great deal of star systems, even out-of-the-way ones, being mined by all three sides, traveling all this way without being detected had been a slog that had somewhat aggravated him and the others aboard.

Admittedly, that time had been taken up by important personal matters, such as going on dates on board the ship with Padme, spending time with Zule, spending time with Aayla, and training Ahsoka. In fact, Harry had spent more time with Ahsoka than he had been able to consecutively for quite a while over these past six days.

To say that he had been happy to spend so much time with not just Aayla, but their other two lovers would be an understatement. With no overriding demands on their time, beyond spending the mornings in Hypercom-assisted meetings, it'd actually been quite idyllic.

But now it was coming to an end. An end that would be far more profound than any other kind of ending that Harry had dealt with in his life for years. One beyond even leaving his mother and master Fay behind on Russan, beyond even having his padawan bond to Fay break as he became a Knight. Because their arrival in Taanab meant that Aayla and Zule would soon be leaving to follow the Force Visions that the two had seen that led to Nar Shadda and something hidden there.

The two of them had done as much planning and preparation for their trip into Hutt space as they had been able to during the trip. At first, Aayla had wanted to set the two of them up as bounty hunters, but Zule had nixed the idea. It was far too unoriginal, and the majority of bounty hunters were part of the Bounty Hunter's Guild, which operated in Hutt space. Worse, there were some noises passed on from the GDL Specters that hinted at the idea that the Guild was going to start taking bounties on Jedi.

Thieves, on the other hand, who had lucked into some bacta and been the survivors of a shootout with the rest of their crew? Such would find a home on Nar Shadda and not be seen as unusual after everything that went on in the Polith System.

To that end, the pair would be taking a small amount of the bacta the Tyrant's Bane had taken on from Thyferra and had found an old freighter here on Taanab to purchase over the Hypercom. One of the Verpine techs had also volunteered to go with them, along with two astromech units. Once their hard drives were cleared of all the information about the runic arrays, the pair would be a major help to the Verpine in keeping the freighter going, as well as helping to install some little surprises, including a new hyperdrive and some discrete weapon systems.

Yet for all of the planning that Aayla and Zule had been putting into it, neither she nor Harry knew how this, this separation was going to go. How it would feel to be parted. Their Light Side-forged connection was through the Force to be sure, and even apart, Harry had been able to receive visions of Aayla's distress, but that was a far cry from living with their minds and hearts fully conjoined as they had for years. The pair had not been apart from one another in any real sense since Harry, Dooku and master Fay had rescued Aayla when she was a prisoner of Jabba the Hutt, but there was no way that the full mental joining they had now could be sustained even by the Force over a distance of light-years.

What was going to happen, then, to their minds? Would their connection completely sever? Would it be sudden and cause a backlash? Subtle over time, letting them slowly get used to no longer sharing their emotions and feelings and everything else? There was just no way to know, as there had never been a connection like theirs before in known Jedi history.

"Yet you know it is a necessity, Harry, as do I," Aayla said, speaking through their link from the training area where she had just finished putting Ahsoka through her paces for the day.

Like Aayla, used Jar'Kai Ataru. Ataru was a frenetic style based on constant movement and repositioning, of attacking the enemy from different angles from one second to the next. When you added Jar'Kai into the mix, it became even more so, with users preferring to use movement and lightsaber strikes to a mix of lightsaber and Force powers.

This meant that users were more frequently faced with wearing themselves out in long battles against duelists who preferred Soresu or Makashi, and even more so in large-scale battles. Considering the way the universe was at the moment, it was probably only a matter of time before Ahsoka found herself with Harry on some large-scale battlefield somewhere, rather than the relatively small flare-ups she'd had to deal with up to this point. All of which meant forcing Ahsoka to cut down on her body's movements as much as possible without impeding her overall style, and training her to call on the Force to enhance her body even more than a normal Jedi could.

"I will not say I don't fear it. I do, and I know that acknowledging that fear should remove much of its control, but it doesn't. That isn't something a Jedi should admit to, but I, I fear reaching out for you in our shared mental space and finding nothing, like I did when you were unconscious and nearly dead on Thyferra. Or worse, just feeling an, an end to my own mental realm, where yours should be. But the Force sent us those warning visions for a reason, and we must act on them. Just like Mak and Kas did. Whatever the cost."

That reminder hurt, but Harry and Aayla had talked about it before. The Force visions they had seen were demanding enough that, yes, it could be likened to the visions that their friends had followed. Mak and Kas had been directed by visions that had eventually led to the destruction of the Veil of the Dark Side, but also their deaths. It was a sobering thought, but regardless of their love for one another, Padme or Zule, they were Jedi first and foremost. The idea of Aayla or Harry dying was one they'd had to face numerous times, and could deal with it even now, with the added weight of being separated.

"I know, but, and I know it's quixotic of me, but I still worry about what will happen to both of us if our connection is entirely severed, as you won't be alone," Harry thought back to Aayla, a flash of Zule's face accompanying his thoughts. All four of them had gone on dates and spent time with one another over the past few days, and it had been a very nice time. *"But our mental realms? How is this separation going to effect us?"*

For a moment, Aayla was silent, and when her thoughts formed words once more, it was with a homely and with a promise rather than any great insight. Despite that, it still made Harry feel better. *"I don't know. But connection or not, distance or not, Harry Potter, I will love you all the same, and I know you do as well. We will get through this, as the Force wills."*

In response, Harry replied with his own words of assurance, before words fell away, replaced by raw emotion passing between them. Love, assurance, respect, anxiety, concern, devotion and, finally, acceptance. As Aayla said, the Force had given her and Zule the visions of Nar Shadda for a reason. As Jedi, they had to accept that and simply make the best of it.

Eventually, that emotional moment faded, and Harry moved back over to sit in the captain's chair. When he did, Padme spoke up. "Well, I seem to have finally gotten through to the locals. While I was prepared to deal with the local tendency to be overly formal, I don't understand how the local bureaucracy can try to throw up objections so suddenly. I had called ahead, and they knew I was arriving in a GDL-registered ship and what ship it was. But still they tried to argue, tried to say that the Tyrant's Bane should be forced to park in the outer system near Stamia under the guns of the stations there."

Zule snickered. "Overly formal? Are we talking in dress as well as in tone? Are you going to have to break out your old queenly regalia?"

"Hah! You couldn't get me into that thing again even if you had Chewie to help you," Padme scoffed. "No, it's just Taanabians are well known to be formal in their speech and how they interact with one another. I've no idea where it comes from. Regardless, trying to get in our way with red tape and dubious concerns about the security of the planet at this point is just foolish handwaving in my opinion, as was their reluctance to accredit you with foreign dignitary status, despite the republic as a whole having done so since the start of the war. I will never understand the minds of such people."

"Then I find it delightful that you are here to cut through that red tape. Of course, I could've done it myself, but having someone else do an irritating task for you is always nice," Harry both teased and thanked Padme, chuckling quietly, his early introspective feeling gone as he and Aayla both basked in the simple banter of their lovers. Both Zule and Padme knew what the bonded pair were worried about, but had simply supported them wordlessly, never pressing them on it or adding to their concerns. "Although I am surprised that only the local authorities have been contacting our ship. I would've assumed that a certain princess had also been calling the moment we came out of hyperspace."

"Despite being linked to Aayla, you don't know how the typical female mind works. The princess will undoubtedly know why you were late, and if she is any kind of stateswoman, she will understand there are bigger issues at play than her. Despite that, as a woman, Chume will also still want to make her displeasure with being kept waiting known, and is doing that by making you wait for her call," Padme answered with an eye roll, before laughing quietly.

Leaning over, Padme let her head on Harry's shoulder. Harry's arms went around her waist, and she sighed contentedly. "In fact, that action is so typical of girls and women of all ages and backgrounds that it could be a truly universal trait, at least among human and near-human societies."

“She’s right,” Zule agreed, smirking a little and feeling that feeling of compersion she always got when seeing any of her lovers together. It might be a most un-Jedi-like feeling, but it is nice, regardless. “Princess or pauper, we all are working from the same kind of playbook.”

“Well then, I suppose it’s good that I have someone like you in my corner who knows what plays are being called,” Harry chuckled, as Aayla added her own agreement with Padme mentally. “Just tell me how forcefully I need to rebut her personal overtures when the time comes, and that will be that. I already have three amazing women in my life, I have no need or desire for any more, and the work we’ve put into an alliance package for the Hapans is pretty darn good in my opinion.”

“Ohh, nice compliment, sincere and off the cuff at the same time,” Padme teased, even though she was smiling at his compliment, and leaning up to give him a slight kiss on the cheek. Despite the fact that none of the techs and Jedi on the bridge were looking at them, that was the extent either of them would allow when it came to affection. Neither Harry nor any of the three women he was involved with were much into flaunting their relationships for various reasons, and Padme, most of all, had a great deal of reasons to keep the relationship a secret. Admittedly, aboard the Tyrant’s Bane, it was well known, but even then, there was no need to bring anyone’s attention to it.

A moment later, Padme had to field a few calls from individuals who were here to attend the conference that was her professional reason to come to Taanab. Thankfully, she had known this would be coming beforehand, and her response was the same: Wait and we will meet in person. Beyond that, she began to organize the start of that conference, which had been postponed to await her arrival. By the time she was done, everyone knew where it would be and that it would start as soon as Padme arrived at the hotel, where it had long since been scheduled, and she would be staying for the next two days.

Similarly, Harry dealt with a few business issues. He had already purchased planetary-level weapon systems from multiple suppliers to be shipped into Taanab, and now, and they would be readied for transport up to the Tyrant’s Bane. The first such shipment would arrive by the time they settled into orbit.

By this point, there was no need to hide what the Tyrant’s Bane could do. The entire galaxy knew about its special abilities after the battle in the Polith System. Not how those special abilities had been done, thought. The runic arrays were still a secret. That was enough. *Besides, it isn’t as if the Tyrant’s Bane is going to be alone for very much longer. It astonishes me how fast the Karelians are working, and I’m still a little ambivalent about the plan there, but I’m not about to gainsay the local admiral,* he mused, while Aayla joined them on the bridge, having sent Ahsoka off to take a much-needed shower.

Aayla exchanged hand squeezes with both of the other women before settling into a space left unoccupied on Harry's other side, away from Padme, reporting aloud on Ahsoka's training and the fact that she would be joining the Bane's allotted combat air patrol once they were in orbit. They weren't expecting trouble, but the attack on the Polith System that the Confederacy still had a great deal of contacts and espionage activities going on within Republic space. It wouldn't be the first time the Bane had been attacked in a supposedly safe zone, after all. The locals were undoubtedly going to bitch about that, but Harry was more than willing to argue that point.

Moments later, a call came in that had nothing to do with the business of the Tyrant's Bane, security or anything else. Rather, the caller had business with Harry and Aayla personally, as well as Harry in his office as leader of the GDL.

After he accepted the communication, a hologram appeared in front of Harry showing a semi-familiar face set. Ta'a Chume's hair was done up in Hapan formal style, as was her makeup, giving her an overall ferocious-looking appearance, made marginally worse by the scowl on her face and the way her eyes seemed to glimmer. "Knight Potter," she began, using his Jedi rank rather than any of his formal titles, perhaps as a way to get under his skin? Harry wasn't sure, but it certainly didn't matter to him. "It is very clear that the Jedi have never instructed you in the proper etiquette when meeting a lady. You do not keep one waiting, in particular one such as I."

If she expected Harry to be intimidated, she was grossly mistaken. Not only did Harry have Aayla there to tell him that the princess really wasn't all that concerned about being kept waiting, having, of course, learned the reason why along with the rest of the galaxy, but he had Padme's prior warnings. Thus, he answered her disdain with his own cool look. "I am sorry you feel that way, but saving the galaxy's only planet that produces bacta was not exactly a minor stop along the way. I also regret to inform you that I will be busy for the rest of the day with GDL matters. The war and everything else wait for no man. However, tomorrow evening I will be entirely free, as will Aayla."

The princess's eyes flashed at being put off even further, although she had intended to do the same thing. After a moment, Ta'a wondered internally if Harry had known that, and that was why he specifically mentioned tomorrow evening, the same time frame that she had been intending to demand they meet. *That could be a subtle show of his intelligence apparatus and how good it is, or it could be simply a coincidence. Regardless, it works well enough for me.*

That flash of anger and annoyance passed by so quickly that even Aayla, with her empathic abilities and a face to concentrate on, could barely detect it. "I see. Very well. I will

make arrangements. I have been waiting on this planet long enough to know which restaurants and so forth will cater to those who desire complete anonymity and discreet service.”

With that, the woman cut off, and Harry slowly shook his head. “Well, that was somewhat abrupt. And no flirtations either. Perhaps she’s already moved past the idea of...”

It was stopped as all three of the women around him shook their heads, and Aayla snorted. “If anything, she desires you even more. Some women are like that.”

Harry sighed faintly, shaking his head. “I was afraid of that.”

“I also... hmm... her haughty attitude is also interesting. Coupled with something in those eyes of hers, and Chume’s age...” Padme mused. “Remind me to go over the recordings from the official GDL archives about her discussions with you. I want to see if I can get a better handle on her personality. There is something off there I’m not seeing, and it has nothing to do with the regular Hapan feelings towards men. Rather the opposite, really.”

“I got it too. Oddly, this close, I think Ta’a might have a bit of the Force to her as I couldn’t get as good a read on her emotions as I should be able to with an image of concentrate on. No training, to be sure, and perhaps not even enough to levitate a pebble, but she has some serious emotional control,” Aayla added. “I wager that’s been a major help in her various political training and so forth.”

“That could be a part of it too,” Padme nodded, inwardly adding. *In terms of hiding her emotions anyway. But that brief look she made, I wonder if there’s an actual hero crush working here?*

Moments later, as the Tyrant’s Bane finally settled into orbit where it had been assigned, and starfighters began to fly out to form a combat air patrol, Padme and Zule headed down to the hangar bay for their dissent to the planet’s capital, Pandath. Meanwhile, Harry and Ahsoka retired to the Hypercom network room to get caught up with events around the GDL as they had done so every morning.

Settling into the shelter along with Chewbacca and his wife, Zule acted as pilot, while Chewbacca contacted the locals, using a translation program built into the shuttle’s communications. After a moment, he leaned back, looking over at Padme. “I’ve just been warned to be wary of crowds. Apparently, news of your arrival has spread, and the locals are... confused, worried and... they are somewhat panicking.”

Padme’s brows furrowed. “What is that supposed to mean?”

The large Wookiee shrugged his shoulders, while Zule hummed pensively, looking over at Padme. "I wonder precisely how popular you've become, Senator," she mused, a slight twinkle entering her eyes.

Given how carefully the *Tyrant's Bane* had been traveling to keep from being detected, this was the first time that Padme had been on any other Republic planet since the Battle against Grievous's armada over Thyferra. While in the Polith system, the amount of work and everything else going on had shielded her from how the public had begun to react to not just events there, in various ways, but to Padme's part in them. She knew the Senate had cheered her actions, but that had been a minor thing nearly two weeks back.

Thus, it came as something of a shock to her when she exited the shuttle into the waiting area to find it crowded not by reporters trying to scoot past security to shout questions at her, but thousands of regular civilians. All of them were locals and every one of them was shouting and cheering for Padme, making the Senate's reaction to her hologram reporting the victory over Thyferra seem tame in comparison. "Amidala, Amidala! Senator without Fear! The Republic, the Republic. The Iron Lady!"

On it went with other names and phases shouted in the tumult she could barely make out as she shook hands with Taanab's governor, a man who looked like someone had smacked him in the forehead with a small hammer. The People of Taanab were not at all given to effusiveness, to shouting and yelling in public. They were a very formal, calm sort of people, but it was very obvious that was not the case at the moment.

"The senator without fear" was one that she heard clearly, although thankfully, that one didn't seem to have grabbed the public attention as much as others. "The Iron Lady" was another dominate one, although she was of two minds about that one as well. It had connotations to it that she wasn't sure that she liked.

"Do you think I should say something to them, Governor?" Padme asked, wincing a bit at the sheer noise of the crowd, held back as it was by a police force in riot gear. She did not like that sight at all on many levels and waved at the crowd, hoping that doing so would calm them down.

"This is, well, I had to look up events like this in other systems to understand," the elderly man, somewhat florid of appearance but not overly so, said, shaking her head. "I think giving a speech would not be helpful at this time. A statement we can read over the news could be a good idea, but right now, it might be best to get you out of here. The crowd is well-meaning, but there are still a lot of people out there."

"And friendly faces can hide sinister intent," Chewie growled, his roar heard far more easily than the translation coming from the device on his belt. Luckily, Padme had learned much

of the Wookie language and could understand him well enough. "Let's get into the local shuttle and move on."

"True. I'm not feeling any violent intent, but this level of near veneration can be dangerous on its own, even without that," Zule added. Zule had seen crowds like this before, when her former master and she had helped overthrow a local corrupt government. She didn't think it was dangerous, but crowds were tumultuous things regardless.

Even with the local and her companions urging her to move on, for a moment, Padme thought about what she should do. Should you try to calm the crowd down, should she try to appeal to them to go home, to reiterate that she was simply a woman, a normal woman despite her vaunted rank? That regardless of her own actions, they were simply what she thought incumbent on a Senator? But the sheer number of people trying to push into the waiting zone around the shuttle, the tumult already going on, convinced her otherwise. "Very well, although I will write up that statement quickly. I get the impression this crowd is..."

"Is throughout the whole city, yes," the local governor, whose name was Moroo, stated. "Our police are barely able to keep order. Now if you could step smartly this way? Your security guards will, of course, be allowed to look over the shuttle we prepped for you, but..."

He shrugged, and Padme nodded, heading towards another shuttle waiting nearby, as the shouting of the crowd continued.

The Bane's shuttles, like the ship itself and its starfighters, were registered with a foreign, if allied body. As such, they wouldn't be allowed to simply roam around the planet, especially when they weren't carrying an accredited ambassador like Harry, and using one to transport Padme, a Republic Senator, around a Republic planet wasn't good optics either.

Rather, it was a local shuttle, the type of which Chewie recognized. It had a major ECM suite and some armor on it, to go with an emergency shield, and was made for VIP movement. He said so as he moved into the shuttle, while Zule walked around it, her Force senses looking for any trap while also looking with her eyes for anything out of place. Mala followed, concentrating on the engines.

Not a year ago, Padme would've taken one look at the thing and ordered Chewbacca to find something else, something less imposing. However, that had been in a universe that wasn't at war. A universe where Padme had simply been one of many senators, albeit an important one, thanks to her position in the Peace Party. Now, with the shouting crowd and how close she had come to the front lines of the war, that was no longer an option. *I'm a major target now, and a public figure, one whose social clout might well outweigh my political strength. That's something I am going to need to think about.*

Thankfully, once in the air, they found the local newsies and busybodies moving aside for them. Even as hyped up on hero worship as the locals were, apparently, some rules and regulations still remained in place.

Ten minutes later, they were sitting down at a private landing area outside of a large, exclusive hotel, where the consortium that Padme was here to take part in would be meeting. She was greeted by the hotel manager and chief of security, who directed her and her security guards to where they could go. Mala peeled off at that point, heading towards the security room for the hotel, while Zule and Chewbacca stayed with Padme. Mala would provide overwatch using the existing security, communicating directly with Padme and the others.

When one of the locals protested that the Senator would not need bodyguards while inside the hotel, Padme responded dryly with, "The Confederacy started the attack on Thyferra by infiltrating commando droids to assassinate anyone in a position of power. I was attacked in the hotel where I was staying at the time. While I can promise that my companions will not shoot first and ask questions never, I'm certainly not going to gainsay them when they decide to stay by my side."

The man winced at that but backed off, nodding his head. "Ah, I see. In that case, we will accord your guards all the access we have."

Minutes later, Padme barely held back a gasp of surprise when she entered the receiving area where the other members here for the symposium had gathered to greet her, because in among them was the queen of Naboo, her old friend, Eirtae. *Oh dear. That is an interesting development. I thought she would send an observer at the most, I am our sector's senator after all, even if I did have to cancel the trip after this one that would have seen me heading home. So is this going to be a personal discussion, or something political? It must be important too, else she would have called me when we reached orbit.*

"Ladies and gentlemen," Padme said, a smile on her face with practiced ease, even as she thought about why her good friend and the current ruler of their planet was there. "I am sorry that my arrival was postponed for so long and that pushed the time of this symposium back in turn. But I am here at last, and as representative of the Senate, I will listen and try to address all your concerns and worries about further taxation and trade restrictions during wartime that this meeting is meant to address. In that vein, might I say that I am happy to see so many of you still here despite how long it took me to arrive? That is a good-faith act on all your parts, and it will not be forgotten."

That was a bit of political nothing, but it served to set them all on the same level, so to speak. Padme moved forward into the crowd, while Zule walked behind her, and Chewbacca roamed the outside perimeter of the room, glancing at various lights and the air vents in

particular. If any of the symposium goers were thrown off by the giant Wookiee, they didn't show it, and within moments, Padme had moved through and gotten the group moving into a separate room, where a conference table was laid out for them, complete with data pads, carafes of water, and a large screen set above where Padme would be sitting.

With Padme's even-handed nature guiding them, eventually, after several stops and starts, the group had a series of agreements largely finished. It would take their aides a few days to go over the wording, and for that to go back and forth to make certain no major changes had been slipped in, but for now, Padme's hardest task with the symposium was done with, and all in a single day.

It was pushing midnight by the time all of that was finished, but Padme knew that her day wasn't done just yet. The queen of Naboo hadn't said much, and what she had said, Padme knew a representative could have just as easily, or better, could have been simply sent to her via Hypercom mail. No, there was some other reason why her old friend was here in person, and one that Eirtae was keeping to herself at the moment.

Now, as the last of the other representatives left, the Queen laughingly stated that she wanted to catch up on the gossip with her friend. Padme smiled warmly, waiting for the other woman to return to her seat before slumping into her own, before letting her public smile change into a more private one. "All right, what is the real reason why you are here, Eirtae?"

"Why, Padme, couldn't I have simply taken the opportunity to come and say hello in person? We might talk over the Hypercom at least a few times every week, but even so, that's a far cry from being in person, isn't it?" the queen asked, one eyebrow arched dryly.

"Eirtae, I know precisely how uncomfortable all of that formal clothing is. If you want to banter with me for a while after spending more than ten hours in it, be my guest. I'm not going to be the one paying for that with a sore back and neck later. But don't insult my intelligence, please. Or if you're going to, do it in a way that is at least a little less obvious," Padme said, wrinkling her nose.

The other young woman shrugged, then shook her head, which set her headpiece to jangling a little bit. Her expression became serious as she folded her hands in her lap, staring at Padme. "With how busy you have been for the Republic and then the business in the Polith system, have you had time to follow local news back in the Chommell Sector?"

Padme's eyes narrowed. "No. And from your tone, I might not like what I've missed."

"Ah... Well, there's no easy way to say it, then," Eirtae winced. "There's a major smear campaign going on against you and the rest of the Peace Party on the Hypercom and in local

newspapers. So much so that your parents' house was attacked by a group calling themselves the 'True Republicans' of all things."

"What!?" Padme blinked, her sardonic good humor disappearing in a flash of worry. "Are my mother and father alright?"

"They are fine. I moved Ruwee and Jabaal into the palace for the moment. But I wanted you to be aware of it. The house... the one your family had by the lake? It wasn't so lucky. It was completely destroyed," Eirtae admitted apologetically.

That took a moment for Padme to push aside. That house especially had many happy childhood memories to it, up to and including the time that she, her handmaidens and four young Jedi padawans had enjoyed a day there away from their various duties. But after a second, Padme recovered, feeling Zule's hand on her shoulder and the knowledge that her parents had escaped allowed Padme to push through her sudden grief. "By the Force, **WHY!?**"

"There has been a lot of low-key public animosity directed at those people and even planets that are part of the GDL and those calling for anything but total war against the Confederacy. Some people at home didn't like how close you are to Count Potter, while groups like the 'True Republicans' believe you are a traitor to the Republic," Eirtae began slowly.

Padme pounded the table with a fist, but another touch on the shoulder from Zule calmed her down once more. "Of course I know that. The Centrists in the Senate barely tolerate any discussion about the League, and I know before the Battle of Thyferra, there was anti-League sentiment, but now?"

"The attack on your house actually happened a bare two days before the Confederacy launched that attack. But even now, there is still far too much anti-League sentiment, and far too many groups who think that the Confederacy is simply evil. Not the government, not the military, the whole idea of the Confederacy, which the attack on Thyferra actually helped along," Eirtae snorted. "Admittedly, the voices speaking out against Harry have been far more circumspect since he and Aayla rode to your rescue like heroes, but even then?"

Eirtae shook her head. "The pundits pushing such things have been too quick to change and react to events going on in the galaxy, far too quick for it to be natural. Myself and a few other leaders authorized a series of investigations against this or that site, this or that newspaper, but nothing has come from it. Now, that same movement is attacking Potter in more subtle ways while being even more stridently against the Peace Party and anything that smacks of appeasement. So much so that it's starting to be a problem on Naboo and a bigger one elsewhere. All in all, the Chommell Sector seems to be being targeted by a whisper campaign to undermine you, the Peace Party and Republic/League interactions."

"We've noticed similar things on Coruscant, but you think it's happening galaxy wide?" Zule asked. "This new anti-Peace Party push is something new, or at least taking it to the level of outright attacks is."

"True on the violence, I haven't seen the Centrists pushing for that kind of thing, even if far too many Centrist Senators are bitter about how strong the GDL is," Padme answered her lover. "Especially considering how a full Core sector joined them after the fighting began, along with dozens of other planets."

She turned back to Eirtae, her eyes narrowing. "But you're speaking as if someone with a lot of pull is pushing for even more war, and is attacking me personally."

"I'm certain of it," Eirtae stated firmly. "Unless whoever is behind it is a slicer clan, maybe, with a lot of money to throw at the issue along with time, then it's got to be someone in the Republic, someone with a lot of money, connections and influence. There are simply too many forums, too many local newspapers across the sectors that are pushing this idea that the GDL is almost as deadly an enemy as the Confederacy, or that there needs to be a war to the knife with any 'traitors, murderers, and dissenters' and that is a direct quote. Far, far too many such voices, all moving in lock step."

"It can't be a natural thing, even if our local investigations haven't turned up more than a few dozen programmed droids writing articles or handling forum work and a bare handful or rabble rousers and paid troublemakers," Eirtae scowled. "None of us in the Chommell sector can get to the bottom of it, we don't have the resources or the reach to learn more than we have. But maybe you can once you're back with the Senate?"

"We know one person out there who could be behind it, Padme," Zule interjected grimly. "The hidden Sith Lord."

Eirtae started at that, but Zule explained quickly, and eventually, Eirtae nodded. "Well, I can't say I'm happy to be in the know of a secret so dangerous, but at least you have an idea of the motivation. Any ideas as to who, though?"

"They've had a thousand years to plan a move against the Jedi and the Republic. C'baoth is their public face, the real lord is hiding somewhere else. The Senate's been investigated several times at this point, from Palpatine down, but nothing's come from it. Finding a Sith hidden in the vast Republic bureaucracy or some local sector government is the next best thing to finding a single marked piece of metal in a star system," Padme sighed faintly. "This attack on my family though, inciting outright violence against people for just being related to me because I'm being a voice of reason? That's worrisome."

“The True Republicans might not be a real political party, but unlike those Pius Dea buffoons who attacked you months back, they have their nonviolent version which is. Such parties are also pushing hard to be elected into office across the board. We’ve got Centrists and pro-war parties rousing opposition across the sector. There was even a call for you to be replaced, but after the Battle of Thyferra, that’s not going to happen,” Eirtae answered. “But, again, you needed to be aware of all this. And I wanted to also use this opportunity to make a deal with your Harry.”

“He’s Aayla’s Harry, as he’s always been, not mine,” Padme demurred, rolling her eyes at that and the sudden shift in the discussion.

“That’s your story, and you’re sticking to it, hmm?” Eirtae snorted. “Anyway, if you would ask Harry to accept a call from me tomorrow morning, I would like that. And don’t worry about your parents. They’ll be looked after. I might lose my own election coming up, but that at least is easy enough to secure.” Eirtae held up a data crystal. “This will tell you as much as several other leaders within the Sector and I have discovered about the whisper campaign and the connections between the anti-League and the anti-Peace Party issues. I’m uncertain if you Jedi are looking at it from that perspective, but I hope this helps your inquiries.”

“I hope so, too,” Zule murmured, taking the crystal. “And if both of those campaigns are indeed feeding off one another to the point that it could perhaps be coming from the same source, I will wager our slicers can eventually find it.”

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While Padme was busy with her duties as a Senator and then learning about what was going on back home from Eirtae, Harry and Aayla were similarly busy with their own duties as leaders of the GDL. That came with some surprises, the biggest of which was that the blockade around Rendili had been made largely irrelevant.

It had been greatly in flux since shortly after the Veil of the Dark Side’s dissolution, when a newly appointed admiral had, instead of landing what could have been a crippling blow on the mobile elements of Rendili’s defenses, been killed himself. Since Garm had ordered the Forces already amassed for Operation Trident to join the rest of the GDL fleets within the sector to hammer significant and telling portions of the Confederacy’s occupation. One of their logistic nodes had been hit by a surprise assault under a recently elevated Commodore Ackbar, and a significant portion of the blockade had been broken in a sudden assault from multiple angles directed by Shaak Ti. She had apparently taken the concept from a few Republic battles under an Admiral Thrawn, who was quickly becoming somewhat famous in military circles, and had convinced several of the local commanders to go along with things. It had worked.

While the blockade was still in place in many ways, primarily the sheer amount of mines and hyperspace traps that had been towed into position around Rendili and the surviving Lucrehulks which had been able to escape before being destroyed, this had still allowed Rendili to send whole wings of starfighters, bombers and gunboats, fresh out of their shipyards, to the other League forces. These new units were even now being used in the typical GDL slash-and-run attacks, hammering the Confederacy's overall control of the sector. Which was not even mentioning how much effort the CIS had to put into keeping the populace under control these days, given the assault on Thyferra.

Elsewhere, there was the normal back-and-forth between the Confederacy in the GDL, the sparring, the searching, sudden sharp assaults and grade three planets being conquered for far more loss than they were worth. One such assault had been a remarkably hard-headed push on Enadmus and its Hypercom Uplink Center, which had nearly forced a full fleet engagement before the enemy was forced to give up when their supply chain disappeared under a veritable wave of small-scale assaults.

More importantly, it had become very clear that the push into the Corellian sector would soon reach a crescendo. Efforts had been made over the past few days to hammer their logistic suspects, but League Intelligence had reported that the Grand Fleet was now being commanded by Master C'baoth, the visible Sith Lord. He had begun putting his fleet through different training maneuvers, getting to know his commanders.

Garm had been confused as to how long that process was taking, but the Jedi had an answer to that problem. C'baoth was the Sith who had created the Hollowed, the Jedi who had been stripped of most of their minds and power, leaving only a fragile shell to hide what had been done. He very obviously had taken the Sith version of Mental Domination to a hitherto unseen height. It stood to reason that the man could take control of the fleet or even the various ship captains, making them dance to his tune, and making the whole fleet into a weapon that he could wield with all the finesse and control of a lightsaber.

It was only a matter of time before they resumed the push for either Corellia or Duros. The GDL had done everything in their power to make it seem as if Duros would be the far less toothsome, a target that could be used to draw in all the mobile forces and beat them in a set-piece battle, which was where the CIS had the advantage to an incredible degree. The Specters had also made very, very certain that any news about the two Tyrant's Bane class ships being worked on in Corellia was at least a month behind where they really were.

It remained to be seen if such efforts would bear fruit. Right now, that aspect of the war had slowed, but Yaddle and Garm agreed it would not be so for more than another four or five days, if that, before C'baoth launched his Grand Fleet forward again.

That was basically it on the military side of things, and astonishingly, Harry had barely needed to make any decisions at all about any of it, thanks to how well run that aspect of things was. On the social side of things, Aayla had a far longer day, but Harry had bowed out entirely out of those discussions, and not just because that was Aayla's area of special interest. He wanted to take Ahsoka down to the planet to practice the Force Cloak technique and to mingle with the local Republic populace in a way that they hadn't been able to since leaving Valahari. Even after receiving a message from Zule about Padme's warm welcome, he wanted to know more about how the events in the Polith system were being seen.

This was good on many levels, both to get away from politics and the trappings of power, as Harry put it, and to get in touch with the local common man. "Mind you, the populace here is a Republic populace, so it will be different in several ways from a GDL planet. Even so, it is important occasionally to simply listen to what people are saying away from the ears of those in authority. It helps one keep centered."

Ahsoka nodded slowly as the shuttle touched down, then asked, "If it's so important, though, why did the Jedi Order, well, why is the Jedi Order so connected to the Republic Senate?"

"That is a question you'd have to ask someone from the High Council, Ahsoka. I certainly was not part of that decision all those decades ago," Harry said, shaking his head. "I could say that you could look at the GDL and see how the Jedi are more in touch with the war effort and the intelligence apparatus than the actual government, though. That, and how the Order is still seeing to the duties of criminal investigations, small-scale diplomacy and so forth, even during the war. We're just not advising those on high or taking non-combat jobs from the Senate."

Ahsoka snorted at that, nodding her head. The two of them remained silent for a time as they exited the shuttle and headed off in the city, with Ahsoka not blending in nearly as well as Harry could. This led to several hours spent on instruction in the Force Cloak. She was still having trouble with it when she asked a question that Harry had to think deeply about. Eventually, when he was certain she could hold the technique while moving at speed, so long as she didn't hit anything too hard, anyway, Harry used his Force Cloak and Stealth to start a game of hide and seek. This segued into a game of chase across the rooftops, which was much more fun for Ahsoka, but which ended abruptly as Harry, chasing after her under her Force Cloak, sensed something else.

They had just leaped from one side of a road to another when the Force and Harry paused, causing Ahsoka, who was several rooftops ahead of him, to also pause. With the Veil gone, the Force could tell the Jedi more about what was going on around them, about shifts and

eddies in the future than it had been able to previously, and this felt like one of them. Something or someone was here, and the Force was warning Harry to take interest.

By the time Ahsoka had rejoined him, Harry had isolated the feeling and pointed to a shop nearby, a rental speeder shop, a large store that practically dominated a full block of the city and had even more space behind its storefront going back away from the road. "Fun is over for now, Ahsoka. Someone in there, or two people, are of interest for some reason, and I think we need to figure out why."

Shrugging at that, Ahsoka followed Harry off the roof, landing beside him easily. The two of them cloaked themselves for a moment as they entered the rental area, with Harry taking the chance to hide his Force presence just in case. He also made certain his hood was up and hid his face. Unlike Ahsoka, Harry was, after all, a public figure of some repute and had found to his chagrin that the Republic citizens here also had a good deal of hero worship towards him thanks to his defense of Thyferra.

Remaining side by side, the two Jedi moved through the store and the open parking area beyond, where its wares sat. Separating for a moment, the Knight and his padawan spread out, examining every tech, salesman, and client as they moved around the area slowly. Slowly, two of the clients drew Harry's attention.

They were two human men. One was markedly younger and in slightly better shape than the other, and after a second, Harry realized that the black hair of the older man came from a bottle rather than a sign of fitness or age. He had a recently shaved beard, brown hair, and an overall dapper look. The other had black hair as well, but that was his natural color. No beard to speak of, he gave off a slightly more poised, contemplative look than his older fellow.

Both also had furtive, if very well concealed, looks to them. These were men who examined every corner and person nearby. They looked as if they were used to having blasters at their side, and as Harry watched, they deliberately looked for escape routes with just their eyes moving. It was as if they were leery of being discovered.

If Aayla had been physically there, she might've been able to tell more about the emotions of the two men at the moment. But Harry couldn't tell much on his own, and she was too busy at the moment to devote much attention to what he was doing and thus give Harry access to her empathic skills. Regardless, Harry could get an impression of some plan that had gone awry, or had to be changed at the last moment, which had brought them here.

And that the Force thought that these men were important. Not in the Force itself, but perhaps in some more physical fashion. Why that was, Harry had no idea, but he was a Jedi. If the Force hinted at such things, he was not going to argue.

Harry was still pondering what exactly it could mean when Ahsoka's Force Cloak failed. One moment, no one was there, and then Ahsoka, desperately trying to act as if she had been there all along, crouched as if she had just come up from being underneath one of the hover cars.

Both men stiffened, as well as several others, and Ahsoka sheepishly waved at the group of salesmen and prospective clients, her orange skin turning white in the Togrutan equivalent of an embarrassed blush. "Er, Sorry, folks, um, Jedi punishment training. Um, if you had fruit or something, you could chuck them at me as punishment for being spotted, but as you don't, I'll just go..."

Points for imagination and thinking on your feet, my padawan, Harry mused, sharing the moment with a very busy Aayla, who barely kept back a guffaw of amusement. *Good way of having people lower their guards, explain your presence and yet not at the same time.*

"If you would give our thanks to Count Potter and the Lady Senator, we will swear we never saw you, young one," the oldest salesman there said, his tone formal as all Taanabians seemed to be before he ruined it slightly by winking at Ahsoka.

"Deal! And I promise not to um, practice here again. I just, well, like hover cars, so thought, y'know, why not get some fun while I'm being punished," Ahsoka prattled, acting very much like a young person caught where she shouldn't be, further putting the crowd at ease even as she moved toward the door leading out into the rest of the shop.

Harry watched as the younger man kept his eyes trained on Ahsoka in kind. Neither he nor the older man had relaxed as the rest of the now chuckling crowd paused, and now he tapped the other man on the shoulder. He looked around, and Harry, realizing what the man was looking for, stepped into a hiding place where he would be hidden from the rest of the crowd. As the man looked to such places automatically, Harry let his own Force Cloak fade for a second, waiting until the man's eyes widened before jerking his cloaked head towards Ahsoka and out the door she had just exited by.

The fellow with the close-cropped black hair caught it and whispered something into the older man's ear. After a moment spent looking where Harry stood, the older man nodded, and they both headed out of the store, with Harry following. They soon passed the still apologizing Ahsoka, and were out the door a moment later, where the old man led them unerringly into an alleyway.

There he turned, and, one hand moving behind him, looked to where Harry was. "Alright, we're here. Who are you, and... and which do you serve, the Jedi or C'baoth?"

“Rather an illogical question, Jarl,” the younger man murmured. “If they were with C’baoth, we’d be dead, if, that is, we rated one of his Dark Side Brotherhood being sent after us.”

“Interesting that you use that term, as I doubt that CIS propaganda does,” Harry mused as he canceled his Force Cloak again, pulling his hood back just far enough for both men to see him as Ahsoka walked up behind him.

His face caused both men’s eyes to widen, and for ‘Jarl’, if that was his name, to pull out his hand from behind him. Whatever he had been reaching for, Harry didn’t know, but kept his voice calm and measured. “Good afternoon. My name is... well, I doubt you need telling, as much as I dislike my notoriety sometimes. I would like to know who the two of you are, and why exactly the Force pointed me in your direction. Perhaps your own furtive nature and why you think that C’baoth might have sent someone after you are connected to that?”

The older man seemed to sag, while the young man stared at Harry, as if he wasn’t quite believing what he was seeing. “Serendipity and chance. My word, but maybe there is something to that whole Force nonsense you Jedi espouse. I am Jorj Car’das, and before you asked for identification, don’t bother. I have a Republic ID, but it isn’t accurate. My companion is similarly a nonentity, but his real name is Talon Karrde. And we have information that we, as former Confederacy businessmen, wish to pass on to the GDL. Would you be interested?”

Given that this news was enough for the Force to point him their way, Harry was very interested. “I believe I would, gentleman. Although I would prefer to hear a little more about the data in question before we get down to prices.”

“What kind of price would you put on knowing where five of the Confederacy’s hidden shipyards are?” The older man said, not beating around the bush.

“... I think, Mr Car’das, Mr. Karrde, that we should adjourn to someplace where we can make certain that we are not overheard, and where no one is looking for you,” Harry said slowly, while Ahsoka blinked in shock, then grinned and leaned forward eagerly.

Several hours later, a deal was struck and information shared over a pub dinner that was rather bland in Harry’s opinion, to say nothing of Ahsoka’s. In return for Jorj sharing what he knew of the Sith intelligence apparatus, which he had been a minor part of, and the location of the five hidden CIS shipyards, the two men would get new identities, and a ship would arrive shortly within the system that they would take ownership of. With it, they would finish the journey into GDL space, Corellia, in point of fact, and start new lives there.

To that end, Harry got them in contact with one of these slicer clans. That connection would help them along with new identities, and had already transferred a significant chunk of

money to a series of secret bank accounts. The two men would get a similarly horrendously large amount of money when the information on the shipyards proved accurate. In other words, when an attack hit them.

Harry got the impression that would be enough for the older man. The chance to rebuild his business empire was a big draw for Jorj, as was knowing he had done his job in striking at C'baoth. The man felt true disgust and hatred towards the Sith and those who worked for them after the attack on Thyferra.

Although honestly, Harry reckoned that C'baoth had just been a middleman for the intelligence gathering activities Jorj had been paid for so handsomely. He suspected this other man, Dorianna, was a worker for the real Sith Lord. The fact that it had been Jorj who had first brought Thrawn, the same Thrawn whose strategies were making waves right now, was also interesting, although like the description of Dorianna's appearance, Harry wasn't certain how to act on that connection just yet, or what it could mean in the long term. Still, he would pass on the man's description to the Order as a whole, and request that a Jedi investigate (IE work with) Thrawn to get his measure.

In contrast, Talon Karrde gave off the impression of someone who would want to be more involved in certain ways. Yes, he was someone who played fast and loose with the laws, but Harry could tell the man wasn't in it for the money, nor the adventure. While his morals had turned him against the Confederacy, he was driven by something else. Talon desired secrets most of all. He liked discovering things, learning things, and as such, Harry felt Specter would find a place for him.

More importantly was the data that Harry now had in his hands about the CIS shipyards. Information that would need to be acted on as fast as possible. Of course, he shared all this entirely with Aayla as it was going on, although he hadn't yet had the opportunity to share it with Zule and Padme just yet. The two of them were staying on the planet during the time Padme would be busy with the Symposium, and Harry didn't trust the local communications network.

Frankly, for something this major, Harry didn't even trust the Hypercom, even with all of the coding and protections they could encrypt any communiqué with. No, this would need careful planning to even share with the rest of the League's High Command, a process that he began that night with Aayla beside him. By the time Eirtae and Padme were talking, the pair had a plan at least to contact Garm and indicate what they would need in the future to act on this new information.

Although only Harry would be involved in that. Aayla and Zule would be leaving Taanab two days from now on their own mission. This new information, as much as Harry could have hoped, didn't change Aayla's insistence on leaving for Nar Shadda.

Still, before anything else, they had a certain princess to deal with.

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True to the Princess's words, the second night in orbit around Taanab had a shuttle from the Bane was cleared to land at a landing area built for and used exclusively by one of the most expensive rarefied restaurants within several star systems. The restaurant was called Starlight, and it had its own security firm, a dedicated anti-air defense, and a personal radar setup. Every table was set up on a series of separated platforms, with service of each one seen to by only two people: a waiter, and a fully accredited five-star chef, who prepared meals right on the spot in small, well-appointed kitchens separated from the rest of the platform by soundproof glass, with room for a personal guard to be stationed there to watch the two servants. The landing area was itself patrolled by hard-eyed men from the security of the restaurant and, tonight, hard-eyed men and women in Hapes Cluster uniform.

Many of those particular people looked askance at Padme as she came out of the shuttle with Harry and Aayla, dressed in a very nice, if conservative outfit. The two Jedi were similarly attired, although their clothing looked even less high-class, being their typical Jedi robes. Even if both Knights had gone to the trouble of cleaning them.

Padme ignored them with all of the regal disdain that she had learned during her time as queen, marching between Harry and Aayla without even glancing to one side or the other as they headed towards the small lift that would carry them up to their dining table. Inputting the one-time code, Padme turned to her lovers, shaking her head. "Even I think this is a bit much."

"True. And most of the security could be bypassed via subtle means," Aayla said, shaking her head. "Master Vos, myself, or indeed any good Jedi Sentinel could easily bypass it, and I would wager any commando worth his name could do the same."

"I will assume that you're alliteration there was a mistake rather than deliberate. It would be a horrifying thing to learn that you like that kind of thing at this point in our relationship," Padme murmured, glancing down at a small device on her wrist. Chewbacca had put it together for her, and it could tell if there were any listening devices around, and there weren't any in the lift. "And I wouldn't be all too sure about whether or not the security of this place could be bypassed. I think each of the platforms is also behind individual Faraday Cages, so no signals can come in or out once you enter."

“That might stop most, but it wouldn’t stop Jedi. Or even those drone commandos who tried to assassinate you.” Aayla shook her head, then looked at Harry, rolling her eyes. “Harry, concentrate on the here and now, please,” she said aloud and mentally. “I can feel your plans, and I know what you’re doing. Leave that for now. You can come back to it after this meeting is over.”

“Or better yet, my love, after tomorrow evening, when Zule and I leave,” she added, her mental tone darkening before lightening a little bit. “And if you think for one moment that you will have any thoughts other than about me or our other lovers when we return to the Bane tonight, you’d best think again!”

“Oh, I fully intend to make certain that you go away happy... and bowlegged,” Harry said, his own mental tone far more salacious and lusty than Aayla’s deliberately, causing Aayla to blush, her blue skin darkening into almost purple, causing Padme to giggle, not realizing what had been said, but easily able to guess given the result.

“Enough of that, you two,” she said, as the lift finally began to open. “Game faces on.”

Stepping out, the first thing that Harry noticed was that there was a small shield generator, a little bit smaller than what could be found on a starfighter, set into the floor in one corner away from the entryway into the platform. The next was the fact that he could detect a faint electrical shimmer in the air, meaning that yes, this platform was in its own Faraday Cage. *Although I could really have told that by the fact that the Princess looks both shocked and angry that there are three of us here, he thought sardonically. I doubt that her guards would have foregone warning Ta’a if they had a choice.*

The Princess herself was already sitting at the table, facing towards where the lift decanted the trio, leaning back with a glass of wine in one hand. Ta’a Chume was dressed regally in the Hapan style, but without makeup, and her hair was down.

Padme, who hadn’t bothered to look at the platform’s defenses at all, had noticed the same lack Harry and Aayla had in terms of the princess’s makeup, and she felt that was probably deliberate. More than the rest of the Hapan Royal Garb, the makeup was made to intimidate. In this manner, though, she showed off both her beauty and her royal status.

And Padme could admit that the other young woman was beautiful. She was around the same age as Padme and her lovers, with red hair that held streaks of gold throughout. She was uncertain if that was natural or not, but it was certainly striking. Her eyes were also a shade of dark green, a few shades darker than Harry’s, and like Padme herself, she had high cheekbones and a small mouth to match a small nose. From what Padme could see of her body under the royal robes, Padme estimated that she probably had a thinner waist and slightly smaller bust than Padme, although that was just a guess. Broad shoulders showed warrior training like

Padme had under Zule and Chewbacca, only more vigorously followed than Padme was able to, given all her various duties as senator.

Also evident was the displeasure in those eyes as they took in the group coming out of the lift. A servant was already hastily moving forward himself to prepare a fourth place at the table, a chair coming up out of the floor of the platform, robotic servos whirring. The next moment, he was back behind a wall that separated the kitchen from the rest of the platform.

Yet Ta'a was not off balance for long. She was too well trained for that and quickly regained control of her expression, although not her eyes. Despite that, Padme let the woman speak first. It was only proper after all, as she was serving as host for the evening.

"I had anticipated this would be a discussion between three people, not four," she said, staring hard at Padme. "Or did I somehow misinterpret that this was supposed to be a discussion about both proposed private and political assignments?"

"Honestly, she's lucky it isn't happening between five people," Harry remarked to Aayla, adding a mental snort. Zule had just as much of a right to be here during the personal side of this discussion as Padme did, but she had opted out, figuring it would just make things more bizarre, and having no desire to let anyone know about their personal relationship.

"Frankly, I think the fewer people who know about our relationship, the better in many ways, not least of which being the Jedi Order. Admittedly, I did pass all of the tests necessary to form relationships, but a four-way relationship is a bit beyond what I think the Jedi Council would approve of. Let them know about me and Padme, maybe, but that is the extent of things. What we have should be kept private and personal, which makes it all the more important," Zule had said at the time.

Even as Harry was thinking about Zule, Padme was taking charge of the conversation. "You did not, although perhaps you did not know all the players involved."

Padme let that settle for a second before going on in perfect Hapan. That language wasn't quite the same as common, as it had numerous words and a strange usage of consonants, the local dialect having drifted away from the rest of the galaxy over time, when the Cluster had been basically isolated. She had learned it over the past week in preparation for this meeting and knew that her two companions could easily translate it using Force powers. "I am Padme Amidala, Senator of the Chommell sector. Although I daresay you already knew that."

"...If you are here to act as a neutral third-party, I could perhaps understand, but I would not accept," Ta'a said slowly, staring hard at Padme, then to either side at the two known elements here as they all sat down. "Unless there is some kind of treaty between the GDL and

the Republic that I am not aware of, which means you must have a seat at the table when agreements are reached with a third polity? If not, then a neutral observer is very much not necessary.”

“Nor wanted,” she added, before her gaze flicked over to Harry. “There is a personal connection that must be discussed here, and one I will not have just anyone hearing.”

“There is no treaty like that, although that is probably more oversight than anything else from the Senate’s perspective. They tend to forget that your Cluster is in fact a foreign polity within the sphere of Republic space, and the very idea that the GDL would reach out to the Hutts, the only other foreign polity that the Republic even nominally acknowledges as such, is laughable,” Padme languidly waved a hand as the three of them reached the table, having deliberately walked very slowly towards it, and now sat down without waiting for any motion to do so from the hostess.

That was deliberate, as were Padme’s next words. “As for my being here, my being here is mostly personal as well. And in terms of the personal and political connections you wish to make, I suppose that when you get right down to it, one must ask, what is more important to you, your people or your libido?”

“I have pleasure slaves to see to my libido,” the princess scoffed, not noticing the looks that crossed Aayla’s and Harry’s expressions at that. Indeed, to all three of her listeners, the term ‘slaves’ and ‘pleasure’ should never go together. “But if we are speaking without any social graces to cover the truth, the needs of my lineage are not nearly so easily assuaged. For that, I require a male of sufficient vigor, intelligence, and power. Count Potter has all of those.”

Ta’a did not waffle about things, now that she was aware that Padme at least knew about how Ta’a wanted to cement the agreement between the GDL and the Cluster.

“Yet Harry is in a well-established and well-known relationship with me,” Aayla said, shaking her head. “I admit that Harry and I might have seemed open to that concept before, but that was before we talked with our own third partner, and—”

She gestured, and Padme smiled as Harry took her hand as they sat down, squeezing briefly before looking over the princess. “To say I shot it down is a gross understatement. Further, I do not believe that Harry or Aayla were entirely aware of your culture, or all of your reasons beyond wishing to forge a personal attachment with him, which you just elucidated when you spoke of your lineage.”

“...Attachment is not the term that I would use, but if you wish to, I will not argue,” Ta’a said, slowly nodding, going over in her head what she knew about Padme, coming up with an image that she could not help but respect, even if she disliked what she was hearing. This

changed things, and she was not happy with those changes. *But I am a princess*, Ta'a reminded herself. *I'm not a love-struck fool interested in my boyhood hero, even if his rescuing us was easily the highlight of my younger years.* "And yet, the fact that you are indeed involved with Harry and Aayla, given their well-known, if odd Force connection, implies that there is, in fact, room for more beyond that. Room for simple physical affection, perhaps? Or are you saying that there needs to be an emotional quotient to it as well?"

"We are," Harry said, speaking up for the first time as he looked over at Padme, the look in those emerald eyes that Padme always loved looking into her causing her heart to thump most inappropriately. "The two of us and Padme were basically dancing around one another for years, and then, when we met in person again, well, things escalated quickly."

Admittedly, that escalation happened over time, given how short a time we had together in person before hostilities began, but our time on the Bane's certainly continued things most satisfactorily, Padme thought to herself, remembering the foursome they'd had the night before the Tyrant's Bane arrived in the Taanab System. It'd been the culmination of several days of dates at flirtations, and physical activities and had been glorious in her opinion. *Although a part of me is actually looking forward to being the center of Harry's attention once Zule and Aayla leave. I will miss them both terribly, but Aayla shouldn't have bragged about the number of times Harry had literally left her gasping, practically mindless mess if she didn't want Zule and me to become a little jealous of their one-on-one time.*

Padme kept all of those thoughts off her face with ease, although Aayla could certainly sense the salacious tone Padme's emotions had taken on. In response, she lifted a leg to slide up and down Padme's leg for a moment.

For his part, while subliminally aware of such through Aayla's empathic abilities, Harry ignored it for now, staring across the table at Padme. "Furthermore, as Padme said, I was not entirely aware of the depth of the specific connection you wanted. You want a child with Force powers."

"Indeed. I will not prevaricate or sugarcoat things, I believe that is the term?" Ta'a motioned, and a small hologram lit up in the center of the table, showing the menu for the evening. She let the three of them peruse things, having already chosen what she would be eating tonight, before continuing. "My mother is entirely ambivalent about the idea of continuing our relationship with the GDL. The starfighter designs and the few Golan space stations you have sold us at cost are a magnificent carrot; however, they are for the Cluster as a whole, not for the royal family. There must be something to gain for the royal family, or else I will face intense internal pressure. But if I get that, and our fleets can show our power and

strength to the rest of the galaxy, earning a claim and fame at home, then there might be... room for dynastic changes to be made.”

Padme got that while sailing over Harry and Aayla’s heads for the moment. As much work on the political front as they had done up to war breaking out and even after, they’d only very rarely dealt with monarchies that were truly dynastic in nature, wherein power passed down from father or mother to son or daughter. That kind of government wasn’t exactly normal throughout the Republic, although admittedly, there were, in point of fact, **lots** of planets that did follow that style of passing on power, but coated such in the veil of democracy or other kinds of government, with autocracy and oligarchy being the choice for many, such as on Kuat.

Harry quickly chose the meal for himself and Aayla, knowing precisely what she would like faster than she would, something that came from the fact that he was still, despite Zule having a marked interest in cooking, the chief cook for their little quadrangle. With that, he raised a finger in question. “Point of clarification, please. Are you saying that if I do not agree to a personal assignation with you, then there will be **no** agreement between the GDL and the Cluster? Because I will have to shoot that down now. Once Padme made me aware of what precisely you wanted, I knew that I could **not** go through with it.”

He emphasized the negative there before shaking his head. “It has nothing to do with you. You’re gorgeous, and perhaps if you and I had had the same kind of connection, the same kind of interactions as Aayla and I have had with Padme for years, there could have been some measure of affection growing within us towards you. But there isn’t. Beyond even that, any child I have **will** have a father in his or her life.”

Ta’a at first found herself blushing at Harry’s words. They were so blunt and so matter-of-fact that it took her aback. She was used to the flowery, poetic words of pleasure concubines, of dignitaries and officials. Hearing such bluntness was immensely refreshing as well as far more real, coupled with the whole bit about needing to build an emotional connection. Something that Ta’a understood on an intellectual level but really didn’t have any experience with. *Although perhaps it would’ve been nice to have someone I could confide in, someone I could have that connection with.*

Yet the rest of Harry’s words caused the princess to set such thoughts aside. “Among my culture, such a thing wouldn’t happen at all,” Ta’a admitted candidly. “Oh, normal families in the Cluster might work like that, although even there, the matriarch is always the head of the family. But with the royal house, no. Absolutely not. The father might be involved a little bit in the younger years of a son, but far less the daughter. She would become the Princess Apparent, third in line to the throne.”

“Third in line? You don’t have any other siblings then? I thought I had read several reports that you did, although admittedly, Republic intelligence has very little information about the Cluster as a whole.” Padme said.

Aayla smiled at Harry’s choice of food for her, the man having discovered one of the spicier pasta dishes on hand faster than she had, something the twi’lek was already looking forward to trying. When cooking, Harry’s tendency was to go for savory and flavorful, and since that was Zule and Padme’s preferences as well, she hadn’t actually had a truly spicy meal in a while. Even as she sent a thank you over there link though, she was adding to Padme’s words aloud.

“The League has very little in the way of spies or anything else in the Hapes Cluster either, although we have far more detailed information about your military thanks to what little in the way of communication we’ve had so far with them. And might I say that your battle dragons are a magnificent technological achievement, given some of the weaknesses of your technological base? I spent most of this morning going over the reports of how they’ve done in those limited engagements your military has been allowed to take part in, and when matched with some of our own tactics and ship designs, they’ve proven amazing.”

“Thank you, although in that vein, I will admit that our Nova-class cruisers have not done nearly as well. And the less said about how slowly our starfighter production centers are moving to switch over to your Arrows, the better,” Ta’a said, before looking over at Padme. “As to your point, yes. Any child of mine would become the third in line for the throne. I am the only survivor among more than a dozen half-sisters.”

At last, Harry and Aayla got the implications of that, and both of them winced. “Very bloody palace politics, I take it?” Harry said, shaking his head. “That you survived such, and are not a, well, a raving psychopath says much about your character.”

Ta’a let loose a laugh, shaking her head. “Well, that was bluntly spoken! That seems to be your normal mode. I find myself tickled by it. But yes, I do not believe I am a psychopath, as you would put it. And yes, palace politics on Hapes is very bloody. Secondhand, admittedly, as only a few of my half-sisters ever attempted to do their own dirty work in order to secure their position, but even so. I admittedly did not have to do much, and always knew that being away from the palace was safer. Even so, I did need to take action a few times.”

She slowly shook her head, her face darkening. “It was not pleasant, but it was necessary. My eldest half-sister, the firstborn of us, was very much a psychopath as you would term it. Another, well, if you have seen anything in me to make you think I might be misandrist, you would think she was a raving lunatic, with her ideas of doing away with men forever.”

"I understand the type of upbringing you have had, princess, but you must understand that that is not normal, nor superior in any way to other societies within the Republic," Padme said, getting the conversation back on topic before Harry or Aayla could start to feel sorry for Ta'a. She didn't think that that was what Ta'a was shooting for, rather understanding, but understanding could only go so far. "As Harry has said, he is in no way interested in fathering a child and then not being able to take part in that child's upbringing. And I will not allow any kind of assignation regardless."

"Not allow? Fascinating. So you have such control over things, do you?" Ta'a said, her voice turning cold for a moment as she glared right back at Padme. "You, a senator of a foreign power? Does that not constitute a conflict of interest? Going both ways in point of fact. Your friendship is well-known, I suppose, but if the depths of it came about..."

"Low blow, and something you wouldn't pursue in any event," Padme snorted, while Harry and Aayla looked on, letting her take the lead as they had planned. "First, I doubt that you have enough connections outside the Cluster to get such a story out there. Second, my own popularity of the moment is at a frankly worryingly high level. And third, unless the Hapes Cluster is actually going to become a part of the GDL rather than allied with it, you would be in much the same position. Although I at least am not looking to get pregnant anytime soon."

The quartet had actually talked about that at one point. But the quartet had decided that until the Sith were dealt with, any kind of talk about children was grossly premature. Following that conversation, both Zule and Padme had been given the same shot that Aayla routinely took in order to stop any issues in that direction.

The Royal and the former Royal continued to go back and forth for a few moments until Harry interjected. "You seem to have lost the premise of what I said in your eagerness to argue with Padme, Ta'a."

The use of her first name brought Ta'a up sharply. That was something that not even her most favored advisors would do, and it was the first time any of them had used it.

Harry continued on into the silence, slashing a hand through the air in front of him. "I say again. I will not be a party to creating a child and then have no say in what happens to him or her. And I will not sleep with someone that I have no emotional connection to."

He took Padme and Aayla's hands in his own, squeezing them briefly. "It took Aayla and me years to form a connection with Padme, to go from acquaintances to friends and then to lovers. There is no such thing between you and me, Ta'a. Thus, there will be no carnal interaction between us. Nor will I even allow my blood or semen to be used similarly."

"We apologize for giving you any signal that we would be all right with that," Aayla jumped in, shaking her head. "But that is a line neither of us is willing to cross."

Despite being the Heir Apparent, Ta'a Chume had almost as much political acumen and ability to read people as Padme did. Moreover, both Harry and Aayla, this close to the young woman, could tell she did indeed have some small ability with the Force. Thus, Ta'a could easily tell that they were being very sincere and very firm, and there would be no arguing on this point.

For just a moment, Padme detected something else in the Princess, not anger or frustration, but honest sadness or regret. Yet it was gone before Aayla could do more than recognize it. A second later, she answered Harry and Aayla's firmness with her own cold tone, her gaze sweeping across the trio across from her. "Then the agreement between the GDL and the Hapes Cluster is null and void," she said coldly. "We will be keeping the designs of the Arrow, and the Vultures and return to our own borders, closing them off to all comers. If I do not have something personal invested in this, then I will simply follow my mother's demands. I need something to solidify my position, and if I cannot get something personal, it will need to be something **truly** major for the entire Cluster in order for me to do so."

"Has your mother actually started to move against you in fear of how strong your position is?" Padme asked, her own tone cool and collected, as if she wasn't talking about a mother and daughter being knives drawn with one another.

"My personal taste tester has discovered at least three attempts to poison me in the last year. I might be her only daughter, but my mother is still remarkably hale and hearty. She has more than enough time to create another daughter to replace me, and she never approved of how I went about surviving the internecine wars with my half-sisters by simply not being around. Apparently, she does not believe I am aggressive enough," Ta'a answered equally calmly.

Her gaze flicked over to Harry and back again. "But if I produce an heir myself, then a good deal of her backing will start to disappear. While she is hale of body, she has bouts of cruelty and insanity alike, and if the line is secure, many of her supporters will look to find a more stable ruler."

"And you say that whatever agreement you reach with the GDL must be far richer than it already is?" Aayla said, more to steer the conversation in that direction than the need to clarify things.

When Ta'a nodded, Aayla leaned forward, before pausing as the waiter came out of the kitchen, moving silently towards the table. All of them paused then, waiting as the food was laid out, wineglasses refilled, the bottle placed, and the servant once more back in the kitchen,

before continuing. Aayla took a bite, then spoke up again, smiling at the amount of spicy heat within the pasta. "Tell me, did you follow any of the decisions made by the Republic after the assault on Thyferra?"

Looking up from her own food, Ta'a scowled. "No. I've seen some of the news reports, and I know about Padme's activities and how she broke the power of the companies there. Beyond that, I have not followed it at all. Why?"

"Well, how important would it be for your position to be the princess to bring in bacta? More importantly, create bacta production in the Hapes Cluster?" Aayla said, not looking up but rather back down at her food for a moment, deliberately so that it would seem as if she couldn't see Ta'a's face at that moment.

For just a second, Ta'a's self-control slipped.

On a personal level, this might have gone about as poorly as it could ever have gone, but Ta'a Chume was a princess. She could still look beyond her personal frustrations and anger to the bottom line, and what Aayla had just said was, well, it was beyond intriguing. Beyond any other kind of technological advancement or exchange that she could get from the Galactic Defense League.

Realizing her face was showing far too much shock, Ta'a hastily looked back at her own meal, which, looking at it, Harry would term a kind of strangely shaped egg roll even if the smell wafting from it didn't seem to match. After a few bites, she asked for clarification, and Padme and Aayla explained briefly about the Vratix, how they went about creating bacta and how, after the assault on Thyferra, the various nests had decided they needed to expand beyond their home planet.

"Of course, finding such planets, and not only finding them, but colonizing them, defending them and so forth, are major undertakings. I know that the Senate has determined to make certain that the defenses are in place before anything else. But in your case, the Cluster itself is so well defended that you wouldn't need to worry about that. I'm not going to be so foolish as to state that you could simply start creating bacta right away, but you probably would be able to beat out the Republic or even the League in becoming the second producer of bacta in the galaxy."

Ta'a waved that off, knowing that was simply more enticement as she thought about what had been said, while Harry and Aayla waited, and Padme simply enjoyed her meal. While the vratix were Republic citizens, they had already said they wished to find new worlds within both the Republic and the GDL, so Aayla and Harry making a deal like this was within their rights... even if it was certain to make waves. *More waves, rather, given what Eirtae reported.*

While Padme's thoughts had shifted elsewhere, Harry and Aayla kept their thoughts on the young woman at the table. Well, the one whom they weren't involved with, anyway.

The idea of helping the vratrix set up in the Hapes Cluster was something of a long-term plan that Aayla had come up with, which Harry likened to the story of the Golden starship. It was pretty to look at, but high maintenance, expensive to keep and defend, let alone actually run. It would take the Hapes Cluster tremendous resources to set up a colony, refineries, distribution and so forth, even if they didn't have to worry about defense.

Those resources weren't the same kind of resources that would be needed in the war, for the most part, and thus they would be able to meet any obligation they made with the GDL. But their internal logistics wouldn't be hampered for a time. The payoff would be tremendous down the line, and Aayla and Padme and Harry all knew that to be the princess who brought bacta production to the Hapes Cluster would give Ta'a immense political and social power. Enough, perhaps, to slowly remove her mother from power.

But in the long term? Well, that would be the tricky aspect, and, honestly, what had sold Harry on it. Once he had delved into the social structure of the Hapes Consortium, Harry had not liked what he saw. The Vratix were not a race that the Hapes Cluster had ever dealt with before. They had no similar bug-like aliens among their constituents, and in point of fact, very few aliens in general. Bringing a whole hive in would cause friction, especially when those vratrix insisted on being in charge of their new planet's orbital infrastructure, defense and so forth as part of the deal. Eventually, Aayla and Harry both hoped that such a hive would become strong enough to create a kind of loyal opposition within the cluster, something that could act as a counterweight to the overall power of the royal family.

It was a long-term gamble to be sure, and it would obviously make the Hapes Cluster even more independent than it already was. But really, that didn't much matter to Harry or the League as a whole. At the moment, the fleets the Hapans could call on mattered far more than that, and if it got them on board, Harry was willing to go along with things. *After all, they won't be the only source for bacta that will be behind unbreakable defenses as soon as we can take some of the ingredients back into Ruusan and start the ball rolling there. It'll be slow and we'll need to be careful, but the vratrix won't object, I don't think.*

Yet even as Ta'a went through the positives, not having enough knowledge about the vratrix or the logistical aspect to see the long-term trap, she still looked annoyed, glaring up occasionally at Harry, then back down at her food as she thought about things. Aayla once again felt that brief spike of sadness and anger and realized with a start that the princess hadn't been altogether upfront about the reasoning why she was interested in Harry. She truly did have some kind of semi-crush on him from the time he had saved her when they were younger.

That was childish to be sure, but still powerful for all that. Aayla relayed all this to Harry, adding, "It almost reminds me of Anakin's infatuation with Padme, although perhaps not nearly as blind."

Harry mentally nodded at that, then spoke up again. "And, if you are so set on adding someone with Force powers into the lineage of your dynasty, Ta'a, perhaps the way forward would be for your mother to appoint you as her ambassador to the wider galaxy? And for you to insist on working primarily with Jedi. There are many young, male Jedi out there, and physical relationships are not outlawed within the Order. Simply personal attachments. Thus, a more normal Jedi would serve you far better than I can."

"In fact, I could name a couple offhand and recommend them to the order for you," Padme added, jumping in quickly, setting aside her thoughts about who might be behind the low-key but apparently ever-present whisper war against the League.

Elsewhere, many a young Jedi who had interacted with the Senate over the years, including Anakin and Obi-Wan, shivered, while Ta'a smiled briefly. That seemed to do it, and she slowly nodded. "In that case, so long as that door is open to me in the future, to strengthen my dynasty, I think that we can come to some measure of agreement."

The meal passed quite pleasantly after that, with the princess burying whatever regrets she had about not convincing Harry to sleep with her to the wayside as they got down to the nuts and bolts of things. Datareaders appeared as if by magic at a signal from Ta'a and, eventually, with Harry and Aayla taking the lead, and Padme giving her opinion on wording and so forth, as, after all, the vratrix were all Republic citizens, they eventually hammered out a true agreement, complete with specific wording and everything else needed.

Harry, since he was the nominal leader of the GDL, could actually ratify his segment of the agreement now, while Ta'a had plenipotentiary powers to do the same. Padme didn't, something that Ta'a ribbed her on several times, but it was good-natured fun. Given everything else she had learned about Padme prior to this meeting, Ta'a had already been in a position to respect her. Now, she actually had come to admire the woman for her steel, and, perhaps, for having something that Ta'a herself would never know.

However, as the meal ended, Harry added even more incentive. As the meal was cleared away, and they all prepared to leave, he pulled out a small box he had been holding in his lap throughout the meal. Before this, Ta'a had simply thought it was some kind of security device, which had not proven necessary with the Faraday cage and everything else. But now, she watched as he slowly pushed it across the table towards her. "And what is this? If it is some kind of personal gift, I must admit you are now giving me very mixed signals," the princess joked lightly.

"It is a gift and an incredibly useful one," Harry said with a small smile of his own. "I believe you know that the leader of the Confederacy is a Force user, and that other Force users are serving him. What you might not know is that we think that this entire war was instigated by the Sith. I don't have to explain them, do I?"

"Only if you want to insult both my intelligence and historical education," Ta'a drawled, still looking down at the box.

"Well, we believe that the Sith Lord, the one truly in charge of all of their movements, is hiding somewhere still. We don't know where, although we have essentially started to narrow it down to somewhere within the Republic's bureaucracy. The Senate itself has been cleared several times by different Jedi Masters up to and including Master Yoda, but a bureaucrat somewhere in the sprawling governmental structure would be far more difficult to discover. Regardless, such Dark Side users can use the Force to manipulate the minds of individuals."

Ta'a scowled, her eyes narrowing. "Far more than simply getting them to agree to something momentarily or forget something equally momentarily, I take it? Although that would be devastating enough if they chose the proper moment."

"Indeed. Harry and Aayla were worried that I might come into contact with someone willing to use the Force to manipulate me, and they gave me this," Padme said, pulling her necklace out of her dress's décolletage for a moment. It looked crude to Ta'a's eyes, but gleamed with an inner light, something she had rarely seen before. "This protects my mind from incursion, either by blocking the attempt entirely, or by fizzling out and thus telling me that something is going on."

Ta'a slowly nodded, opening the box to find a bracelet. Some thought had gone into the design, with bands of gold and even a bit of platinum worked in such a way as to look as if two tree tops were pressing into one another. In the center was a simple granite stone worn smooth, marked with a series of runes and glowing with Force power.

"I thank you for this, Harry. Although it makes me even more annoyed that you are so against the idea of my joining you. Yet at the same time, perhaps it is for the best. I can clearly see that feelings might truly develop there, and that would be most difficult to deal with given everything else," She murmured as she pulled it out of the box and placed the bracelet on her wrist.

"It's simply insurance, your highness. But better to have it than not," Padme said repressively, causing the Hapan woman to send her a semi-mocking sneer, which caused all three to laugh. They might not have ended the night as friends, but Harry and Aayla both would cheerfully say that the night had ended about as well as they had hoped it could.

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The agreement between the League, the Hapes Consortium and the vratix needed to be ratified by the Senate. The vratix were Republic citizens, and any kind of mass migration from the Republic to a separate polity needed to go through the Committee of Extrasolar Body Agreements. This committee was basically made to deal with the Hapes Cluster and the Hutts in centuries past, along with a few other races who, when they had initially joined the Republic, had already had a star-spanning governmental system, like the Mon Calamari. Few of those remained, having been fully integrated into the Republic.

Dealing with the Hutts was never fun, and the Hapes Consortium, thanks entirely to the fact there were only two known, and well-defended entrances into the Hapes Cluster due to its protective nebula, had little dealings with the rest of the galaxy. Even if the cluster's territory was entirely encased within the Republic, something the Cluster's various business people and ambassadors didn't like acknowledging, making them prickly as well as insular. A very un-fun combination for any diplomat. Hence the Committee of Extrasolar Body Agreements was not exactly a very important, or well-thought of committee. It was a place for those Senators who annoyed their fellows, or were lazy by nature and thus unimportant.

Because of this, the full implications of the agreement didn't really register with those on the committee itself. One of whom was a Peace Party member, and who took the task of pushing through the acceptance of the agreement when Padme sent it to him as a favor for the Iron Lady. The committee okayed the agreement, then had to actually address the Senate as whole to deal with the implications of it, something that none of them had ever had to do before.

Despite the stuttering, the backtracks and gulping of the men doing so, the reception within the Senate to the agreement with the Consortium to allow a vratix colony within their territory was largely positive. No one wanted Thyferra to remain the sole source of bacta, and while several Senators, like the Senator for Ryloth, wanted to look into alternate medical technology, there really wasn't one available that could match the sheer power and ability of bacta. Most of the Senate also knew that defensively, a colony in the Hapes Cluster would be impossible to beat.

Even the Centrists, who had been somewhat defanged in terms of how open they could voice their disdain of the GDL after the battle in the Polith System, could find little to fault. Although many demanded that new laws and ordinances be put in place to both make certain that the Consortium didn't try to hoard bacta in the future, and that the Consortium's government clearly understood that the vratix were Republic citizens, and were to be given the same rights as all such.

Of course, that covered a wide range, to say the least. And was highly ironic considering many in the Senate had been cheerfully willing to look the other way when it came to the rights of the vratrix before this when the various Thyferran corporations had made it seem they were non-sentient. Still, Padme had already made this clear to Ta'a Chume, and the princess would be coming to Coruscant to discuss things.

For his part, to his consternation Sidious found that he hadn't learned anything about this move. He had barely known that a three-ship group of Hapan military vessels were in the Taanab system, let alone anything else. The princess's retinue and security team had done a very good job of keeping her presence hidden despite the nature of their transportation.

Thus, even if he had wanted to, he hadn't really built up any opposition to it, and when he thought about it, it was a shrewd move by everyone involved. *And will take enough time to truly start the ball rolling that I will be able to take advantage of things, at least on the intelligence-gathering level. Even if at base this is a move that will strengthen the Galactic Defense League, I can allow it... especially since at present I don't have enough power in my office to stop it even if I could.*

Sidious asked some questions in his guise as Chancellor and was pleased with the fact that the young princess would almost certainly be named the Ambassador to both the GDL and the Republic soon after returning to speak with her mother about the agreement they had made. Thus, she would be coming to Coruscant to speak about the agreement and organize the transportation of a vratrix hive.

Which would put her here, in the center of Sidious's web of power. *And she will not be the first young woman who is drawn to power, he mused. It would also not be the first time I have used seduction in order to manipulate such. Perhaps I can get some information from this Chume girl that I would not be able to about the GDL and Harry Potter in particular. Even if I can't get anything personal, I can*

Setting that to one side, the chancellor leaned back and allowed the daily business of the Senate to wash over him for a few moments, knowing what signals to look for when he would need to be aware of things once more. He was more concerned about certain reports about movement on the Jedi side of things. Four Jedi had been recalled and assigned to a mission on Coruscant itself without the Jedi Order sharing anything about it with his office or the Republic High Command.

Looking over what was publicly available about the quartet, Sidious realized that the local knowledge that they all could bring together was concerning. The Dark Side was warning him about them, and what precisely their mission could be, if in a far less descriptive manner

than Sidious had become used to before the Veil was destroyed. Something he still ranted and raged at every night.

I'm getting the distinct impression that Yoda has discovered more after the Veil was shattered than I am comfortable with. He certainly hasn't discovered my own presence, but was he able to get enough of an impression from the Force to be aware that the hidden Sith Lord the Jedi have been searching for is here on Coruscant? That is dangerous enough at this stage. I had feared such would occur to those Jedi buffoons in time, but the war isn't even a year old yet, and I have barely begun to consolidate power, damn it all!

It took Sidious a moment to calm down from his the fury that thought evoked in him, a task that was becoming harder and harder since the destruction of the Veil. That blow, more than any other, had put the Great Plan in doubt, and Sidious had found that for all his ability to roll with the punches, there were some even he could not weather without repercussions.

Finally pushing aside his anger and hatred, Sidious was now wondering if he should countermand some of the orders he had recently sent out to Wayland and Cronal's group, perhaps bring them to Coruscant now rather than later. But he decided against it. Setting them on the Consulars scattered throughout the Core and Inner Rim was too important, and frankly, if worse came to worse, he already had an escape route planned out, even if they did not arrive on Coruscant in time to take part in his preferred plan. *It will not be pleasant, but it will perhaps be even better in terms of a scorched earth campaign, which I will need to use if I am forced to flee. No, I will stay the course for now, and look for ways to kill or at least slow down whatever investigation these four Jedi are on.*

Sidious's next thoughts were almost rueful, even when tinged with the fury he was currently feeling. Even though the Great Plan has been forced to change in ways I could never predict, becoming far more difficult to pull off one thing has not changed. *I need to remain here, in order to become the Emperor I am destined to be. If I have to flee, I would need to take my throne through fire and sword rather than law, and every step will become all the harder. For all that causing some fire and blood sound quite cathartic right now. But as long as my position is secure, my being a Sith not yet known, the Great Plan is still salvageable in its current form.*

OOOOOOO

In point of fact, now that the Veil was gone, there were some things that Sidious was not at all aware of. He was not aware of other events that had occurred on Taanab which would have a massive impact on the nature of the war against the Confederacy. He was not aware that Dominus had begun to make real, concrete plans to usurp his position, although he was aware Dominus had absorbed a significant chunk of the Dark Side powers held in the Veil.

One issue, one problem more than any other, had slipped through his net of agents, provocateurs, criminals and corrupt officials. A certain pair of Jedi Shadows, who his agents had tried their hardest to kill, had survived. Indeed, they had even reached out for help without his agents or Sidious becoming aware of it at all. And now, his lack of knowledge on that front was about to bite his long-term plans and infrastructure on the ass with all the power of a rampaging rancor.

Astonishingly, once the exact coordinates of the S-thread Booster hidden in the Empress Teta system were discovered (after all, space was quite vast, and if something was shut down and cold, even hiding in a single solar system was easy unless the seekers had the force), overriding the controls on the nearly city-sized device was relatively simple. This was down to an equally simple reason: the agreements that the League had made with the Slicer Clans. All Quinlan had to do was get close enough for his computers to connect to those of the booster, then, with his ship's connection to the Hypernet, the slicers did the rest in under an hour.

Thankfully, as much as Quinlan had feared there might be, there didn't seem to be any kind of Sith trick or anything similar on the control system of the hyperspace tunnel ring. When it came to computers and programming, it seemed even the Dark Side couldn't do much, something that Quinlan admitted came as a vast relief to him to Komari, who voiced her own agreement.

S-thread boosters were massive, semi-cylindrical constructs that worked by using a tremendous amount of energy to basically brute-force open a hyperspace tunnel between one point and another. Pairing two boosters together could create permanent tunnel, such as the Koros Trunk Line that connected the Empress Teta System to the Coruscant System, the two boosters using the power of hyperspace in some fashion to keep the tunnel open. Here, the tunnel wasn't permanent and had to be activated each time, a huge endeavor that would undoubtedly burn out the generators within, but such could be replaced. *And it is hoped that we will find a similar booster on the other side, or getting back to the Republic proper is going to be troublesome.*

The hyperspace tunnel opening ahead of him, Master Plo Koon sent a command to the external hyperdrive ring, powering forward. That was honestly the only thing he definitely disliked about the new Actis-class starfighters his entire wing had been given over the past few weeks. The Actis starfighter was smaller and more mobile even than the Aethersprites, having more powerful ion engines and greater maneuverability, which any Jedi pilot was happy for. The ability to react and move even faster was something that favored Force users. But needing to release yourself from the hyperspace jump ring meant that the starfighter couldn't go instantly into the attack.

The Actis design could be configured in various ways, either with proton torpedoes, although only having space for two such, or two ion cannons on top of two lasers. Their shielding was, unfortunately, the equivalent of a Vulture. That was quite low for even starfighters, but with the Force, the shielding didn't matter as much as it would for non-Force pilots.

Honestly, Plo was rather ambivalent about the fighter except for its maneuverability. Everything else was subpar in comparison to the Falcons that the Jedi assigned to the Tyrant's Bane purportedly used. He also knew that several new starfighter designs were being whispered about coming to the front lines soon from the GDL and was intrigued as to what those would be like. *That on top of the bombers they've already begun to build, like the two squadrons they clandestinely assigned to this mission alongside the troop transports. It is good to know the League is so willing to trust us Jedi and understand the importance of what we might find beyond this hyperspace tunnel.*

All around him, the wing of Jedi starfighters that he had been leading since hostilities with the Confederacy began did the same, their hyperspace rings flaring in the darkness of the Empress Teta's outer system. Ostensibly, they were supposed to be training with their new starfighters, and they had been moved out here for a series of war games, but that training had ended two days back,. Behind them, nearly thirty freighters also lit up their hyperdrives, but it would be the wing of Jedi starfighters that would be the lead on this assault.

Some of those ships were, admittedly, tougher than others, including three troop transports from the GDL and six other interesting ships that had been sent to Alya by Alderaan's queen barely a day ago, but beyond those six, the Aldrete Consortium's freighters were more of a mixed bag than anything Plo would have been pleased with leading into a real fight. *Although the two squadrons of bombers from the GDL will certainly prove their worth. And I note those ships don't need to use exterior hyperdrive rings.*

"All ships check in. Go for hyperjump on my signal," Plo said, feeling the response through the Force from his fellow Jedi before any of the other officers could give voice to it. With the Veil gone, using the Force and connecting through to one another had not been so easy in decades. Within seconds, every Jedi starfighter was in hyperspace, with the freighters following more slowly along with the bombers.

Plo had never used a hyperspace tunnel before this. They were projects on the same scale as a Hypercom Relay Station, and that made them ridiculously expensive even in the Inner Core. That this one had been built, even over at least ten years or more, spoke of both prior planning and a horrific level of reach that those behind it possessed.

Despite that, Plo had expected this jump to be the same as any other, but surprisingly, the lights always visible in hyperspace were different. This jump was not marked by the bright reds, whites, oranges and other colors that those species with an ability to see beyond the visible human spectrum could see that Plo was used to. Instead, there was a deep hint of blue and almost gray energy splashed with blotches of green that seemed almost like large raindrops rather than the streaks of the rest of the colors.

It was a very strange phenomenon, but it ended quickly, and Plo and the rest of the attacking flotilla came out into hyperspace on the other side without mishap.

Instantly, the sensors of every ship in the fleet, including Alya's yacht, the Libertine Princess, reached out, gathering data as they zoomed forward. Alya was currently acting as her ship's gunner, with Komari acting as pilot, and that ship had easily the best sensor equipment in the fleet.

The flotilla instantly learned they were remarkably deep into the gravity well of the star system. Evidently, whoever had emplaced the hyperspace tunnel had wanted travel to and from their destinations to be even faster than normal, as ahead of them a single, blue-green planet loomed almost in gun range already, crazy close in spacial terms.

Quickly, further information began to come through from their sensors, and Plo's mandibles twitched in surprise inside his mask. There were a lot of planetary bodies in this system, with the planet ahead of him having five moons, albeit small ones. Of far odder import was that this end of the hyperspace tunnel had been set up in a binary system, which meant it had two suns, a blue dwarf, and a blue star. *That must have made setting it up even harder and more time consuming than otherwise.*

The light of those stars gave the blue-green planet a bizarre gleam as Plo closed enough for his visual sensors to relay information to his computer screen, even if those colors were normally a sure sign of being an amazingly idyllic world for more than four-fifths of the species who made up the Republic. More immediately important were the sight of numerous defensive installations in orbit over the planet, seven of which were on the side of the planet facing the attackers, becoming visible as they sped closer.

Thankfully, as they zoomed closer, more data became apparent to their sensors, aided by the sensors of the rest of the fleet, even as the starfighters poured on the speed, leaving the capital ships behind. Only two of those stations were online, the shields starting to power up as the attack force came out of hyperspace, while the others didn't seem to have shielding or defenses.

Some read as having a few weapons systems, but most didn't have any internal power source yet. *I can only hope the other space stations not facing our way are in the same state of*

construction. And I doubt we will be lucky enough to find that those stations are the only defense. And... what is on that planet which is radiating such Dark Side energies?

For all that the planet looked almost untouched and pristine, as Plo and the other Jedi flew towards it, they all became aware of a feeling of intense Dark Side energy coming off of sections of it. This formed a miasma the power of which Plo had only felt before when he once traveled to Korriban to better understand the Sith. Worse, that had been a scar, a remnant in the Force left behind by millennia old evils. This was not quite as potent but was new and growing.

Plo could tell the corruption was coming from only two scattered points on the surface, including one that looked like a tower of some kind. Another was at the north pole of the planet, although a brief moment's meditation was enough to tell Plo that it was slowly beginning to dissipate. *Perhaps that place had something to do with the Veil, and whatever it was has ended? But to sense the other equally as well as whatever that had been even from this distance, I wonder... does that mean we have run the Sith Lord himself to ground? Have we gotten that lucky?*

Setting that thought aside as hopes of that nature would not aid him here, Plo took in everything else his sensors were telling him as he spoke into the pickup. "Lady Alya, if you could make certain your Hypercom jammers are online? Starfighters with me. We will split our attack into two. Master Niamu will command two of the squadrons. I will command the other two. Niamu, break and engage those vultures. My squadrons will plow the road. Bombers, with us."

Even droids needed time to activate and come online, and it seemed as if the flotilla's arrival had taken the defenders entirely by surprise. Even so, droids could react faster than most sentients could, and as the Jedi zoomed into orbit over the planet, wings upon wings of vulture fighters launched. Most of them came from the two finished installations, but some came from a few of the others.

These vulture fighters were the typical fair that the Trade Federation and Techno Union had used since well before the war, except they were painted black rather than the normal gray or dark green. The sheer number that had already flung themselves into space made the vultures dangerous, but Plo had seen and fought the like before.

It makes sense that most of the defenses here will be automated. While I know Quinlan told us that at least a large force of Kuati construction ships from House Knylenn and Andrim were diverted here, that isn't the same as having a large enough work force to work on all these projects at once. Someone made a mistake there, spreading their efforts out rather than concentrating it, he reflected.

That was the last long-term thought Plo allowed himself as the first of the vulture fighters reached the wing of Jedi-piloted Actis. Lasers blazed across space, with the Jedi's Force-assisted speed, reaction time and ability to read the near future proving more than a match for the computational powers of the droids.

This was the first large-scale battle Plo and his wing had fought in since the Veil had shattered, and the difference was impossible to miss. Every move and instinct felt better, flowed faster. Every time a pair or even a squadron had to coordinate through the Force it felt almost effortless. The vulture fighters couldn't keep up, with ever Jedi moving as both an individual and as a cog in a machine, shifting and moving too quickly for the vultures to keep up with, let alone analyze.

The vultures lost at least seventeen fighters in those first few seconds, then more, as they tried to draw all the Actis and bombers into a dogfight, with no avail. Five vulture fighters died under Plo's own fire as he and his fellow plose the road while Niamu's fighters broke off, slicing through the vulture swarm. Three more died under Plo's guns before he was through the first group of vultures.

While he and his wing mate engaged the next group, Behind his squadron, the two squadrons of bombers entered range with the first space station. Proton torpedoes locked on, firing into one of the defense stations. Its shield was already online but not fully charged. Keeping shields online at all times degraded the systems. Now, as more than thirty torpedoes hit, those same shields fell within seconds under the pummeling of protonic explosions. Three more proton torpedoes slammed into that one space station, and it blew up spectacularly.

However, concentrating their attack on that one space station had meant that the other had time to get its shields up to at least seventy-five percent, as well as bringing its guns online, which the first hadn't been able to. A few of the other space stations also had a some anti-air guns operational, and soon, as the Actis and bombers flew in closer, the dog fight became even more wild and dangerous.

Behind the Actis starfighters and League bombers, the Aldrete-owned freighters moved forward. A few of them were fitted with capital ship caliber weapons and now began to provide long-range fire targeting the shielded space station. The station fired at them in turn with its own, showing that it was indeed fully operational.

Moments later, having escorted the bombers' retreat out of the dog fight, Plo released his two squadrons to independent attack. The vultures, having continued to launch up to this point from the surviving station and a few others, needed to be paired down before the bombers could target the surviving station.

The vulture fighters, despite having at least ten or twelve for every Actis, had already been faced with a losing battle. Now, their numbers started to drop quickly, the Force and the Jedi's ability to easily reach gestalt with one another giving the Jedi an edge that could not be beat.

Feeling that through the ebb and flow of the battle, Plo allowed himself a faint smile under his mask. This proved once and for all the idea of keeping his wing as a single consolidated force. *Yet there are still a lot of them.*

As if answering Plo's concerns, more of the freighters moved forward, shifting into a wide wedge formation and coming down from above the plane of the original attack. These vessels were different than the others, a build of ships that Plo had been astonished to learn Alderaan had commissioned and sold specifically to the Aldrete corporation for their anti-pirate fleet.

These were Q-ships. An ancient idea, Q-ships were essentially combat vessels that were built to look entirely like freighters, even to the point of fooling in-depth scans. They were not like the Trade Federation Lucrehulks, but just regular-sized freighters, but underneath that surface, Q-ships were built for war, with as many weapons as could be crammed aboard and hidden behind fake panels that even now peeled back.

They could never be as good as true warships. There was only so much interior design you could do to make up for the lack of shielding and external hull armor, and weapons. Even so, a single Q-ship in a convoy could keep pirates or even squadrons of starfighters away.

The Alderaani version was built to be a jack-of-all-trades, able to engage other similarly sized capital ships with four concussion missile launchers set forward and seven quad laser cannons scattered around their hull.

The other freighters stayed back providing what long-range firepower, mainly pummeling this or that space station that didn't have shielding. Already three of those bases had gone silent. Now, the Q-ship wedge moved in, coming within range of the vultures and ranging themselves on the vultures and the one shielded space station in turn.

With them came a wing of starfighters, piloted by some of Alya's people. While used to their Those pilots were nowhere near the level of the Jedi, but they provided more close-in defense. Within minutes, the Q-ships locked on to the single remaining battle station with shielding, firing their capital-grade concussion missiles.

His lasers blasting a vulture into pieces, Plo flipped over one wing, dodging around another Vulture coming in from the side, then dove, letting his wingman take out a third vulture fighter that had tried to light up on his tail before another Jedi killed the one who had

attempted to take Plo from the side. Killing two more, he was, able to watch as several concussion missiles slammed home into the space station's shielding.

That shielding flickered in one particular area, and the Force guiding his hand before his mind could truly calculate what he was doing, Plo's two sole proton torpedoes flashed out, slamming into that same segment.

There, the sphere of blue energy began to fade, and two other Jedi followed suit. One of them, Knight Maokluth Brerk, a Devaronian woman, was so close, she was able to get in underneath the shielding. Her fire raked the battle station's side, ion cannons causing shorts and lasers blasting apart several installations and a shield nacelle. But she could not avoid being hit by an ion cannon that came online too suddenly for her reaction to allow him to jerk away.

Maokluth's starfighter went tumbling through space, but a large segment of the space station's shielding collapsed thanks to her ion cannon fire, and the Q-ships poured fire into that area. One of them blew up in turn as several vultures were able to get in behind it, but they all died seconds later to defensive fire from the Jedi starfighters and the normal pilots.

Plo shot three more vultures out of space as the space station continued to return fire. A second Q-ship came apart, but the space station followed the two Q-ships into oblivion a second later as something hit its power generator. A second later, it became clear that the demise of that space station had signaled a shift in the programming of the vulture fighters. Instead of continuing the dogfight, which was basically nibbling their numbers to death with incredible rapidity as they tried to protect the other orbital stations, the vulture fighters started to swirl around, launching themselves at the more distant freighters.

They paid for it, opening their flank up to the Q-ships and the Actis fighters took a toll, unwilling to just let the vultures go. But at least a reinforced wing still survived to get in close with the more vulnerable Aldrete freighters.

As they closed, the Libertine Princess opened fire along with the rest of the freighters. A larger version of the same yacht that Padme had been using when she first met Harry on Tatooine, the Libertine Princess was armed with only four quad cannons, but it was highly mobile for its size, and its scanners, communication, jamming and radar were top-notch military grade. The pilot pushed it close to another freighter, and Plo could tell that it was directing the web of defensive fire for a few moments, the two ships swirling around one another in a way that made it clear Komari had lost none of her flare for piloting. This drew in still more of the vultures, protecting the other ships for a few minutes.

That was enough, as Master Koon and the other Jedi were on the heels of the vultures along with the Aldrete starfighter pilots. The vultures might have had enough straight-ahead speed after gunning their engines to a suicidal degree, but now the Jedi came up behind the

vultures, killing several of them quickly. Despite that, thanks to their suicidal programming, the vultures ignored them, still attacking the freighters, and several actually rammed. The shielding of eight of the freighters that Alya had brought in went down, down, and they were then raked with fire. At least three were badly damaged before the last of the vultures were destroyed.

This ended the dangerous aspect of the battle in space. The freighters continued to fire at the various defensive installations, smashing them one after another as they slowly spread out around the planet's orbit, but that was it. Plo had a brief thought to maybe order them to stop doing so but knew that these space stations were probably beside the point in terms of what they were here to discover.

Already, his systems were warning him that the installation, the unfinished tower on the planet, was heavily defended by numerous anti-air guns, some of which were still coming online. There were already hundreds of others though that were fully powered, waiting for them to enter atmosphere. *No true ship-killing weapons, though, and those guns seem to lack the power to get up into space.*

Quad lasers were short ranged weapons in comparison to turbolasers or ion cannons, the energy holding the bolts coherent fading in space. While still the best weapons to use against fast-moving targets like starfighters, relying as they did on putting up a significant number of quad laser pulses, acting almost like ancient flak guns, in atmosphere, the problem was made even worse. *Better, this planet doesn't have a fully built and reinforced power grid.*

Swiftly, Plo scanned his wing, noting that a handful of his starfighters were reporting that their shields were down. "Night Pullo, your starfighter and eleven others whose IFF signatures I'm sending to you now are detailed with search and rescue. Please help our fellows up here." There had been a few escape pods launched from the destroyed freighters, but Plo could sense still other survivors out there floating in space. "The rest of you, on me. Master Vos, I would suggest that you keep the Q-ships and freighters back for a moment."

Quinlan's voice was grim as he replied from the bridge of one of those Q-Ships, the Nature's Gaze. "Negative. The readings we're getting from the ground show far too many anti-air defenses. The Q-ships will come into the atmosphere with you."

Plo sighed into his mask, but knew that arguing would be pointless. His own systems could tell the same thing. *Even with Jedi abilities, that number of anti-air guns would be dangerous. Worse, beyond the one strong point around the tower they are so spread out, we would need to come at them from over the horizon, an area of the planet we haven't yet scanned, to come at them from the side.*

Planetary-based anti-air guns could not depress all that much. Thus they could be attacked from the side if bombers or fighters could come in from their flanks.

But Plo felt building danger from the very idea of attempting that. *I suppose we should thank the Force that there is no sign of a planetary shield just yet. And if we get down there quickly enough, it won't matter if they are able to raise one.* "Roger that."

The Jedi starfighters spaced themselves out among the Q-ships, with many of them actually flying directly above the Q-ships with the two bomber squadrons as the larger freighters entered the atmosphere. From below came a hail of anti-air fire even as the stronger sensors of the Q-ships reached down, finding not just the anti-air guns, but the energy systems, the control lines feeding into them.

Those defenses were incredibly well laid out, but every defense had a weak point in the energy network that powered it, and in this case, those energy runs were not nearly as deeply buried as they needed to be. Two of the Q-ships pulled up and away, their shields flickering, then fading, but they were able to get back up into orbit out of range of the defensive fire before their shields failed.

Another couldn't. Its shielding failed too quickly, and a series of lucky shots into its engines caused the ship to explode.

Master Koon and five other Jedi were close enough to use that explosion, though. Even as they felt the crew of that ship die in the Force, they dove down, getting in underneath some of the defensive fire. Their reflexes and Force-assisted speed were enough for them to dodge the rest of the enemy fire sent their way, and then they were within their own range. Plo's lasers flicked out, smashing into one gun station, then along the ground, until it hit a coupling junction, silencing six other sites.

All around him, his five fellow Jedi did the same, causing a wide swath of the defensive fire to falter across dozens of miles of the battlefield.

Soon, the remaining Q-ships had dumped their concussion missiles, smashing down specific portions of the defensive or shattering portions of the energy grid, although several of them took heavy hits before they pulled back up and away. By that point, the Jedi starfighters were down into their own range across the board. Specific strikes against other energy couplings caused the guns to go silent in growing patches, leaving most of the guns intact.

After a moment's contemplation, Plo ordered their destruction as well. He did not want to find out that there was a secondary power system when the freighters carrying their ground troops came down. That would be disastrous, but the threat would explain the overall danger Plo could sense through the Force.

This proved to be wrong as the next defense wasn't in the form of a hidden secondary power network. Rather, hidden bases on the other side of the planet along the shoreline of a

massive ocean began to launch starfighters, showing the danger that Plo had felt before they descended into the atmosphere.

Hundreds of vultures zoomed up into the fire of the Jedi, but the Force had warned the Jedi ahead of time. At the same time, the bombers came down behind the vultures, who, thanks to being in an atmosphere, couldn't turn to engage them fast enough to save their bases. Several exploded under the torpedo fire of the bombers, and one Jedi was even able to get behind and into one of the bases, destroying it from within in what had come to be called the Skywalker Maneuver.

Even so, there were so many starfighters launching that even the Jedi were hard-pressed. This was made worse by the fact that the fight was happening in an atmosphere. Unlike other starfighter designs, such as the Nabooan N-1 or the Arrows of the GDL, neither vultures nor the actis were made to be aerodynamic. These droids and Jedi had to deal with things such as air friction resistance and drag, although the Force remained a tremendous skill multiplier. The wing of actis fighters lost four of their own around this time, while a energy shield sprang up around the central, Dark Side-oozing tower.

Meanwhile, one of the other space stations on the other side of the globe from where the attackers had hit the planet initially tried to come online. In fact, it tried to send a message out via Hypercom. However, powering up enough internal energy to send such a message was not a process that could be hidden. Indeed, that power quotient was probably why a space station was being used at all rather than the message being sent directly from the tower. The enemy could have decided to power either the shield and everything else, or the Hypercom, not both.

By the time it was fully online, the freighters had already moved towards it, and the Libertine's jammers blocked any outgoing message. That fight was quite fierce, and more than one of the normal freighters had to be pulled out of formation once more while the bombers returned to orbit, their magazines empty, and their secondary weapons not worth much. Yet eventually, even that space station died. Once they turned that space station to slag, the freighters turned their attention back to turning everything else in orbit into similar debris.

Even as he slewed his starfighter to one side, Plo Koon had to smile at that report coming in from Quinlan and Komari. Whatever the Sith had been doing here, regardless of any information they would be able to discover once they landed, the Jedi and their allies were determined to make certain that the investment that the Sith had made in this planet became a write-off.

It took some time, perhaps as long as an hour, before the last enemy starfighter died, although every Jedi starfighter and bomber had already used up all of their onboard proton

torpedoes. Even the Q-ships were running empty. And unfortunately, a shield had in fact come online soon after the Jedi starfighters began to destroy the energy runs; that shield had popped up around the half-built citadel, protecting it.

That was odd, as there was a budding city near the shoreline, complete with people moving around in large numbers. It would need to be investigated, but there was little to no feeling of the Dark Side there. No, the center of the Sith presence on this planet was the half-finished citadel under its shield and at least eighteen remaining anti-air guns.

With that in mind, Plo Koon pulled his Jedi back up into orbit, where the starfighters began to float for several moments, simply resting as he, Komari and Quinlan debated what to do next. Despite having been the pilot of her yacht in the battle, Alya didn't participate. The fake debutante knew her strengths, and outright military conquest of a planet was out of her purview.

"It's obvious we need to get boots on the ground, but where?" Quinlan began without preamble.

"That's obvious, as is our target. That spire is too grandiose to be anything but the real Sith headquarters on the planet," Komari said, shaking her head as she leaned back in the command chair of one of the Q-ships. She and Quinlan had been out of practice in terms of piloting starfighters and had decided to command the freighter portion of the attacking fleet. It had served them well, as with the Force, they'd been able to keep the losses to a minimum, although Komari knew that Alya would grieve the losses in ships and men her Consortium had lost.

"With those shields up, we'll need to land nearby and assault over land," Plo warned. "We've used up all our proton and concussion missiles. Any attempt to knock that shielding down will take too long, making us lose more ships, and even Jedi reflexes will fade over time. I think we need to pick a few combat teams of knights and masters to land, attack the installation over land with the objective of destroying the shield generator, after which--"

"With respect, Sirs," a new voice interjected, its tone stern and unyielding. "But I think that the first boots on the ground shouldn't be Jedi. Or at least, not entirely Jedi."

Colonel Trunn Grird was a Weequay from a Core World who had joined the GDL. A veteran of more than two decades of pirate-based conflict, he was the leader of the GDL forces that had been seconded to this mission. "You brought us along for this aspect of the fight, and we're trained and equipped for it. Your troops, as good as they are, don't have our training or equipment, and all of you have mentioned time and again that we're likely to go up against more automated defenses, which means your Force powers will be of limited utility in predicting ambushes and so forth."

"You do realize that we had said that the Jedi should lead the way because it will be most dangerous right after you land, correct? We Jedi would be able to keep our losses down," Plo argued.

"Maybe, maybe not. These Sith would certainly be as ready to fight Jedi as anyone else, right? They know how you all think, and they might have surprises laid out especially for Jedi attackers, rather than professional soldiers. Admittedly, most of the same traps will work on us, too, but I think we're ready for this. I'm not saying that we should be the only ones to land, just that we should land in force rather than with a small probing team of Jedi," the Colonel said calmly. "Speed and aggressive use of power to a point is necessary in attacks like this gentleman."

He paused then, asking, "Unless your Force powers can hide your landing from someone on the lookout for it?"

"No, that's not possible. My Force Cloak might hide a starfighter from a living enemy's attention, but not one who has the Force to call on himself. Worse..." Quinlan sighed and shook his head. "Given the miasma of Dark Side energies down there, we might be facing more than simple Dark Side users. We might face animals and beasts twisted by the Dark Side, and such predators would ignore a Force Cloak."

Plo Koon fell silent for a few seconds, thinking about Quinlan and Trunn's words. As a member of the Jedi Council and one of the most senior Jedi Masters who were part of this attack force, he was in overall command, and thus the final decision was his. He also had access to aspects of the Jedi Archives that said that, if anything, Quinlan might be understating things, if the minds behind the cloned Sith assassins were here.

I only hope we do not see too many of the ancient horrors the Sith created in the past. And the colonel is correct about his troops being trained for this, the Kel or Jedi Master thought.

The GDL's armed forces were a very strange conglomeration of different parts, but it was a conglomeration that had a lot of thought and planning put into every aspect of its methodology. Pragmatic self-defense and self-preservation were the terms used to describe the GDL spacefaring military, and they worked quite well to describe it. A large portion of the GDL's strategic and logistical doctrine was built on the preservation of their own people, the preservation of the lives of their crews and ships. Even their starfighters, although to a lesser extent, obviously, because there was only so much that could be done there, were rooted in those same principles. Even there, Plo Koon had heard some interesting rumors about new technologies coming out.

Similarly, while their land-based forces had not gotten nearly as much funding or attention, they had been built to serve the same premise when on the attack. There wasn't a lot

of those forces, admittedly. Republic Intelligence estimated that the entire GDL could perhaps call on the equivalent of four Army Groups, whereas the Republic had something like a hundred and eighty clone army groups. However, the quality of the GDL troops again could not be overstated. In terms of doctrine and equipment, they were closer to clone commandos than regular clone troopers. They were built for point assault and point defense, and assault onto a planetary surface like this was something they had been specifically trained and equipped for.

“Very well, Colonel, you will be in overall command of the initial landing. Quinlan, Komari, you will be joining him in the first wave. I will choose seven other Jedi to land with me to take part in the second wave, with the others coming after we have secured entrance into that citadel and the area around it. Colonel, I formally hand over control of this battlefield to you,” Plo Koon said formally, even recording his words for later. This was a joint operation between the Republic and the GDL, and such things needed to be stated for the record.

The Weequay Colonel nodded brusquely, and soon, the troop transports loaded with his men moved down into the atmosphere. Not very far, though. They were still well out of range of the enemy’s guns when Colonel Trunn chose the site of the initial landing and began their attack. From the bottom of the two landers, hundreds of small drones were released. Tiny, human-torso-sized things, they zoomed down.

Dozens of them, which were marked with silver lines, flew down to just over the small shield, taking losses from the guns within before they exploded, releasing electronic chaff. This blocked the defender’s sensors, causing their guns to be unable to lock on, while others marked in red continued down. These pounded the area chosen for the initial landing point, causing major kinetic impacts or releasing spores of thermal detonators.

As everyone had predicted, the defenders had time to dig in or prepare defenses of their own. In numerous places, the drone assault smashed that defense flat, exploding in among a series of interconnected trenches, scattered foxholes and even a bunker.

At the same time, other drones marked with tiny eyes followed their suicidal brethren down, taking real-time pictures and sending them up to their commanding officers as the attack went in. When enough of those defenses in the area targeted were smashed, one of the GDL troop transports dove down so fast that they almost looked to be in danger of crashing. Even though they didn’t, they landed hard, slamming into the ground and nearly burying themselves a few inches into it in places, before ramps on either side flashed down, and the troops raced out. Soon, four whole companies had disembarked, pushing outward, creating more space for the rest of their men to come down. With them came Komari and Quinlan, who had transferred over to this transport while Trunn had been planning on where to assault.

Droid troopers, the normal B-1 and the B-2 super battle droid variants, popped up in places, firing at the troopers as they spread out away from the transports. While other B-1s marched forward out from under the shield, hundreds strong. Those troopers were quick to go to ground, firing back. Soon, mortar rounds began launching while shoulder-mounted concussion missiles slammed home into enemy positions. At the same time as the heavy weapons teams began to work, one out of every squad of GDL infantrymen paused in place, launching even smaller drones from their backpacks. Those drones were linked directly to the helmets of the platoon lieutenant, company captain and the Colonel, giving everyone real-time data on whatever they were seeing.

The droids did not fall back, but had to be destroyed where they were. This didn't take long, but they held the attackers long enough for the main defenders to be released.

As the image of these new defenders charged towards their position, 'released' was the term that jumped to Trunn's mind. Because these new enemies were not any kind of sentient or even droids. No, these were monsters. Trunn didn't know what species they were, but the slathering jaws, the brutal claws, the howling, it all made them look almost like miniature rancors, despite being far spikier, with more fingers and red leather skin. And there were a lot of them.

Hissing, Quinlan and Komari, who had been standing near him, shook their heads. "Pull your troops back, Colonel. Those are Terentatek. They are Dark Side creatures, and their hide will be immune to most of your troops' fire."

Instead of panicking or looking confused, the Weequay took in the entire battlefield, noticing the thrust of these creatures and how much space was between them now and the energy shield. "Companies four and one, maintain position, but prepare to fall straight back to the transports. Companies two and three pull back, shift to the left and right, respectively. Let's see if we can catch them in the crossfire."

The choice of landing area had been well chosen, as there was very little in the way of natural cover between where the shield began around the structure and where the GDL troops had landed, while the rightmost flank had a large while the rightmost flank had a large, deep river marking it, making it unlikely the landing area could be flanked. It had made for fierce fighting at first, even after the area had been prepped by the drones, but now that the initial wave of droids back into that area was down, the foxholes, craters and trenches served the attackers just as well.

Trunn watched as his troops fell back, not bothering to fire at the attackers for a few seconds, then, as they came closer, fire came from elsewhere in the defensive perimeter from the companies who had shifted to either side. Mortar fire, to be specific, along with other

indirect fire in the form of guided rockets. He didn't have an infinite amount of any of those, but he figured that using them in the open like this would be better than using them inside the citadel.

Once inside, I have bouncing grenades after all, although I'll have to order my troops to watch how they use them. Trunn had seen what force users could do with any kind of solid-state projectile if they could concentrate and had no wish to be on the receiving end of having his own such turned on him.

For a moment, with his troops hunkered down and using small drones to aim their fire, they made for very small targets, and the Terentatek seemed to be confused by this kind of strategy. They charged through his fire, with only the mortar rounds doing any damage and even then, only when they directly impacted. That was... Not pleasant. Grunting, Trunn quickly ordered the evacuation of the companies at the front of his line facing the horde, pulling them straight back to the transports. He then was forced to pulled back company two when a group of Terentatek broke off from the rest to head in their direction. All across the front facing towards the energy shield the Terentatek charged over the ground towards the foxholes and trenches.

Despite the company commanders' best efforts, at least a few of those Terentatek closed to claw range, and once they did, the GDL troopers proved no match for them. Even the best kind of knife fighter couldn't fight an enemy on which vibro-knives bounced after all. Trunn watched, teeth clenched grimly as those four Terentatek barreled through company two in particular, slaughtering at least thirty men before the others could retreat, with only four of the monsters being injured, and only one dying without the League troopers being able to call in fire on top of themselves. Nine more died before the company commander called down fire, and a concussion missile slammed into his former position.

That was a little too close for comfort in the Colonel's opinion, but he wasn't about to gainsay the company commander. His troops then shifted back into the previously abandoned positions, killing one of the Terentatek that had somehow survived, and firing into the horde of monsters who had kept on advancing towards their retreating fellows.

When the companies in the center pulled back, Komari and Quinlan reached and passed their positions. Now, when the Terentatek caught sight of the two Jedi waiting for them in the trenches, they howled, their jaws open in a broad delight. While Terentatek would cheerfully slaughter anything and anyone they could get their hands on, they had been bred for one purpose beyond all others: To hunt down and kill Jedi and all others who used the untainted side of the Force.

Seeing more firepower coming in from the sides once more, Quinlan hopped out of the trench, his lightsaber flaring on. "We'll keep their attention pinned here, I think. Remember what we learned in the Jedi archives. These creatures will be resistant to lightsaber strikes except to the eyes, ears, mouth, and joints. Anywhere else, we will merely wound them."

"True." Komari waited a moment as the Terentatek came closer, firing at their feet for a second, using a disrupter rather than a regular blaster. The more heavily charged disruptor did some damage, causing several of the Terentatek to lose toes or chunks of their legs, but didn't do nearly enough to put them on the ground, simply slowing them. That was enough, though, and Komari tossed the now gas-less disrupter to one side as she leapt up over Quinlan's head, her own lightsaber powering on before she brought it down on the first of the Terentatek attempting to reach him.

That Terentatek twitched backward, raising an arm to block the blow, but she had diverted it just enough to hit it on the elbow, which didn't have as thick a hide on it, allowing the elbow to actually be used as an elbow should. Its arm flew, and she whirled around and away from the upcoming strike from its other arm, which opened the Terentatek to a thrust from Quinlan. His lightsaber's tip took it in the eye before he pulled back, lightsaber blocking a strike from one of the other Terentatek.

Like the thickest portions of their hide where chitin grew, their claws acted almost like Beskar armor, blocking his lightsaber blade entirely. Then Quinlan was pulling back, ducking under another strike as Komari landed behind him, her own lightsaber coming up to block another strike. The two twisted around, blocking several more, then Komari ducked as Quinlan willed a bolt of fire into being that crashed out into several of the Terentatek. That chakram of flame was as hot and as concentrated as he could make it before it slammed into two of the Terentatek even as the others ducked or dodged away.

Some of their armor still held against the heat of that blast of flame, but not their actual skin. That skin peeled away and burned and in a reaction no lightsaber blade would cause, one of them found itself actually on fire. The creature, which, for all its ferocity, was still a beast, dropped rolling and howling in panicked fear to put out the flame.

For several moments, the Terentatek tried to press in on the two Jedi as long-range fire and mortars crashed into them. One came too close, and Komari raised a Force Shield, protecting the pair for a second, then exploding the shield outwards in a technique that Komari had developed. Bits and pieces of raw Force energy lashed out like shrapnel, cutting into the Terentatek here and there, and one of their legs went out from under it. That disrupted another, allowing Komari and Quinlan to gang up on a third before more could reach them. However,

seeing a dozen more beasts coming their way on top of the four that could still fight around the duo, the two Jedi knew it was time to go.

“We should drop our grenades here, tying them to go off,” Komari said even as she dodged under a blow from one of the monsters.

Quinlan agreed, and the two of them dropped their grenades, tossing them all around the area they had been defending while dancing around the strikes of their foes in way that even most Jedi would have been hard-pressed to match, Force Shields flickering on and off to dens them in small bursts. They then raced away as fire rained down on the incoming Terentatek, this time in the form of more shoulder-launched concussion missiles. Reaching through the Force, they reached out to the grenades they had left behind and raised them into the air all around the Terentatek before punching the detonator buttons, a tricky thing, but possible at that relatively close range.

Still, the Terentatek proved remarkably durable, withstanding the sheer wave of fire and power that rolled over them. Some of these were bigger and tougher than the monsters in the first batch, and Komari realized with a start that they had been somehow changed even more than normal via Dark Side Alchemy.

Elsewhere across the front, some of the monsters had penetrated the defensive cordon around the area where the troop transport had touched down, allowing it and its fellow, which landed a moment before Komari and Quinlan began their battle, to bring their own guns to bear. Several of the Terentatek died out in the open to those guns, but at least twelve more troopers died, and several of the Terentatek simply hunkered down into the foxholes or trenches, waiting for his men to push forward again so they could ambush them now that a straight charge had failed.

Trunn didn't do that. Instead, using his drones again, he called down further fire from his mortar teams, hitting each hiding place one after another.

It was slow going, and made worse when more Terentatek charged out from the citadel, at least fifteen more. Looking at the drone footage, it was clear these were larger and stronger-looking than the first, but definitely the same kind of breed. Several of them survived everything they could be hit by, closing with the defenders. However, by this point, Plo and over a dozen other Jedi had arrived with the second wave. That second wave brought in still more companies and heavy weapons, and the Jedi closed in on the Terentatek even as those guns hammered the monster herd away from where the Jedi were.

Plo led that effort, and as the defensive fire from the GDL troopers fell all around him, he studied the Terentatek. There were crystal structures that grew up out of their shoulders and hips, looking almost like someone had taken quartz crystals and embedded them into the

Terentatek for some reason. As he watched, though, one of those quartz crystals seemed to light up from a dark energy within, lashing out towards him with a whip of lightning.

Plo raised his lightsaber and blocked the attack, but frowned internally as the impact nearly drove him to his knees. The lightning cut off quickly, thankfully, and he rolled away from another Terentatek attacking him from the side. "That was almost like Sith lightning," he mused, his lightsaber slicing into the second beast's thigh, nearly upending the creature to the ground.

"Did the Sith learn how to somehow embed Force techniques into crystal so that they could be released on command of an unthinking beast!?" One of the Jedi nearby whispered his voice somewhere between awed comprehension and concern even as he strained against the claws of one of the Terentatek.

"Perhaps. But you are wrong in assuming that these were unthinking beasts. Even in ancient times, Terentatek were known to have a certain low cunning. If the Sith could use Sith alchemy to create those crystal constructs, perhaps they also bred intelligence into them," Plo reminded his fellow Jedi, blocking a blow from another lightning using monster. "Not enough to override their instincts, but enough to implant new ones, so that they can use this new power."

The Terentatek closed, and like Quinlan and Komari, Plo learned that their claws and armored segments acted just like Beskar armor, blocking his lightsaber. However, while Komari and Quinlan were more attuned toward fire and water, respectively, Plo had always had a way with wind. Cutting force wind hammered into one Terentatek, shearing through the crystal with as much energy as a hurricane distilled down into an attack the size of a palm. The attacker's crystal shoulder and head alike slid off the monster's body, and a Forced Push sent that Terentatek into another one, causing it to tumble.

"Some of you use Force techniques on the ground, disrupt their footwork. Others, Force Grabs and Pushes. Aim for their legs. Slow them down. Those of you who can replicate the technique I just used, do so. Pure Force Cuts might be useless, but element attacks seem to work. Remember your shields as well!"

It was hard going, and two of the Jedi died when one of the Terentatek broke through their Force Hold before they could recover and any of the others could shift their own attention to aid them. A lightsaber stab was completely ignored by the Terentatek as it closed, its maw tearing the Jedi's chest open, before a kick caught the other one in the leg. She collapsed and barely had a second to scream before the Terentatek's claws slammed down into the back of her head, puncturing skull and brain alike, before an overpowered cutting spell slammed into the Terentatek's neck, beheading it.

Four other Jedi were wounded and forced to pull back, while another was crippled, losing his foot to a monster he had thought dead. But the fact the monsters were here on their

own, away from the droids to provide covering fire, let the Jedi and troopers were together to hold the Terentatek in place and put them down.

Minutes later, as the last Terentatek collapsed to a rocket, an eerie silence fell on the battlefield for a second before the Colonel's voice spoke. "The beachhead is secured. I'm bringing in the third wave and switching them out with my breaching companies. They took a hammering."

That simple report covered a lot of territory. The companies who had made the beachhead had losses ranging from saddening to disastrous. All told he had lost more than two platoons worth of men already in this fight.

With the GDL troops came more troops armed with light blasters and light armor. They weren't made for direct combat, but the Aldrete Consortium's people instantly began to set up a relief station. Wounded were pulled in from all of the companies previously engaged, while the remaining Jedi and the GDL troopers pushed forward.

Soon, they were underneath the enemy shield and running into further defenses. Comprised mostly of B-2 super battle droids, these troops had waited underneath the shielding in various positions around the anti-air guns whose attacks the Colonel had so effectively spoofed earlier.

A few of those anti-air guns, quad laser batteries, had been hastily modified to allow them to depress enough to attack the incoming troopers, and a platoon found this out to their cost before the Colonel or the Jedi could warn them. They died to a man under the flailing fire as the anti-air fired at what amounted to point-blank range for that weapons system down at their position.

That quad laser was destroyed a second later by a guided rocket that slammed into it. Two other super battle droids nearby staggered and came under further mortar fire, and the attack pushed on, grinding into the attackers, expanding outward. Plo and the other Jedi were at the forefront, each of them working with a squad or platoon of GDL troopers as they slowly ground the defenders under.

Thankfully, it seemed as if the defenders had used all of the Terentatek at their disposal.

Or at least all of the Terentatek they were willing to spend once they realized that using them in the open was tantamount to simply throwing them away, Plo thought as he used his lightsaber to block a series of blaster bolts coming towards him. The next second, he was forced to create a Force Shield around the fire team he was currently working with to protect them from further fire coming from several super battle droids.

For which I am quite thankful, he thought with regret at the losses the League troopers were taking. The super battle droids are tough enough nuts to crack in such numbers. I've seen them before on the battlefield but not concentrated as much as this. I suppose I can be thankful that the defenders lack commandos or those Jedi killers, the Magna guards. This is tough without them.

Sensing some danger waiting ahead of him, Plo ordered his troops to remain where they were rather than move on to the next trench. Instead, he flicked several parts of the droids ahead of them and watched as several thermal detonators set up as traps exploded throughout the trench leading to the next bunker. That bunker also opened fire when it hadn't before, raking their position, but the Kel Dor's Force Shield held.

The Corporal he was with called down fire on it, and a second later, a mortar strike landed directly on top of the bunker. This was followed by several more, and eventually, the bunker simply came apart under their fire, taking the super battle droids around the bunker with it.

Trunn knew that the immediate objective needed to be knocking out the shield generator. With that done, and with enough of the anti-air guns down as well, they could bring in the freighters to provide further overhead cover and simply wipe out any more defenders in the area without needing to push forward as they were.

Thus, while his own troops and most of the Jedi pushed their way slowly forward, grinding down the enemy and pulling all the enemy's attention to them, Quinlan and Komari had been sent with two demolition experts to work their way forward without engaging the enemy. This was something the two of them were uniquely suited for, given how good their Force Stealth and Force Cloak techniques were. They could hide not only from the enemy droids and sensors, but from enemy Force users.

At first, this didn't actually seem to be needed. The droids seemed entirely on their own at this point. However, when they came within sight of the shield generator, that changed. The generator was built into the side of the citadel and housed in a massively protected bunker, but the housing was obviously unfinished. Indeed, looking at the metal spires rising from around the citadel, it seemed as if the final citadel was meant to be much larger than this one, fully encompassing it on all sides.

Near a metal girder, Quinlan crouched low, hiding himself behind a tiny bit of foliage that had withered and died long before this battle began, yet had been left there for some reason. From here, around four miles distant from the fighting, allowed him to examine the darkly cloaked individuals ahead of them.

One stooped, as if his back was bothering him, or perhaps he had a hump there? Or maybe he was another species of some kind, although the long, flowing beard coming out of his hood made Quinlan think he was human. The other was clearly human, standing with his hood down and his face, young looking but lined with scars and deep-set eyes in the open, his fingers twitching this way and that almost as if he was fighting an urge to reach out and choke someone. Which, considering he was a Dark Side user, was not at all a simple turn of phrase.

From here, it was impossible to see the man's eyes or the eyes of his still hooded companion. Yet Quinlan was certain that if he could, they would be gleaming yellow with Dark Side corruption.

Oddly, neither of them had lightsabers at their side. That told Quinlan that they were probably long-range fighters of some kind, Dark Side users specializing in Force techniques rather than combat. *Just the type to be behind experimenting on those Terentatek.* But judging from everything that they had seen personally and seen reported by other Jedi who had run into Sith assassins in the past, Quinlan knew that those techniques would probably include quite a bit of the skills that Harry and his mother had introduced into the Order.

With that in mind, Quinlan shifted backwards until he joined the two sappers and Komari. "I think we should use the Force to deal with those super battle droids, then close quickly. I don't think we want to fight those two at range for any amount of time if we can help it." *Oh, to be able to do Harry's little teleport trick...*

"Agreed. You two, stay here. The Force Cloak we put about the two of you should still hold for a little while longer, but not if you make any sudden movements," Komari ordered, causing the two sappers to nod convulsively. The four of them had passed directly underneath the guns of enemy positions several times to be here, and so neither of them questioned the efficacy of the Force technique that had been used on them at this point, although it still felt surreal.

The two Jedi skirted around the shield generator's position until they were well away from their still hidden companions, practically coming at the protected shield generator from the other side. There, the two of them paused, reaching out to the Force together. The twelve super droids on guard all around the shield generator buzzed and shouted at one another in shock as they found themselves raised into the air, then slammed into the side of the shield generator with enough force to cause their bodies to explode. That shield generator itself was armored enough to take those hits, but the droids certainly weren't.

However, by the time droid parts began raining down around the generator, the two Dark Side users had twisted around and launched attacks toward Komari and Quinlan. This

came in the form of a circular blast of black fire of some kind, and a Force technique that looked almost dark purple as it flashed towards the two in the form of a slice of power.

The Jedi could feel the Dark Side roiling not only in the Dark Side users but in those attacks and desperately raised shields. A second later, the shields shattered underneath the hits from the pair of techniques, but it held long enough for Komari and Quinlan to roll away to either side. They charged forward, still connected through the Force via their gestalt, their lightsabers up and blocking several more attacks.

These were smaller than the first two for a few seconds, but they followed by a larger one, a tongue of black and purple flame, which forced Komari to shield herself. Meanwhile, Quinlan ducked low and underneath a cutting spell that was similar to the first one, then slammed his hand down on the ground, sending a shockwave through it towards the defenders.

One of them retained his footing, his own Force powers stopping the attack cold, underneath his feet. The other one stumbled, its hood coming off, showing an alien countenance, one that Komari had never seen before, with a hammer-like head and several eyes on a long, hunched neck. A second later, Quinlan's own cutting Force lashed out, catching that worthy in the side and cutting him in half. The other twisted around, still launching attacks towards both of them, but Komari leapt up into the air, drawing his attention and encircling herself with a Force Shield against his attack, letting Quinlan close once more.

To Quinlan's surprise, the man was able to split his attention, lashing out with more, smaller attacks at both Jedi. He had to deflect several more attacks before he was in lightsaber range, but the man could only retreat so far. When he did, he was forced to shift entirely to attacking Quinlan.

Her Force Shield collapsing, Komari fell on him from on high, using the Force to propel herself downward like a human missile. The man's desperate attempt to shift his attention back failed as his wrist came off from a blow from Quinlan's lightsaber, and Komari finished the man off with a slice to the head.

By this point, the other defenders had begun to react. Droids from all around twisted in the direction of the shield generator, racing towards it as they fired, forcing Quinlan to shield the pair as well as himself and Komari from their fire. But soon, the sappers, who had begun to move forward the moment the two Jedi began to fight the Dark Side users, reached the generator.

One of the two men nearly fell, hit in the side, but his body armor protected him long enough to get into cover. Soon, they were at work alongside the shield generator.

The super droids all around them pressed in hard, trying to regain control of the shield generator, but the two Jedi defended the sappers until they were finished. At that point, working together again, they raised a heavy shield as the sappers' explosives did their work. Shaped charges burned into the cowlings of the shield generator, releasing the energy matrix within, and causing the shield generator to lose control of itself and explode.

That detonation tore a chunk out of the defensive position, and the shield fell even as Komari and Quinlan nearly collapsed from the strain of holding the shield against the force of the explosion.

Instantly, Colonel Trunn shouted, "The shields are down! All units hold pull back to assigned positions. Freighters, move in. I want ion cannon fire on the citadel. I repeat, ion cannon fire only on the citadel. I want everything electronic within that building fried if we can. Q-ships, target anti-air batteries."

At his words, ion cannons blasted down from the freighters as they descended again.

The purpose of this attack was not just to this planet, this hidden bastion of the Sith, but to find any further information about the Sith Order that they could. And in Plo's opinion, far too much time had been spent breaking the enemy defenses already. But he couldn't help argue that they should've pushed faster. The losses among the GDL troops had been heavy from the moment they began to engage the super droids, despite all the best efforts of the Jedi to help things along, and the losses against the Terentatek had also been bad among the four companies that had first landed.

Now, though, that equation changed. Even as lights began to go out all around the partially built citadel from the ongoing ion cannon bursts, the anti-air cannons were taken out. A few of them were able to strike back, admittedly, but the freighters had time to let their shields cycle, and none of them took any more damage.

When enough of the enemy anti-air guns were down, the Aldrete freighters came in even closer to the previously shielded area around the Citadel. Scattered drones and troopers, every bunker and installation that could be hit without hitting their own troops were targeted and destroyed.

With enough of those defenses down, the Colonel pushed forward hard, and soon, Plo and a force of Jedi reached the entrance into the Citadel. There, a visibly exhausted Komari and Quinlan joined them. "The Force is telling me that we will face worse than the two badly trained Dark Side users you fought, and even worse than the Terentatek. This building reeks of the Dark Side to my senses. "

Quinlan nodded, staring up at the unfinished spire of metal, then into the entrance, which, with the door blown off, resembled nothing more than a cave entrance to some horrific beast. The impression of that and the sight of the shadows within had him fighting back a shiver. "This place... I sense far more danger within than we have already faced. But we must push on, or else the information leading to our real quarry will elude us."

"Indeed. I will not tell you to let the fighting from here to us, Colonel, but... the dark side miasma within is thick, and I do not know what the effect on your troops will be. In sufficient quantity, the Dark Side is known to drive those without Force powers to madness or bestial actions," Plo warned.

Trunn frowned at that, then nodded, understanding that his people's role in this might be over. "I understand, sir, but if you think we can still help, I'm willing—"

"I am not willing to let you die against a threat you cannot defend against," Plo said, holding up his hand. "I admire your courage and acknowledge your skills, Colonel, but from now on, this is a task for the Jedi. And it is one we had best be about quickly."

End Chapter

Well, there you have it, guys and gals. Not as much stuff, but it ended on a high note in terms of combat and happenings, LOL. In the next chapter, Plo and the rest dive into the heart of darkness, and Harry and Aayla face being separated while the battle for the Corellia Sector resumes. See you then!