

I'm not a sell-out nor do I think the good guys should let children solve all their problems.

As many of my readers already know, I announced back in January that Magic would be the SW crossover I would update in February. From now on the SW crossover will be a Pat R On only poll. If you wish to influence this choice, I urge you to go and sign up. You'll have a louder voice in what stories I update and access to a series of omakes from this fic where I have Harry, Aayla and Lily be transported back to Hogwarts.

ON that note, several reviewers have asked if I intend to go back to Earth. The answer is no. The mechanics of that would be too unwieldy to make use of in the real story.

This is going to also be a large chapter - ATP size-since it's been so long since the last time I updated this story.

I would like to thank [Kathryn518](#) and [Michael](#) for their help with this chapter. [Kathryn518](#) pointed out a few fundamental flow issues, and that I was trying a little too hard to railroad a character's canon attitude into him as he is in this fic, which I changed. And [Michael](#), my small mistakes guy, got this back to me in under a week. Given the size of the chapter, that was an amazing feat, and I hope you all join me in thanking him for his work.

Chapter 8 Changing Tides

Komari stepped into her former Master's study, gathering her hard won Jedi serenity around her with more difficulty than she had needed ever since Master Fay and Master Unduli had put her back together, body and soul. She knew both would remonstrate with her for the very idea, but she owed the two of them far more than she could ever repay, just as she owed Master Dooku for coming for her in the first place when she had turned due to the tortures of the Bando Gora. Dooku had saved her body and given her a chance to rejoin the Light. Fay had healed her body, and, between her and Unduli, they had helped Komari save her soul. Those thoughts were foremost in her mind now as she entered the room where she knew Master Dooku had left his last will and testament.

It had been two days since Master Yoda had informed her and the others who were connected to Master Dooku in some fashion of his death. Of course, the ancient Grandmaster hadn't outright stated how Master Dooku had died, as he had no idea. All they knew was that, in Yoda's words, "A great light, extinguished it has been. A great darkness, gone too now. Burned each other out, they did."

Of course, knowing her Master, Komari had been able to put that together quickly enough. He had gone after some Dark Side user. Imagine her surprise when Master Yoda had informed her that the High Council actually felt that the Sith, or at least something called the Brotherhood of the Sith, which she had never heard of, might still be out there.

It would be just like my Master to go after him on his own, and just like most Jedi to assume that if you remove the head, the body will die. I could have told him after my experiences with the Bando Gora that that was not the case, but no one asked me... And now I am both stalling and devolving into snark in a manner that is unbefitting of a Jedi. Come, Komari Vosa, remember what Master Dooku would say: fearing the unknown is worse than fearing reality, but both fears must be met and overcome.

With a deep cleansing breath, Komari banished such thoughts and stepped into Master Dooku's study. As she did, Komari remembered the recording her master had left her to tell her to come to his study in the event of his death. It had been mailed to her directly by the Dooku house lawyer, the lawyer informing her that they had not found a will for him yet, but that they had found those instructions, and they had been dutifully observed and found to have been written by Master Dooku. As a Jedi, of course, his being of sound mind did not come into it.

Inside his study, Komari moved around, reaching out with the Force to find the thing that she was here to find. It was a somewhat tough skill to learn, and the more people in an area the harder it became, but it worked very well on small enclosed spaces and on mechanical items.

Seconds later a small hidden compartment in his desk, which you had to be sitting at in the chair at a proper angle to open, yielded up its secrets. The setup wasn't very high tech, but Komari thought that it was somewhat ingenious in how well it was hidden. From the compartment she pulled out not one, but three little data chips.

The one on top of the small pile had a single K written out on it. the next was unlabeled, but Komari could tell it was a specially prepared security chip, one which could not only slag itself but any system it was connected to if the individual who tried to use it didn't input the correct code. The last was a simple chip like the first, though

it too was unlabeled.

So, the order in which I view these is laid out for me. Very well, Master, though I find it most droll that you are trying to control things like this from beyond the grave, Komari thought whimsically. Still sitting at her former master's desk, she inserted the disk with the K on it into the desk's reader.

Instantly a full body hologram of Master Dooku, his face set into grave lines, one hand resting on his lightsaber hilt as he stared into the pickup. "I, Master Dooku, being of sound mind and body, do prepare this last will and testament, to be enacted upon the moment of my death for my estate and all items therein. This should be read by my last padawan."

The image's lips quirked. "Well, my last full time padawan, at any rate, if not my last student: Knight Komari Vosa. If Knight Vosa is reading this, please prove your identity by entering in a code now. A single word that can describe our first mission together. You have two minutes to do so before this disk erases itself."

Komari sighed, but nodded. No one but she among those now living knew that the first mission she and Master Dooku had done together actually hadn't been one that had been put on the books of the Order. It'd been a simple enough mission, simply finding a thief that had begun to target elderly men and women on the second level of Coruscant. Dooku had turned it into a training exercise for her: how to find and winnow through the minds of multiple types of sentients in order to find someone who was feeling guilty, and connecting that guilt to the crime that they were investigating.

Thinking of a single word that could be used to describe the mission threw her for a brief moment, but then she remembered the name of the culprit. Typing it in quickly, she watched as the tiny timer disappeared from the screen and her master's image returned.

When he spoke, however, the air of whimsy was gone, and he had quickly gotten down to business. "Komari, I have made many mistakes in my lifetime. Mistakes with you, mistakes with Qui-Gon, mistakes in my own life and my own training. Yet despite everything, I have to say that perhaps my worst mistake was not involved in the training of you or Master Qui-Gon, but that in my own thirst for knowledge I looked to dark places. As you well know after the Mandalore debacle I had become thoroughly fed up and disappointed by the lack of growth in the Order. The corruption within the Senate, and how closely we were tied to them also repulsed me."

The image seemed to sigh. "What you do not know is that after your disappearance and before we learned you were still alive, I went even further. I

thought if perhaps the Sith, or some small variant of them, came back, they would push the Order to grow again, to break the cycle of stagnation that the Order has been in since the end of the New Sith Wars.”

Dooku’s image laughed now, a wry, self-deprecating tone that jarred sharply with everything Komari had seen of the man in life. “I was wrong about that, and I should have trusted the Force. The Force, the Light Side, brought us Lily and Harry and the changes their presence has created in the Order. You now of what I speak.”

Komari barely had a moment to nod agreement with that, her mind somewhat reeling from the idea that her Master had looked for the Sith so long ago and the way he had admitted to his faults like this. He had apologized and admitted to making mistakes with her and Qui-Gon, but that was a far cry from this.

But then the message continued. “I was unsuccessful in finding the Sith, obviously, and yet, and yet when I heard from Master Giiett that the Order felt the Dark Side user which killed Qui-Gon could be a Sith, I felt somehow that the Force was telling me something, that the Force was telling me that this threat was someone I knew. I began to meditate on it, searching my memory for clues using the organizational method Lily has been teaching us here on my estates. I found it. I found the individual who had tried to steer me towards some Sith practices, and then I began to research them. The head of the Banking Clan, Hego Damask. With that knowledge, I decided to go after him on my own.

“If you’re reading this, I hope that at least I have taken him with me. But if not, I urge the Order to investigate the Banking Clan very, very closely. On the disk below this one you will find everything I was able to discover through both the Force and certain illegal means. There is nothing which would hold up in a court of law, but some of it is worrisome enough to follow up on.”

For a moment Dooku sighed, looking every inch his age, where before he had been projecting an aura of weathered strength. “I hope I succeed. But if I do not, I wish to leave the universe a better place than it was before my death. I want you, Komari, to keep the training center going. This is my earnest request to you as your former master. My House’s resources will answer to you for now. But the training center is my most important request of you.”

Komari breathed a slight sigh of relief. So this was only going to be a temporary thing; that was good. Komari had no desire to be tied down to Master Dooku’s estates. For one thing, it smacked too much of putting worth on material things to her, and for another, many of the Order were still too leery of her for her to want to add another way to stand out. *So I’m named as the family manager of the*

family's holdings, but not the actual heir. That makes sense. And I can bet who he did name as the heir.

Master Dooku continued on, telling Komari about the powers she could wield as manager and the things she couldn't do, which were far more numerous. "As I said at the beginning of this message, I have made many mistakes in my lifetime," Dooku said after winding down. "I urge you to learn from them. Learn from them, but walk your own path. If that path leads you to being the kind of Jedi that the Order wishes you to be, I will respect that. But if it does not, I will respect that too. Think for yourself; live for yourself. Trust in the Force and do not give into the Dark again. That is all I ask my former padawan, my proud Knight. May the Force be with you and with the Order." With that the image disappeared, and a moment later it began to repeat.

Komari leaned back, trying to analyze what she was feeling at this point. There was grief there, certainly, but also a strange kind of relief, or perhaps vindication. She knew that Master Dooku had gone out the way he would have wanted, lightsaber in hand. And given what Master Yoda had said, he had indeed taken his target with them.

She was a little concerned about having been left in charge of his family's holdings, but that concern was tempered by how little as manager she could do unless those holdings began to see significant downturns in their fortune. *That shouldn't happen*, she thought, thinking about what little she knew about Master Dooku's family's holdings. *And it says that the rest of the will is going to come into effect once certain conditions are met, and that I would know what they are. Hah! That too is obvious, and I can think of no one better to look after those. Still, it will be interesting to see how the Council reacts. It is rather obvious to anyone who knows of their connection in the first place, after all.*

But the training center and the mansion were hers now. That was interesting, and it filled Komari with a sense of purpose. Further, she felt the touch of the Force on her. For the first time in years it was unequivocal and certain: this was what the Force wanted from her. *So be it. This is my new charge, and one I will prove worthy of*, Komari thought, standing and taking the three data chips as she left the room and locked it behind her.

She moved to work through the mansion to Master Dooku's personal Hypercom array. Every one of the counts who ruled Serenno had one of these, and they did not feed into the central one on the planet unlike most such systems. Instead they allowed the user to connect directly to the Hypernet.

Thus, a moment after sitting down, she was looking into the wizened face of

Grand Master Yoda. He looked even more aged than the last time she had seen him. The death of Master Dooku had come to him first and had obviously hit him hard.

"News you have," Master Yoda said, his eyes closed at first before he opened them to lock eyes with her through the hologram. "Report you have to give?"

Komari quickly explained what she had found, showing Master Yoda the data crystals in the pickup. She finished, asking, "Is this legal, Master?" She would still follow her former master's wishes regardless, but it was important to know at the outset what kind of opposition she would face.

"Illegal it is not," Master Yoda said after a moment's reflection, his words not giving anything away. "Outside of military items, the Jedi ownership of things, never been made illegal in the Republic or the Order. Not actually made his heir: not enough there for the Order or the Senate to concern ourselves. Of Jedi stepping in to manage estates, precedent there has been before this."

Indeed Yoda was actually understating things. Jedi were routinely called in to mentor or watch over young heirs in many systems. The Green Jedi of Corellia took this further, acting in the manner Komari would be for the Dooku estate if requested to. This tied them closer to the Corellian government, far more than the Jedi Order as a whole was happy about, and also smacked too much of being connected to material things. But so long as they didn't own military systems or infrastructure, the Order was prepared to look the other way rather than to push the Green Jedi into breaking off entirely from the Order, as they had threatened to do numerous times in the past thousand years.

"Master, if you allow me to accept this appointment, I will act as I feel Master Dooku would in terms of the training center and his holdings," Komari said. "And you know exactly who he might have named as his real heir."

"I do," Yoda said, looked at that second data disk. "Looked at that, have you?"

Komari shook her head.

"Do not then. Cross that bridge we will when forced to."

Komari nodded to that, more than willing to leave that particular basket of snakes in Master Yoda's capable hands. "I also have the security disk, which explains how Master Dooku came to believe the head of the Banking Clan was the Sith. Should I upload it?"

Yoda quickly shook his head. "No. Still on the planet, is Master Bilaba?"

"Yes, Master Yoda. She seems to have learned the Shield technique very well, and her retraining with her lightsaber is going well. In her case it is more disuse of her lightsaber than a weakness in her personal style."

"Give the disk containing Dooku's findings to her you will. Inform her she is to come back to Coruscant you will immediately after finished talking we have," Yoda ordered.

"I will do so, Master," Komari said, feeling very gratified that Yoda was taking this so seriously.

"Well are you?" Yoda asked abruptly, looking at Komari with shrewd eyes through the pickup. Despite the distance between them, Komari got the impression that Yoda could sense a lot more about her than she could about him.

Though I probably shouldn't be surprised by that, she thought sardonically. A Jedi pushing over a thousand years should have a broader set of tricks than me.

"I am well, Master," she said aloud. "I wish that Master Dooku had confided in me his suspicions before going off on this quest of his, but if he had, I do not think he would've been Master Dooku. Headstrong, certain to the point of arrogance in his own skills and beliefs, and a way with the lightsaber and the Force: that was Master Dooku in a nutshell.

"He was not perfect, but none of us are, and despite his many faults I will remember him as a great man. I will remember his lessons, his teachings, and his messages to me, and I will strive to be worth his trust."

"Greatest student he was. Strongest he was. Wisest. Hrhrhrm. Best he was. My greatest achievement he was," Yoda said, and it was as if Komari's words had acted like a balm to him as Dooku's last words had been to her. "Do well I know you will in your new position. A title, perhaps, we will come up with for you in the future. For now, may the Force be with you."

"And with you, Master Yoda," Komari said, holding upper hand formally in salute before ending the communication.

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Yoda looked across the now dead hologram projector towards Master Ranicisis, while around them the rest of the High Council currently present on Coruscant either waited for them to speak or worked on their dataslates, looking up what they could about the head of the Banking Clan, his ship, and where it was at present. This was a sharp contrast to how the High Council usually ran their meetings, but many things had changed since Ranicisis had taken over and the threat of the Dark Side had showed itself.

Waiting for the others to discern what they could, Ranicisis began by talking

about the rest of what Komari mentioned. "The training center: yes, I fully agree with allowing Komari to act as head of the training center. While she might be a Knight, there are few Masters who could face her in a lightsaber duel, and she has some knowledge of the new techniques as well. But as head of the Dooku house? That sets a bad precedent. Not even Dooku did much on the business side of things, though he had retired formally from the Order."

"How?" Yoda asked, knowing the other was merely playing the devil's advocate. "Precedent there has been for Jedi to act..."

"The Green Jedi are one thing, the Order as a whole is another, and you well know it, Master Yoda," Master Ranicisis interrupted him brusquely, concern on his ancient face even as the discourtesy made some of the other council members frown. "This will be seen as both favoritism within the Order and as a dangerous precedent for the Order to be going back to the old ways of the Jedi Lords if it gets out to the Senate as a whole. We will need to head that concern off."

"Make a new rule, perhaps?" Yoda asked, showing no reaction to the other Master's rudeness. The Thisspassian species became more brusque and abrupt in conversation when they became concerned about something. "Only Jedi can leave things to other Jedi?"

"Exactly. Admit that this, the idea of one Jedi leaving another property, is a hole in the no attachments rule we had not anticipated. It will make us look reasonable and proactive within the Order and without once this gets out to the Republic Senate at large, if it does. How likely is that?" Ranicisis asked, looking over at the political specialists.

"Not very actually," Master Gallia replied, shaking her head. "Serenno has always gone its own way as much as it could possibly get away with, and the Senate really doesn't have much business or political interest there. There might be some questions from people who realize that Master Dooku has been missing for too long in the future, but if we can keep that quiet for a while, we can keep Komari acting in his stead quiet as well. As for the long term..."

"Let us leave that for now," Ranicisis ordered, steepling his long fingers in a triangle in front of him as he looked from face to face. "The issue with who Master Dooku has named as heir is one we will need to address, but only once it has actually occurred, which could be years in the future. We need to concentrate on the real meat of the matter. Master Dooku is dead, and we are agreed that he probably took this Dark Side user with him?"

"A possible Sith," Yoda said, shaking his head with a sigh. "Felt a shift, I did,

but the Veil, still in place it is.”

“Dissipating slightly, perhaps,” said Yaddle. “But the future, still clouded it is. Hope for balance returned, but not certain. Not yet...”

“Why?” asked Master Tiin, his voice gruff. He was never one for sneaking around the issue. “If this Sith or this leader of a new Brotherhood of the Sith is dead, then surely the Veil will dissipate if we wait.”

“Common misconception there is. Dark Side always there is, just like the Light. The Veil, retain its power it does, even if its creator, dead he is,” Yoda replied.

“Agreed,” Ranicisis he said firmly. “This Sith Lord Dooku fought might have been the main problem, but his structure is still out there, whether it has other Force users within it or not, such as the Brotherhood we have been trying to find since the Naboo Conflict, is immaterial at this point. How do we go about dismantling it?”

“And do we do this alone?” asked Master Bilaba slowly. “Should we show the Chancellor, at the least, this information, that there might have been a Sith operating behind the scenes for so long?”

“No. Open about this we cannot be,” Yoda said firmly. “Studied this in depth I have since this shift felt I did. Knowledge that we are looking must be kept close, lest we feed the Dark Side.”

“Can we instigate an investigation into the Banking Clan?” asked Master Poof.

All eyes shifted to the newest member of the Council. Coleman Trebor was a public relations specialist and had several friends and connections with the intergalactic news networks. “We can if we’re careful about it. The Banking Clan isn’t very well thought of, and if their head is out of communication for a long period of time we can use that as a pretext to investigate his personal holdings. We have to be somewhat open about that aspect, however. How that will mesh with our desire to keep our concerns about this Sith Lord’s organization secret I leave to older and wiser minds.”

There were some dry chuckles about that around the room. He wasn’t the youngest there, but even if you included Yaddle in the equation Master Yoda had the rest of the Council beat in that area.

Plo Koon had been silent up to this point, his personal datapad opened as he skimmed through some information. A gentle tap on his chair’s armrest brought the rest of the council’s attention to him, and he held up his datapad. “I wanted to see if I could find out what I could about the ship this Hego Damask used. It was reported in Coruscant space, but then it jumped out two days ago. The odd point is, it didn’t contact Coruscant space command before it hypered out. And it did so in a direction

where it was certain to run into a gravity well. I would recommend we try to follow that route before it gets too old.”

“Agreed. Master Tiin, Master Koon, would the two of you please follow up on that the moment our meeting is done?”

The two of them were two of the best starfighter pilots in the Order. They had also been given special dispensation recently to aid in the construction of new starfighters for the Order. They both nodded agreement, though Tiin looked rather dubious that this hunt would equate to anything.

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For once since becoming a Sith, Sidious was angry with himself rather than with the universe at large. The reason for this was simple. Thanks to his eagerness to remove his former master and take command of the Veil, Sidious had made mistakes. First, he had overlooked the fact that Yoda would have felt his former padawan’s death. Second, he was not on Coruscant, in order to further distance himself from the event.

This had served him in numerous ways, and he was certainly going to use his time abroad to good effect, but Sidious would not be on hand to attempt to steer or influence the Jedi’s initial push to investigate the Banking Clan, and unfortunately he had not left any orders to that regard with Pestage. That was bad, as while there was nothing there to point to any Sith involvement, he had no agents of his own in the Banking Clan, Plagueis having handled them entirely on his own up to this point.

This left Sidious in the uncomfortable position of truly being blind to what could occur. *Nothing to lead the Jedi back to me or to the Order of Two, but what else will they discover? How much will this set back our plans to continue to gather the opposition forces for our war?*

The Veil also had weakened slightly as it shifted from his former master to Sidious. But that aspect did not matter much. It would grow stronger even than its previous incarnation soon enough. Further, now that it answered to Sidious alone, he would start to receive some of the power up from it that was part of the design.

No, it was the mistake with Yoda that was going to cost Sidious. *I wanted to move on the Banking Clan and my former master's personal holdings quickly, but now I can't! The Jedi will be watching it, and if I make any move to consolidate the clan's holdings or even look as if I have any previous connection to them, they will begin to be suspicious of me far too early in this game.*

Still, the Jedi will not be in a position to take that power for themselves. That

would go directly against the laws set down at the Reformation. The Banking Clan will have to deal with being watched by the Jedi more closely, but even that can be turned to my advantage, Sidious thought.

There was a slight beeping noise to one side, and Sidious came out of his meditation, turning in that direction. His droid pilot's face appeared there. "Master, we are coming out of hyperspace over Wayland."

Sidious nodded, saying nothing. The droid had its orders, having come this way before, and, after all, who would waste pleasantries on a droid? *Now to see what my master has been working on out here and if any of it can be turned to my purposes.*

The ship, the same ship that he had given to his former apprentice, slowly descended towards the planet, a planet that appeared on no system charts in a system that appeared on no intergalactic map. A planet that had little to no sign of any inhabitants, save for a few scattered, extremely low-tech settlements. All of those were well away from the ship's target: a large mountain standing alone well away from any other.

Despite the fact that there was no visible sign of any technology, the ship was suddenly locked on by various targeting systems as they closed. Sidious quickly input a command control code, and they all shut down in sequence, one after another. A moment later a small portion of the mountainside opened, revealing that it had been artificial. The Scimitar glided in, where it was caught quickly by a few small tractor beams, which helped to guide it to a gentle landing.

Exiting his ship, Sidious swiftly moved deeper into the mountain of Wayland, his black cloak billowing behind him as he moved.

First, Sidious checked on the projects he had known about going in, all of which seems to be puttering along nicely. None of them, however, were why he was really here. The ones he didn't know much about were: the ones his master had mentioned, the new experiments begun since the invasion of Naboo.

Plagueis had been his usual organized self, installing the new experiment on the highest levels of the mountain with the known experiments on the levels below. This included the storage facility for the original cloning cylinders they had purchased and then squirreled away from the Kaminoans. They were there waiting to be used in the future, but Sidious quickly saw that half them were missing. *I wonder what he has done with them? Well, I will find out soon enough.*

Ascending to the topmost level of the hidden facility, Sidious was stopped by several automated defense systems coming online. "Halt and be recognized. Further attempts to move forward will result in your destruction and the destruction of this

facility,” droned a robotic voice out of a nearby speaker.

“I am Darth Sidious, Lord of the Sith, as you well know,” Sidious intoned coldly. “This is **my** mountain. Let me pass or be destroyed.”

“Where is Master Plagueis?” the same droid voice replied.

“Master Plagueis is dead,” Sidious intoned, becoming angrier by the second but keeping a firm rein on it through the ease of a lifetime’s practice. “I alone rule the Sith now. You have two seconds to turn off these defenses and get out of my way, or I will rip them and you asunder, IG-42.”

For a moment there was nothing, then the automated guns shut down, pulling back into their recesses, while the door on the far side of them opened. On the other side was a large medical droid of a type found throughout the Republic. Its normally gray or white body had been painted a deep matte black, its eyes glowing not the normal yellow or white of such droids, but orange. Its grill, too, had been replaced by a narrower version.

All in all it looked the most sinister example of its basic design that Sidious had ever seen, though he was immune to the effect. He stared, a single millisecond away from rendering the droid down into pieces.

The droid's new words, however, caused him to pause. “Forgive me, Lord Sidious; Master Plagueis left instructions to keep the security on this level and his new experiments on high during his absence. He also left no orders in regards to what I should do in the event that you came here before he did.”

“And do you have any orders in the event of his death?” Sidious asked, still cold. This droid irritated him for some reason. It always had. But it was too good at its job to simply do away with it without having a replacement available.

“Should the master be declared dead, I am to obey your commands as if you were him unless evidence suggests that you had anything to do with his death. As I have no connection to any off world Internet connection or Hypercom device, that portion of my programming is mute,” IG-42 replied.

Sidious debated cutting the droid in half immediately, but decided against it. *It might have been wired into some kind of doomsday device, the droid no longer being part of the loop perhaps activating said program.* “Show me Plagueis’ latest experiments, then.”

“This way.” The droid nodded its head and clumped down the corridor. They stopped at the first door, opening it. “These are the master’s newest experiments. Would you like a running commentary? I have induced in my databanks verbal records of the former master’s activities.”

Inside were some of the missing cloning cylinders. Sidious swiftly counted five, which left forty still missing. "How many experiments was Plagueis running that had to do with cloning? And then yes, tell me the details of this experiment," he asked aloud, stepping forward and staring into the cloning cylinder. Inside was a human boy who looked perfectly normal, at least in the first cylinder. In the second...was something else entirely.

"Three out of his five newest experiments had to do with cloning and genetics, master. This particular experiment had to deal with genetic meshing." An instant later the droid continued in Plagueis' voice. "Subject number two-zero-zero-five. A genetically modified clone based upon mixing the genetics of Jango Fett and Sidious' assassin Maul. Through manipulation of the Force I have made certain that his connection to the Force will not fade. Zabraks and Humans can breed to a certain extent; however, the impact of my manipulations might have a detrimental effect on his mental stability. It should be interesting to see if he becomes more or less than the sum of its parts."

"Details, droid!" Sidious ordered. "What exactly was done to this one? What indoctrination is being inputted into its programming?"

"The programming is a mix that Master Plagueis devised himself, master. The clone will believe that it is a Mandalorian who has been taken and trained in the ways of the Sith. In this manner the clone should be able to call on the best of both worlds. As for further genetic modification, Plagueis felt that doing so would add to the chances that it would be mentally unstable, which currently has a possibility of 43.00987 percent."

The droid continued, becoming more animated as it described how it and Plagueis had manipulated the genetic codes of two men into creating the clone in the cylinder. It had been a very difficult operation, but Plagueis had been as much scientist as Sith, and IG-42 had the programming to be the equal of the original clone masters.

Sidious said nothing as he moved through the room, looking at the three other cylinders. In two of them were Maul clones, barely toddlers at the moment, while in the third and last cylinder was another unmodified clone of Jango Fett. "And this one?"

At that question the droid once more replayed a verbal recording of Plagueis, something that Sidious was not pleased to hear but could do nothing about at the moment. "Subject two-zero-zero-two. This subject is the original unmodified clone promised to Jango Fett as his payment for allowing himself to be cloned in the first place. A completely unmodified, or indoctrinated or programmed clone, for now, at any rate. That might change, but at present he serves more as a source of fresh genetic

material than in any capacity on its own.”

“That implies that this other one is modified in some way?” Sidious mused. This cylinder contained a baby, very obviously not nearly as far along in the growing process as the first, but with no visible difference beside that. “And answer in your own words, droid.”

“Affirmative,” the droid replied, accepting the order, though Sidious might have heard a tone of derision or irritation there. “That one has been modified via scientific methods. It will be faster, stronger, and more docile, though its life expectancy after reaching its full growth will be measured in years rather than decades.”

“Interesting.” *Plagueis didn’t mention that one, but I suppose since it matches to the commando type clone the cloners are creating for us it hardly matters.* “And do you have further unaltered genetic data from Fett?”

When the droid answered in the affirmative, indicating several small freezer units set to the other side of the lab, Sidious smiled grimly. “Then the unaltered clone is redundant.” Activating his lightsaber, Sidious stabbed the red plasma beam through the cloning cylinder. It seared through the boy's chest and out the other side, burning his heart out.

The clone boy gasped, coming awake only to die, and Sidious smiled as he felt his death through the Force, however slightly. After all, while the death occurred right in front of him, the boy had not been a Force sensitive. *But still, that brief flare of agony was delicious.* Feeling it, Sidious further wrapped himself in the Dark Side, much of his anger at his miscalculation fading as he allowed his sadism a moment of free rein, something he could rarely do.

Quickly pulling his lightsaber out, he did not deactivate it as he turned to the droid, the red of the blade adding to the red of a series of alarms as the monitors on the cylinder behind him screamed out a warning, quickly silenced by IG-42. “Do you have any issues with what I just did?”

“Negative,” IG-42 intoned. “You are the Master of Wayland and the Sith. You can do with these experiments what you wish. I would prefer you not to destroy them all. My primary mission at present is to watch over them and to take notes on their progress. But if you wish to get rid of one test subject or many, that is well within your rights as Master.”

“Good,” Sidious said simply, deactivating his lightsaber and hanging it openly on his waist now rather than under his cloak. “Show me the experiments that don't have to do with cloning. We’ll come back to those in a moment. These four, at least, I will allow to continue to grow for now.”

The other two experiments IG-42 was in charge of had to deal with Sith alchemy. Sidious found Sith alchemy fascinating, but he had never shown any aptitude towards it, something that angered him, but which he could not do anything about. He could manipulate minds, but not the bodies of people to this extent.

Two of these experiments had to deal with the effects of Sith alchemy on the human body, making it tougher, stronger, more susceptible to control. The third had to deal with creating monsters through Sith Alchemy. His master had attempted to reproduce some of the ancient beasts that the Sith had used in their long ago wars against the Jedi Order.

Those experiments Sidious dealt with quickly, ending their tortured existence personally before ordering the droid to activate the emergency flamethrowers each cage had installed, burning their bodies all to ash. If a beast such as that could not be controlled effectively, Sidious had no place for it in his designs for the future. It was control that was key, not creating chaos like these things seemed to revel in.

The others, however, were interesting and Sidious ordered the droid to keep track of their growth. The effect of Sith alchemy on the human body, a series of experiments that Sidious found fascinating. *Of course, continuing those experiments would take a dedicated individual here to keep the experiments going.*

Following that line of thought, he turned to IG-42. "Tell me, droid: if I was to install someone else in this mountain with the specific orders to follow up on these Sith alchemic experiments of Plagueis', what could you do to halt him from any attempts to do anything beyond that specific sanction?"

"I could do much, master," IG-42 said, and it might have been Sidious' imagination but for a moment its eyes seemed to glow slightly brighter at the very idea. "For one thing, each of these rooms is programmed with bombs underneath them should any subject attempt to escape. For another, they cannot be deactivated and are rather on a dead droid's switch. If I am not present and online in the room when someone is in here, the bombs will go off instantly. Further, the former master implanted in me numerous devices which allow me some combat capability."

"Define that," Sidious ordered.

The droid took two steps backwards away from Sidious, and suddenly a shield glowed around it. "As I am not made of flesh and blood, the radiation of the shield matters not to me. It is based upon the shield the droidekas use."

One of its arms transformed slowly into a large blaster cannon, while an iris on his leg opened, revealing a lightsaber. "While I am in no way able to use the Force, I have programmed within me several different combat methodologies."

Plagueis, you were a magnificent planner. In many ways you are simply building upon what came before, but you did so in such an amazingly annotated manner. “Good,” Sidious said aloud. “I will possibly be sending you an individual to serve as scientist for these experiments in Sith Alchemy. But you will still retain overall command of this facility under **my** orders. When I have decided on who to send, I will send you detailed instructions along those lines before he arrives.” *The prophets will be more help here than wallowing away in their hidden isolation.*

“Understood, master, but I must bring to mind a caveat, a fact hardwired into my programming. This facility cannot withstand orbital bombardment for any length of time. It is secrecy more than anything else that has served us.” For a moment its voice had shifted again to that of Plagueis.

“Do not lecture me, droid. I know all too well how vulnerable we still are,” Sidious retorted with a scowl. “I will need to take some serious thought about how to make certain that Wayland’s exact location remains unknown even to the individual I send to follow up on these experiments.”

Again Sidious looked down at the three dead bodies on their tables, smiling at the excruciating pain their faces all showed. The pain and fear they must have felt still echoed in the Force of this room, and he drank in its heady tonic. But it was the notes on how pliable Sith Alchemy had made them which made them far more interesting. *Like an individual doped up on ‘Slaughter and a hallucinogenic, but without any downside or visible effects, unless it is taken too far.*

Sidious ordered the droid to give him a copy of the stages of the alchemic experiments for him to look over, and once the droid had done so he gestured back to the hallway. “Now, let us return to the cloning experiments.”

“Yes, master.” IG-42 led the way through the darkened corridors to the room nearest to the Sith alchemy room. This was the largest room on this level and contained thirty of the missing cylinders, lining the room.

Yet when Sidious made to enter, IG-42 held out a hand. “A warning, master: this cloning experiment was built around an effect from an animal which impacts the Force in a negative manner. You will feel some discomfort if you enter the room.”

“I am Sith,” Sidious said coldly. “Discomfort is nothing.”

With that he pushed the droid’s arm aside and opened the door, entering quickly, only to gasp as the Force, the Dark Side which fueled his body, which surrounded him at all times even when he was hidden under his Stealth, left him utterly. “What?! What is...?”

Stumbling back out the doorway, he felt the Force return, his strength and

certainty likewise returning, and the Veil covering him once more. "What was that?" he said, looking to the droid who seemed somehow darkly amused by his reaction.

"I do not know how the master found them," IG-42 said. "That information is not in my archives. But do you see several little animals stuck on various trees in there?"

Sidious looked and spotted the animals in question. "I see them. And...?"

For a moment the droid fell silent, and then when it spoke again it had once more assumed Plagueis' voice. "These animals have a most fascinating ability to actually push back the Force. They are the first animal that I have ever discovered that use this ability. It is a truly astonishing find, though it is obviously an evolutionary necessity given that the dominant animal on their planet hunts via detecting the Force. I will have to return to that planet at some point for more in depth study.

"But more importantly, this ability has some implications, one of which I believe could be connected to the clone madness. The clone madness, as anyone who has studied cloning should know, is a symptom which clones that are grown too quickly fall prey to within months of being decanted. This is regardless of species. There has never been any real in depth study done on why this could be, as there is very little in terms of genetic code which would carry over between all the species who have attempted cloning in the past. But I have long believed that it was because of a connection through the Force from one clone to the original. If we can cut off that connection, it then supposes that we will be able to grow a clone from youth to maturity far faster."

At that Sidious nodded, once more remembering the conversation he'd had with his master on that score. The implications were huge, both for the war effort and for Sidious' secret projects.

"However, this will have a negative effect on indoctrination, both in efficiency and the amount. For example, this would probably not work on clones that must have secret orders," the voice said, dust dry, "or who are supposed to act independently beyond a certain point. However, for the purposes of this experiment, Yinchorri hunting packs could be perfect. And what better tools to use to send against Master Windu and remove him before he is able to influence the vergence?"

Seeing the Yinchorri young growing in the cloning cylinders, Sidious nodded, remembering the conversation he and his master had on that topic. While not as obsessed with the vergence as his master, Sidious knew that removing Windu, as he had Dooku, was a necessity in the long term.

Despite his interest in the Yinchorri clones, however, Sidious did not try to

enter the room once more. That feeling of being disconnected from the Force was a terrible one. It made him feel normal, mortal, and fallible, and he had **hated** the very idea.

Then a small, sinister smirk came to him. "Droid, I am about to perform some experiments. Begin recording."

The droid accepted command, a small iris on one side of its head opening and a video recorder coming out. "Ready, master."

Sidious raised a hand, pointing his palms out into the room, creating a bolt of Sith Lightning towards one of the animals within on its tree branch. Yet the technique failed almost instantly after crossing into the room, the lightning dissipating instantly. Scowling, Sidious then grabbed up a small rock and launched it forward as hard as he could hurl it with the Force. That worked, the momentum of the rock carrying it forward after it entered the field the animals were creating.

Smiling, Sidious reveled in the animal's squeals as it died, watching the others shift in their places. *That is good. At least I know there will still be a way for me to deal with those animals if need be.*

But none of them made a move to try and leave. When he asked the droid why, he learned that they become almost symbiotically connected to the tree, their claws digging into the tree in such a way that they could no longer pull them out. Ignoring the still smoking creature, Sidious looked over at the droid. "Next?"

The next experiment proved to be a series of Darth Maul's clones, ten of them, in fact. And again, they were ensconced in an anti-Force field created by the animals. Or rather, eight of them were. The remaining two were normal clones outside the range of the animals' effect. According to the droid, Plagueis was trying to discern what the effect of the anti-Force field would be on a pure Force-using clone.

Very good Plagueis, very good indeed. Now here is an experiment which will be the equivalent of the gift which keeps on giving, Sidious thought, darkly amused by the turn of phrase his mind had come up with, unbidden.

Of course, Sidious didn't trust the droid to have told him about everything, though it did in fact turn out that it had. Even after Sidious had searched the mountain of Wayland from top to bottom over the next few days, he found no sign of any secret experiments being kept from him, no sign of any secret hidden away by his master to be used against him.

Plagueis, Sidious thought as he once more returned to the control room of the mountain, this time with the medical droid next to him. *It turns out you did fully trust me and, in that, proved that you were not worthy of being Sith. Still, I cannot say I am*

sorry for it. It certainly has benefited me, and it will certainly benefit the Sith Order going into the future.

Sidious sat down in the throne room cum control center of Wayland, thinking hard for a moment as he stared at the readouts all around him. "Tell me, droid: can you extrapolate from known data?"

"I am far better at doing so on a medical and genetic model, master. If you're asking me for a psychological analysis of future events, I can at best give you an educated guess," IG-42 replied.

"What would the psychological impact be on an individual forced to fight a clone of himself?"

For a moment the droid was still, and then its body language seemed to shift into an almost sadistic seeming stance. "Master, are you speaking of two parallel clones? That is, two clones of the same experimental branch?"

"I am."

"In that case, master, it would depend both on the individual in question and whether both of them knew that they were clones or thought that the other was simply a clone and that they were the original."

"Extrapolate that it is two Darth Maul clones and that both will be indoctrinated to believe that they are the original, facing a clone of themselves," Sidious ordered.

"Anger, master. Great anger, mistrust, and fury. It will force them to push themselves to a far greater degree than anything else I can think of and will make them more pliable for further mental manipulation.

"Excellent. How long until the clones that are part of the anti-Force experiments are finished growing?"

"They will not be finished growing for four more months, master. Their indoctrination, however, will not match the clones that are being grown in the slower manner, which will have an impact on their individual skills," the droid cautioned.

"Hmm. I would not be able to return that soon the event. Slow their growth process down to half of the normal amount. Proceed with the indoctrination of all the skills and abilities that my former apprentice had accumulated. Can you do that?"

The droid answered in the affirmative.

"Good. When that process is done, release them into a fighting arena, two at a time, and have them fight one another. Record the events and then welcome the winners as Darth Maul, one after another. Keep them separate. By that time I might have enough ships to send them all out on individual missions."

“Query, master: will the individual you will be placing here to oversee the Sith alchemy experiment arrive before or after this event?”

“After. I do not want that individual in any way involved with the cloning experiments. When will you have the first batch of Yinchorri ready to go?” Sidious asked.

“Two months, master, no later. Further, thanks to their simpler physiology and genetic imperatives, the indoctrination on them will be far more effective than it would be on humans. Though I will warn you that Lord Plagueis had not decided what background story to program them with.”

Sidious thought for a moment, and then nodded slowly. “Here is the background story which we will feed them. It will be simple, but will answer their questions for certain. Getting them off planet and somewhere useful without their knowing anything of Wayland will be more difficult, but still feasible. For now, I have more questions before I must leave to head back out into the universe at large...”

OOOOOOO

Master Fay stared out the small viewport of the bridge of the *Lucrehulk* that they had christened the *Tyrant's Bane*. A combative name not to Master Fay's liking, but it had been decided on via a vote. And she couldn't really argue about the sentiment behind the name.

It had taken them several jumps to reach the edge of the ever moving, almost completely un-chartable hyperspace territory surrounding Ruusan and the quadrants around it. But they were here now, and it was time to jump into the true unknown.

But something was making Fay pause from calling the others to the bridge, something that she had been sensing for a few days now ever since Master Yoda's call about Master Dooku.

That had been a trying time. Count Dooku had become, if not a friend, at least a well-respected colleague to Master Fay, and Lily had liked him too. But the one most hurt by Dooku's death had been Harry, who had looked up to the man as one of very few male role models he had had in his life.

Something about the Makashi master's death was calling to her, something that occurred afterwards. Concentrating on it made Fay not wish to turn her attention to anything else just yet, such as plotting a hyperspace route through the disturbances with the Force.

No navigation computer would be able to do that; it fell on the Jedi to use the

Force to try from here on, and it would get harder the closer they came to Ruusan. Whether the nebulae was warped into its current unplottable form was through luck or from the Thought Bomb was unknown, and the whys of it didn't matter so much as the fact they would have to get through it somehow. The nebulae covered nearly the entire Terrab Sector and large segments of its neighboring Mid Rim sectors.

"I can't explain it better," she said, not looking away from the view as Lily's ethereal fingers floated through her hair. "The Force as a whole is once more not responding to my requests for knowledge. There is both hope and fear in the future, as if the future is suddenly in flux to a degree that I have never seen before. It is as if the impact of your and Harry's arrival has suddenly gained more impetus, or perhaps a rebounding effect? The dark has receded, but not enough. There are far too many variables for the Force to tell me which way it will go. There is something else there, something that is just on the edge of my senses, but I can't grasp it."

Fay now looked up at Lily, smiling slightly. "But because of Dooku's actions, hope is returned: the Light side has gained some strength. It falls on us to add fuel to that little fire so that it can keep growing."

"Isn't that good enough for now, love?" Lily said with a smile.

Master Fay smiled, raising her hand to catch Lily's hand with her own. It glowed with the Force for a moment and their fingers interlaced, Lily's hand feeling almost solid for a second. Their relationship had shifted somehow along the way, moving from friends to something far closer to lovers. It couldn't make that final leap, of course. Even with the Force, Fay couldn't touch Lily for more than a few seconds. She couldn't even send out her presence in such a way as to interact with Lily rather than with the Force as a whole.

But oddly enough, that was all right with Master Faye. She had never been in a relationship physical or otherwise, and she had always felt the mental and emotional aspect was more important than the physical. Harry and Aayla's bond certainly seemed to prove that, and both she and Lily were satisfied with what they had now.

For a moment the two were just silent, holding hands. But then Fay sighed, taking her hand away from Lily's, the Force draining out of her hand as a moment of tiredness struck her. "It is time for us to prepare for the next phase of our journey."

OOOOOOO

There were far better ways of being woken up than the intercom going off, Harry reflected, but if there was a better thing to wake up to than Aayla kissing his

cheek, her body wrapped around his, Harry didn't know what it could be. He turned his head, kissing her lightly on the lips and staring into her eyes as their arms tightened around one another. They might have kept on kissing for some time if the intercom hadn't gone off again, rousing them from their little world. "Harry, Aayla, it's time. We are ready for our next hyperspace jump."

The two padawans quickly joined their fellow padawan, the single Knight, the single ghost, and the two Masters in the control room, which made Harry's lips quirk and he thought, *My, we are an odd group aren't we?* He felt Aayla's response, which caused his lips to form into a smile while the others all nodded at them in greeting.

Master Fay sat at the navigation controls, but with her chair turned around to the open area between the navigation position and the captain's chair. The others were already sitting down in a semicircle, and Harry and Aayla quickly slotted in. They didn't touch one another, but they sat in a circle, all of them in meditation poses and looking to Master Fay, who would lead them in this joint exercise.

She smiled at the three padawans and began to explain the method for reaching out through the Force to discern a route through hyperspace. It was something none of the trio had done before, since it was an advanced form of discerning the future somewhat, though it was more connected to the material plane than most such. *Although, is the hyperspace really a material plane?* Regardless, the longer the jump, the harder it was to actually discern.

But their route forward was so congested that the padawans' inexperience actually wasn't as much of a burden as it would've been otherwise. This was proven a few moments later as Master Giiett shook his head slightly, not coming out of his own meditation but breaking his concentration to both continue the exercise and speak aloud. "The hyperspace routes are more cluttered than even I had feared. I cannot see any route forward."

"I can," Master Fay said serenely. "But these will be short jumps: very short. And I fear that each jump in turn will be more difficult the further we go into the nebula."

Quinlan nodded his head. "I can see a way through for a single hyperspace jump of a single parsec out system. But we'll be coming out between star systems. I've never done that before."

"Ah, there it can my turn to be the voice of experience, for I have" Giiett said. "Due to a faulty hyperspace computer, admittedly, rather than through any actual plan, but it isn't that different. We should, however, close the viewports. A normal individual's mind is not ready to see how dark it is out between star systems. Ah, I

mean that literally rather than in terms of the Force,” he joked.

“Understood, master,” said the three padawans in turn, all three rolling their eyes at Micah’s attempts to lighten the atmosphere. Even so, it had worked, and he smiled, satisfied.

The next second all of them turned their attention once more to joining their Force powers. Master Fay led them, but this did not mean that the others could not speak their minds, although, admittedly, splitting their attention between doing so and keeping the connection going was somewhat difficult.

“Are we ready?” Master Fay asked, despite it not being needed at the moment. The others simply sent back affirmative thoughts through their momentary connection, and she slowly turned and began to input the coordinates for the jump.

A moment later it was done and they all came out of the meditation and moved to their various positions. Once they were situated, Harry brought up the ship’s shields, concentrating them on the forward bow, just in case. And then the Tyrant’s Bane hopped into the unknown.

They came out several moments later after a hundred light years had passed. And, like Master Quinlan had said, they came out between two star systems. Directly ahead of them was a giant asteroid blocking their way forward through hyperspace. The areas between star systems were not empty as many people thought, they were filled with detritus like this: wandering planetary bodies which had not been grabbed by a sun or which were stuck between various different gravity systems, muddying up hyperspace.

“Well done, everyone,” Master Fay said, smiling at them all. “We have taken our first hyperspace jump into the anomaly. Now, let us concentrate on the next one.”

Several hours of meditation passed before the group consciousness was satisfied with their next jump. It was again a short one, this time only fifty parsecs. And again they came out in the darkness between two star systems. They all looked at one another as Master Fay input the command for that jump. “This is going to take a very long time, isn’t it?” Harry asked.

“Months or years, more like,” Quinlan said with a nod. “We tend to forget how much space is between star systems, but here, I’m afraid, we are going to be getting a rather pointed lesson in that fact.”

“Nonetheless,” Master Fay replied serenely. “It is what we need to do.”

The other Jedi Masters looked at her, while the padawans all simply nodded. Giiett asked, “I take it that you have felt something?”

“I did the moment we began that first jump. We are on the path the Force

wants us to follow,” Master Fay replied. “Beyond that, we will have to see.”

“Good enough for me,” Master Giiett said with a faint smile. He made no mention of the Balance or the Force in general. At this point, with the Veil still in place, more Light was precisely what he felt was needed in the universe.

Concentrating like this on trying to find their route, however, was the mental equivalent of playing hundreds of mental chess games all at once, when every move they made on one had to affect all the others. The trio of padawans were all exhausted after three jumps, and Quinlan was not faring much better. Even Giiett was feeling it after the third jump.

“Go to sleep,” Master Fay ordered. “Master Giiett and I will discuss how to organize our time from here on out, but it makes no sense for us to simply concentrate on speeding along. I’m getting no sense of urgency, so it behooves us to use this time much more wisely.”

The trio of youngsters all nodded and headed off wearily, followed quickly by Master Quinlan. Once they were alone, Giiett looked at Fay and Lily quizzically. “No sense of urgency?

“None. There is a sense of waiting, of anticipation. But there is no sense of urgency attached to our personal mission, and I cannot see that allowing the passage of time will hurt or hinder anything beyond us,” Fay replied. “Indeed, I am getting the exact opposite feeling: that the more we are out of sight, the better.” *Although it would be more accurate to say, the longer Harry and Aayla are out of sight the better. While my own future is important, the future in its entirety still changes with the actions of the two of them.*

“Ah, but that doesn't mean it won't, just that we can't sense it?” Micah asked.

“I can tell you only what I can sense, Master Giiett,” Fay said sighed.

Master Giiett thought for a moment, then nodded slowly. “That will have to do, then. When a man is blind, he would be foolish to say he would not follow the one eyed man.”

“That is the most mangled phrase I've ever heard,” Lily said, and all three of them laughed before turning their attention to other things.

OOOOOOO

Anakin was thrilled as he and Master Windu stepped out onto the planet of Taanab. This was the first mission Anakin had been on that had taken him away from the Jedi Temple, and he was eager to prove himself in the field. He had been on a few

missions on Coruscant and had even met some senators and chancellors, but despite that, Anakin felt this was his first real mission as a Jedi.

"Jedi padawan, Anakin," Mace said from behind him, reaching down and grabbing Anakin's shoulder lightly and steering him to one side so they were no longer in the way of the other passengers getting off the liner the two of them had taken from Coruscant to Sullust. "You are projecting your thoughts again."

"Sorry, master, but keeping my thoughts to myself is somehow harder to do than not looking into other people's emotions."

"It is, but it is a necessary skill," Mace replied, both acknowledging the difficulty and pointing out the necessity in one sentence. "Now come, Cloak yourself and follow me."

Anakin nodded. Concentrating, he pulled the Force around him in such a way that normal people wouldn't be able to see him. The technique made him grumble, since he had heard several times there was another, subtler version of the technique, but Mace had yet to teach it to him. Shaking that thought off, he quickly raced to catch up to the taller man, whose long strides had already taken him away from the rest of the passengers.

He had been with Master Mace for over two years now. And in that time Anakin had grown, both in height and power, he knew it. He knew he was strong for his age, yet his master continually proved that he still had a lot to learn. And the way he did made that fact seem so simple and obvious, Anakin could only feel awe at how far he had to go rather than irritation at that fact.

The two of them swiftly exited through the spaceport's local office, heading into the city beyond. As they walked, Mace ordered, "Tell us about our mission here in your own words."

Anakin paused as Mace said the phrase, 'in his own words.' That meant Mace wanted more than a simple precis on their mission: he wanted Anakin to think about what it meant. Anakin was being tested once more. That was fine. Anakin had gotten used to being tested, learning quickly not to simply blurt out the first thing that came to his mind, whatever his belief that the Force guided such thoughts.

"We are to look into an allegation against the sector senator from the local planetary governor," he said slowly. "However, the governor did not come to us in person; rather, he sent an intermediary. That intermediary himself did not feel trustworthy through the Force. It feels more as if someone is trying to use the Jedi Order here, master. To remove a local opponent, perhaps?"

"Very good," Mace said. "That matches with my own reading of this mission

as well as the High Council's. But what will that mean for us?"

Again Anakin paused before replying. "We will need to continually use the Force to discern whether or not we are being led? It's hard to explain, master. The evidence we will find... I have no doubt **we** will find evidence, but we will need to make certain it was not planted, that it matches reality..."

"Close enough. Your meaning comes through, Anakin, and as you grow up you will become better at expressing yourself. But do you think you are up to that task?" Mace asked, his face blank as he looked down at his padawan.

"I aim to do my best, master," Anakin said, wondering if this was another moment where his master was going to try to burst his ego. He couldn't tell one way or the other just yet.

Mace often did this, attempting to humble Anakin, though it rarely took. Anakin knew himself too well to not have realized this. Instead, Anakin took his words and acted on them because he knew the more he learned the better, more powerful Jedi he would be. *And power was the thing*, Anakin thought. The more powerful a Jedi he became the more things Anakin could change.

That was why he respected his master so much: he was truly a powerful Jedi and one of the greatest lightsaber duelists to ever live. He had seen Master Mace take on several other well-known lightsaber duelists all at the same time and beat them, although Master Mace had refused to teach him Vaapad until he was older.

"Stretch out your Force senses, Anakin," Mace said, taking the boy by the shoulder and leaping up with him to a nearby building. There they hid in a small alcove for a moment, with Mace on the lookout. "Tell me what you can sense here. I want to know if it matches what I can sense."

Complying, Anakin closed his eyes for a few more minutes before opening them in looking at his master. "...A sense of danger? A sense of danger towards the two of us in particular?"

"Indeed. Hence my earlier question. I did not sense that before coming to this planet, but it is here now. I cannot tell any more about it than you can, which is worrisome," Mace replied.

"So we'll just have to be ready for anything, master," Anakin replied confidently.

Mace smiled at that and, for once, made no move to burst his young padawan's bubble. The Force was not giving them anything specific to act upon, and there was precious little they could do at the moment other than be ready for anything.

"Come," he said instead, turning away and leaping towards the next rooftop

over. "Let us move on and start our investigation."

The two of them, using their Force powers, stayed hidden for the most part, watching the comings and goings of the sector senator's mansion, seeing what kind of people he surrounded himself with when he was not on Coruscant. Before this he had been lauded as one of very few Sector senators who remained in touch with their roots, heading home for at least a week out of every month. But there was a sinister ulterior motive behind that seeming largess.

They quickly learned that the man was indeed crooked. He had numerous contacts they traced to the local underworld, especially the local drug dealers. On top of that he had four personal slaves, girls taken from the planet's population and who had been given to him as presents by the underworld gangs.

While Mace was dismayed that the man's perfidy had gone so long unnoticed, the sight of the four slaves through his range finder made Anakin's blood boil. Indeed, it did so to such a degree that his master looked at him sharply, his narrowed eyes and harshly denunciatory face ordering Anakin to control his emotions better far more easily than any words could.

Anakin did so, though he did not do so in a manner that most Jedi would have. Instead of simply bottling them up and forgetting about them, Anakin stuffed the images he was seeing through his rangefinder into the back of his mind with the anger that accompanied them, vowing to himself that he would make every person who owned a slave in the universe **pay**.

Power, I need more power to change things like that! My mother's work with her charity group is just not enough! The universe must be made to know the evils of slavery, and if they do not understand, then they will be made to pay! Still, he kept those thoughts off his face, not willing to deal with another lecture about how a Jedi should not let his desires drive him or blind him to reality.

After a few days spent on planet they had more than enough evidence of the senator's wrongdoings to remove him. "With the chancellor's push to hold the senators accountable and his anti-corruption campaign, we could easily see him behind bars right now, master, so why haven't we gone back to Coruscant to do that? Or are we going to wait and ambush him here?" he added, his face lighting up eagerly. "That way we could also free his slaves at the same time."

"Remember what I asked you when we first arrived, padawan," Mace said, sighing sadly. Again his padawan allowed the now to cloud his ability to discern the future, allowed his anger to get the better of him. That anger against all things slavery was still with the boy, despite Mace's best efforts to wean him out of it. "We must look

into the Shadows at all times, although the idea of an ambush is indeed a good one. A man such as the senator has too many resources to give him even a chance to run.”

Anakin was about to say something there, but then at Mace’s raised eyebrow paused, trying to remember that conversation. “We need to investigate the whistleblower as well?” he asked.

“Is that a question or a statement?”

“A statement, master,” Anakin replied firmly.

“Indeed. And this will allow us to go with your plan of ambushing the senator upon his return,” Mace said, throwing the boy a bone.

That didn't even take as long as investigating the governor had. It turned out that the whistleblower was almost as corrupt as the governor in question, though he didn't keep slaves. Instead, his vice was being a part-time owner in a local blood sport. After watching a match, Anakin could only shake his head. It was like pod racing and city combat rolled into one horrible, and very bloody, game.

“Well, we have all the evidence we need. Now we must find a local individual in the political and on the police side of things who is both not corrupted and who is capable of doing the job,” Mace said with sigh.

Anakin actually let loose a groan at that, and Mace chuckled, patting him on the shoulder. “Now, now. Missions like these are the bread-and-butter of the Order. We can't have combat missions all the time. Even Guardians don't.”

“Doesn't make me any happier, master,” Anakin replied cheekily.

“A Jedi does not need to feel happy when doing his duty,” Mace said, his lips quirked into a faint smile. “Although it is to be hoped that this should not take long. We can rely solely on the Force for this, rather than gathering physical evidence as well as that from the Force itself, after all.”

They had turned their attention to this task for barely a few hours before Anakin's wish for excitement came true.

The two of them were moving through a crowd in the planet’s capital city when there was a flicker of movement behind them. Anakin turned as someone grabbed his shoulder, twisting him around. Shocked at someone actually noticing him through his Force Cloak enough to do so, Anakin halted his immediate reaction, and the next thing he knew his master had grabbed him by the back of the cloak and pulled him away from the person who had initially grabbed him.

A blaster bolt went off, the blast passing through the space where Anakin had just been standing, impacting Master Mace’s lightsaber as he interposed it between them. The snap-hiss of the blade activating merged with the crackle of the bolt being

deflected. Then suddenly everything was all cries and shouts as over a dozen blaster bolts opened up from above the Jedi and the crowd around them.

Mace hastily threw up a Force Shield over the surrounding people. One of the techniques which had now spread throughout the Order, it once more proved its worth, saving the lives of the local citizens caught in the crossfire. "Everyone, run!" Mace shouted, hoping to keep that from changing.

The locals needed no second urging, racing away from the fighting. The attackers had come from above and behind the two Jedi, so this allowed the crowd an egress. Soon, even over the continued light of the attacker's blasters hitting Mace's Force Shield, they could see their attackers.

There seemed to be four main groups of attackers, three of whom had rushed forward to close with the Jedi first. Seven were on the roofs above them, firing down with heavy rifles. Two groups of six came in from either side. Now, with the crowd of the way, they rushed forward, their blasters firing, while another group came up behind the Jedi, too late to save their more eager fellows, but also the closest portion of the ambush.

And all of them were Yinchorri warrior caste: green and pale gray scales, a heavy, reptilian head with a forward thrusting snout, and deep-set eyes protected by heavy ridge bones. Mace had not seen any Yinchorri since the mission against them, and now, here they were, attacking him and his padawan out of the blue. *What are they doing here?* he thought, even as he slipped into a defensive lightsaber style, pushing Anakin slightly away from them.

Seeing his apprentice still looking a little shocky thanks to his near brush with death, Mace barked, "Anakin, snap out of it!" even as he dealt with the last of the trio of Yinchorri who had already closed with the Jedi.

Anakin did so quickly, activating his own lightsaber, a bright blue blade to Master Mace's purple. "What are they, master?"

"Yinchorri. A shade out of the past, dealing with one of my missions from before we met. I have no idea why they are here, but do not hold back. They have killed Jedi before," Mace warned.

Nodding, Anakin brought his lightsaber up and began to deflect bolts back or to the side, taking some of the pressure off Mace. He also threw up his own Force Shield, a solid bubble of Force blocking the leftmost attackers.

No longer needing to cover them both, Mace, while continuing to use his lightsaber with one hand to deflect blaster bolts, reached out with the Force with one of his own signature moves. A Force Crush caught the Yinchorri on the right before

moving along in a line, crushing each Yinchorri's chests in turn like someone had just smashed them all with a log to the chest.

That Jedi power was a little too close to outright aggression for most Jedi to use, but Mace could do so without fear of falling to the Dark Side. Anakin blanched at seeing it used on flesh and blood opponents for the first time, but he quickly followed up, twisting around his master and leaping in the direction of the attackers coming at them from behind. His lightsaber flashed, protecting his body in midair from the blaster bolts, of which he deflected many back into the attackers, until he landed in among a few more of the Yinchorri, hacking this way and that.

At the same time Mace leaped upwards, attacking the ten Yinchorri on the rooftops, canceling his Force Shield to do it. In the process of trying to get down from the roofs in order to get around the shield, the ten Yinchorri were caught flatfooted, and the first two died before the others could even raise their weapons.

Below on the street, Anakin's lightsaber failed him against a cortosis vambrace, but Anakin had actually seen that coming through the Force, such was his ability with Force Precognition. He ducked underneath a bayonet stab from the owner of the vambrace and reached up to grab its blaster. Using that touch, the ten year old powered a Force Push that hurled the reptilian sentient away to land face first into a nearby building with bone crushing momentum.

He then leaped away quickly, his lightsaber coming back to life just in time for him to cut another Yinchorri in half. His lightsaber then deflected two near pointblank blaster bolts back into the shooters, leaving him facing four Yinchorri. They didn't retreat, however, racing to grapple, their bayonets raised or forgotten. At the same time, behind him Anakin felt his Force Shield crumble, letting in the leftmost wing of the attackers.

Before Anakin could be flanked and overcome, Mace finished with the Yinchorri on the roofs. He landed in among the new attackers, lightsaber flashing. Mace finished all of them off within seconds thanks to how tightly they were packed as they raced forward, but left one of them alive even as he cut through its legs. Behind him, Anakin finished off the last of the attackers there.

Staring dispassionately down at the Yinchorri, Mace pointed his lightsaber's end directly between the Yinchorri's eyes, the hum loud in the sudden silence as the battle ended. As Anakin moved to join him, Mace asked, "Why were you after us? Speak, and I will give you an honorable death. If not, I will simply leave you crippled."

Mace knew that that threat would get through to the warrior, where an actual normal threat would never have. To continue to live crippled as he was would be the

ultimate dishonor. And though he would take no pleasure in it, they needed to know if there was something more behind this attack other than bad luck.

"We will have revenge, Jedi! Revenge on you and the others who beat us! Revenge for our species' subjugation!" the Yinchorri gurgled.

"That is all?" Mace asked, surprised and disconcerted. He had thought, perhaps, that this was a sign that the local senator had noticed them somehow. After all, Yinchorri were not the only species which could see through Jedi mind tricks like the Cloak. To hear that this was for revenge was troubling. "Revenge for your species' being forced to give up space, revenge for the Jedi beating you when you tried to expand?"

"Revenge! We will prove the Yinchorri are still strong!" the Yinchorri shouted, then actually lunged forward using only its stomach muscles to raise its upper body, impaling its own forehead on the end of Mace's lightsaber before he could pull it back. Staring in shock, Mace didn't try to move until Anakin reached out with the Force, hurling them both away as his Force senses finally screamed out a warning.

The Yinchorri's body exploded, hidden thermal detonators going off with its death. Only a hasty Force Shield from Mace saved both of them from being badly wounded. "Thank you, Anakin," Mace said. He had been so astonished at the Yinchorri's suicide that he hadn't felt the sense of danger in the Force.

"You're welcome, Master Windu," Anakin said, nodding at the Force Shield. "I think we're even. I didn't feel any aggression from that first one until he touched me either," he confided. "I suppose I still have much to learn."

"Of course you do, but do not blame your lack of foreknowledge on a mistake on your part, not for this, at any rate," Mace said. At Anakin's quizzical look, Mace explained. "The Yinchorri are blind to the Force, Anakin. They are able to ignore mental techniques, and this spreads to our ability to sense them through the Force. That makes them very dangerous."

"Are we liable to run into more of them, master? The way that one was speaking..." Anakin trailed off, staring at the bodies of the Yinchorri all around them. "And well, the way they kept coming. Their fanaticism is disturbing."

"I am rather afraid we will, Anakin. The Yinchorri were nothing if not fanatic about their race's superior strength to others," Mace said. "Although where they came from is beyond me."

"Still, our presence here is now known to the locals, Anakin," Mace went on with a gesture towards a few of the civilians who were slinking back into sight. They could also hear the sound of sirens in the distance. "That means that the time for

hiding has passed. We will need to move quickly against the planetary governor. I will also contact the Temple and have the sector senator taken under arrest. We will move first to his palace, free his slaves, and search for more evidence against him immediately."

Even as Anakin grinned, Mace's mind was still on the sudden ambush by the Yinchorri. *How did the Yinchorri know we were on Sullust in the first place? On the other hand, we were not covering ourselves during the trip on the liner, and I suppose my features are rather memorable. Someone could have spotted us and sold that information to further criminal types. Still, that is something to look into later.*

Finishing their task did not take over long, and later that day the two of them were once more in the local Hypercom array, speaking to the Chancellor and Master Ranicisis both. The Chancellor, who had been brought in when the Jedi arrested the sector senator, listened intently, then congratulated both Anakin and Mace for their speedy and evenhanded handling of a delicate issue. "You have both my thanks and the thanks of the Senate. With another corrupt official removed, we are that much closer to cleaning up the Senate permanently."

Even as they nodded at that and the young padawan grinned, the two Jedi Masters hid wan smiles. While Palpatine had continued his work to revamp and try to streamline the moribund Senate bureaucracy, his efforts to drain the swamp that was the Senate itself had failed to yield results just yet. Still, this particular case of corruption was clear cut enough that even the Senate wouldn't be able to complain.

"Although this attack on you concerns me. We have had several instances of Yinchorri like that being found in pirate gangs or other underworld groups, but this is the first that has come to my attention in which a Jedi was attacked this brazenly," Palpatine went on, his face grave. "I've been in touch with the quarantine forces, and it is the opinion of them and my military advisers that these groups are survivors of bands the Yinchorri had sent out to cause trouble while they were preparing their main expansion forces. They have thrown off their species' normal indoctrination to obey the Leader caste, which you forced to surrender during that campaign, and struck out on their own."

"The Order agrees with that analysis, though this is not the first attack on a Jedi," Ranicisis said sadly. "Three days ago another such attack occurred. Master Choi and his padawan are both dead. They were on a simple show the flag type diplomatic mission and had no opportunity to even defend themselves."

"I am sorry to hear that. Any death is a sad one, a Jedi's even more so given their service to the Republic," the Chancellor said, shaking his head. "I could wish

Chancellor Valorum had moved against them more forcefully and more quickly so that they did not have time to spread these little spoiling groups. But if they are after the Masters who were involved in that mission, you may be targeted further, Master Windu."

"Now that the threat is known to me, both my padawan and I will be on the lookout for more such," Mace said simply. "I will not retreat to the Temple with my proverbial tail between my legs. If the Yinchorri wish to find me, I will simply be ready for them. The main question will be how they are able to prepare such ambushes in the first place."

"I'm sorry I can't be of more help, but my own sources in the underworld are very limited. A downside to my anticorruption campaign, I suppose you could say," Palpatine finished drolly.

"We can only take what comes as the Force wills it," Mace said philosophically.

Next to him Anakin grinned. "Hey, if this means our missions will be more interesting, I'm all for it."

Mace rolled his eyes, but the Chancellor chuckled at that, exchanging a nod with the young padawan. "I said I'd watch your career as a Jedi with interest, young man. Just see to it that it is not a short tale, hmm?"

OOOOOOO

"It's purple," Harry said blankly, staring at the monitor that was showing an image of the planet their ship was orbiting. "Our first inhabited planet in over a year of travel and it's purple. Gah."

"What's wrong with the color purple?" Aayla asked, confused

"It's girly," Harry and Alecto said as one before they laughed.

"Ah, I would dare you to say that to Master Windu's face, boys. It would be a lesson in humility that would no doubt serve you both good in the long run," Master Giiett said.

The youngsters all looked at him in confusion, but it was Quinlan who supplied the answer. "As you know, Master Windu is one of the finest duelists in the Order. What you obviously do not know is that his lightsaber blade is purple."

"...Forget I said anything," Harry replied, remembering what he had heard about the creator of Vaapad. Alecto nodded just as seriously, while Aayla laughed at the sudden reversal.

It had been a year since they had begun their journey into the unknown

regions around Ruusan, and this was indeed the first planet they'd come upon that had any inhabitants, their cities visible from orbit as scattered lights below them. The atmosphere was purple, a light, almost violet color. Something in the air colored it like such, but according to their ship's scanners it was still breathable. There were a few trace elements that would not be good for an offworlder to get too much of, but they should be fine given their Jedi powers

"They don't seem to have any kind of space-based industry. I wonder why," Lily said. She was currently peering over Aayla's shoulders at present, while the Twi'lek was using their space-based scanners to make certain there wasn't anything threatening out there.

"Why would they?" Fay replied with a sigh, coming out of her meditation. "This planet is the only other astral body in the system outside their star itself. And if they have any understanding of hyperspace they know it would be practically impossible for them to jump anywhere else. I imagine they retreated somewhat technologically after being abandoned by the Republic, but I hope not to the point where we will be obligated to help them recover technologies. That could take years, after all."

"Master Fay, do you sense anything specific down there that we should know about?" Master Giiett asked.

"Nothing important. However, I think that we need to leave Alecto and Aayla behind." Fay replied.

"May I ask why, master Fay?" Alecto asked, cocking his head thoughtfully to one side.

"I have not found the minds of any sentients down there but those of humans."

Harry nodded. "If they have retreated into a pre-space mentality, then humans might be the only species on the planet. If they're all human, most of us will fit in, of course, but..."

Alecto nodded glumly. "I'd have to use Force Cloak all the time, then, to hide my presence, and there should be one of us left behind anyway, right?"

"Exactly. And it would have to be you or Aayla, I think," Master Fay said with a smile.

"And I am both better at Cloak and can change my appearance, my skin color, and even my overall species if I try hard enough," Aayla said, nodding. She could do that if she had to, though it was intensely painful. Lekku were not just for show: they were connected to Aayla's brain, containing within them the portion of a Twi'lek's mind devoted to memory.

“No, I think you can get by with just a skin color change, tying your lekku down behind your neck and an appropriate wig,” Harry said with a smile. “I’ll even help with the wig.”

“You just want to see what I’d look like if I was human,” Aayla teased, only to fight back a blushing moan as Harry replied via their mental connection.

The image was of the two of them lying in bed as Harry nipped and played with her lekku, his fingers playing with her nipples. And it wasn’t an image, but a memory of the first time they had played around with one another sans their shirts a few months ago. The emotions and feelings came from the memory, making Harry’s comment of, *“I love you just as you are, Aayla Secura; never forget that,”* rather redundant.

Realizing what had just happened, Fay smiled, but stood up resolutely. “Come, let us prepare for this as best we can. Then we can finally get some fresh fruit.” The ship had a lot of supplies, but the fresh food they’d had with them had not lasted the whole year. And the Jedi had been slow to realize this and shift their energies from other projects to creating a hydroponics section of the ship. So while, thanks to Harry’s transfiguration skills, they were still eating well, the actual vitamins and protein they need to fulfill their dietary needs needed to be refilled.

It had been nearly a year as they passed through the void between systems. The stars, gases, and astral bodies in this sector of space were so chaotic that they simply could not jump more than a few hundred parsecs at a time. The one time they had miscalculated, taking the next jump too quickly, it was like the ship had run into a wall in hyperspace, coming out so abruptly it had overcome the ship’s internal gravity. The ship had survived, thanks to its immense durability, but the hyperspace engines had nearly blown, only stopped from doing so because of their own size and durable nature. The six of them had to make a hundreds of tiny repairs throughout the ship and in the engine room, which had taken them several weeks of hard work, but when they were done, all of them came away with more respect for the Neimodians engineering. “Now if only their moral fiber matched it,” Micah had said at the time, causing laughs all around.

The Jedi loaded up Fay’s old ship with small tradable items they had taken from Serenno. These ranged from local spices they picked up back then, all the way up to portable heaters and other more technologically advanced items. Using barter, if possible, would be much easier than trying to use Republic currency, given that the Jedi had known they would be running into planets which would be almost completely cut off from one another.

Soon the ship was loaded, and the Jedi all piled in, leaving Alecko behind to head back to the bridge.

The ship came down through the atmosphere near one of the planet's poles, well away from any habitation, remaining unseen until they were near the planet's surface. Luckily, the locals had numerous shuttles moving around across the planet, so they were able to blend in somewhat better than Master Fay had anticipated. Despite that, they took no chances, landing the ship far away from the city that they had targeted for their trade mission.

With Fay leading the way and Harry and Micah leading the repulsor trays containing their trade goods, the group moved through, first the forest, then the fields around the city. The city was an open one as far as any of them could tell, with no sign of walls or other defenses. Dozens, even hundreds of small, thin roads led into it from every direction, with dozens of large, very thin buildings dotting it, built closer and closer together as they moved towards the center. The colors the locals preferred seemed to be brown, green, and a color that looked almost like tree bark but not quite. Exceptions seemed to be pink streamers from a few of the larger buildings.

The people, as Harry and the others had expected thanks to Master Fay, were humans. They wore traditional spacer clothing for the most part, though with far less variety, and seemed to favor long hair, men and women. They also had tattoos which looked much like what Master Quinlan wore, even the children they could see. And there were thousands of them, many thousands, moving around the city. The entire city seemed to be a bazaar. Almost everywhere they looked something was being sold, with no organization they could see.

However, the Jedi could also sense that outsiders were not welcome. Quinlan, the best of them at infiltration, immediately noticed that there were seven types of tattoos. The one which resembled the yellow Kiffar tattoo across his nose were the second most numerous. The others were dark purple bars around the neck and eyes, which seemed to denote children, women, and the owners of the stalls. Three others, green, red, and blue, were not nearly as represented. The people wearing those tattoos also wore their hair differently, and their skin color was just slightly different enough to be noticeable.

None of the colors of the locals matched that of the Jedi. Realizing this, the group of Jedi pulled back to the outskirts while Aayla and Quinlan moved around the other three and used the Force to alter their appearance to include tattoos which matched Quinlan's. "On you it looks good, Master Fay," he quipped, looking somewhat sheepish at marring the ancient Jedi's face.

“Thank you,” Fay replied absentmindedly, looking up as Lily returned from scouting around for them. “Did you notice anything?”

“There’s some small-sale pushing and shoving among the groups, but I don’t have your Jedi skill with languages. I’d say they are acting more like rival gangs than competing nationalities, but that could just be an impression. The purples are the most numerous and seem to be kept inviolate, or at least none of them were involved in the shoving matches.”

Now that they looked more like the locals, the Jedi dropped their Force Cloaks and moved forward, with Micah taking the lead to find them a place to set up shop. Despite their new cosmetic changes, however, they still drew stares, though not because they didn’t seem to fit.

Instead, it was Aayla and Fay who drew attention. Despite their disguises, both women were still gorgeous, neither having even considered changing their appearance to a great extent. Fay looked like a woman of indeterminate age, but her angular face, unmarked by blemish, her long hair, a blonde-brown that was rare among the locals, and a body that, despite being clad in Jedi robes, was very attractive, stood out regardless. Only her lips, thin and no-nonsense, kept away the admirers.

Aayla drew even more attention. She was younger, of what the locals obviously thought prime marriageable age, and her face was just as beautiful as Fay’s. Her hair, a wig she had conjured up, was dark brown, covering her lekku and the top of her head, combining with a skin color and tattoo to match the locals. She wore her normal tight fitting shirt and leggings, her Jedi robe more a cloak on her shoulders. In other words, she was enough to turn the heads of any man near her own age and did as they moved through the city.

And while Fay could keep off the admirers with an expression, Aayla eventually had to resort to the Force, making herself slowly disappear from their attention. Harry laughed at her through their mental link occasionally, but there was some rueful sympathy there too, which made her feel better. The fact he also allowed her to handle it entirely on her own made her feel a lot better about herself.

On the other hand, Quinlan fit in so well it was as if he was moving around the city under Force Cloak, except he could interact with the locals. Between them, Quinlan and Micah had a good idea of the local worth of their goods within half an hour, as well as what they wanted to buy in turn.

Quinlan and Harry started to scour the city for what they needed in terms of tech the locals could provide, which was precious little. After the fourth local store they came to which didn’t have anything they needed, Harry shook his head. “We

won't find any droid parts or anything mechanical here, I don't think. We might need to start thinking about ways of making our own."

"Your transfiguration skills?" Quinlan asked, not arguing the point. He'd been on far more mission to worlds like this one than Harry and knew if they couldn't find even a few of the computer or droid parts they wanted in an entire city like this one, they weren't liable to find them anywhere on the planet.

"No. I can create metals and things, but actual computer parts or robot units? No. Maybe if I had the disparate minerals on hand, but even then it would be hit or miss. Quality control would be a big issue," Harry said dryly. "Although..." Harry frowned in thought. "I could put droid bits and pieces together into a working format, at least, and do the same with other things via the Reparo technique. But I'd need a starting point."

The two men moved on in silence until Harry stopped, staring at a shop that was well away from the others. This might be because of the smell of the store's goods: fertilizer, a lot of it. "If we can't fulfill one of our needs here, we have to at least fill one of the others. Master Fay might not have Master Ti's way with plants, but between us all we might be able to come up with a very nice hydroponics section rather quickly with the right starting point."

Quinlan nodded slowly. "That's a start, at least. Not where I wanted us to start, but needs must."

The trip to the planet was largely uneventful, thankfully. A good start to their larger mission, everyone agreed afterward. While Micah sold their own goods, Aayla and Harry used the local currency this gave them to buy out all the fertilizer in the city one store after another, with Quinlan using the Force to muddy the sellers' memories just enough so that they couldn't realize two people had done so. After each store they had to transport it back to Fay's ship in packed containers, and then onto the Tyrant's Bane. There Alecto and a few of the repaired droids took them, letting the two lovers return to the surface for their next batch. It wasn't interesting work, but it was necessary if they wanted to be self-sufficient going forward.

Their second day, while Fay and Lily started to buy seeds of all sorts, Harry had the idea of also gathering water, buying several large water containers, each the size of which could sustain a village. While he could create water, the technique was more pulling the water out of the air. If there was no moisture in the air, like in space, then the technique failed. "And this way we can even have enough to have maybe half real showers occasionally," he had said, which sold all the others on the idea.

At the same time, Quinlan scoured the city for mechanical wiring, power cells,

lights, anything and everything that could be turned to their purposes that wouldn't force him to cannibalize from the thirty or so droid fighters they still had aboard, none of which were actually in one piece any longer. The Jedi had already used all the supplies of such they had in the Force-enlarged cargo holds while connecting the Hypercom Array which Master Dooku had claimed from the slaver base where Aayla had met with the two Dark Sisters. They had the space available now for the hydroponics garden, but building it and, above all, lighting it would be tough. After a few hours he began to branch out to other cities, using one of the starfighters to move around the planet, leaving Fay's ship to Harry and Aayla.

It took several days, but eventually the Jedi were satisfied that they had gathered as much as they could from the planet. Any more, Quinlan warned, and they would impact the local economy negatively, something none of them wanted even if the material he had scrounged up would be barely be enough to light and power the hold designated for the farms.

Soon after the last trip down to the planet, Micah called the Jedi together on the bridge once more. As the others entered he smiled faintly, looking at the expressions on their faces, which were much more relieved than they had been the last time he'd seen them a few minutes ago. "I take it your attempts to use the Force to deaden the smell of the fertilizer worked?"

"That and some cleaning techniques on Master Fay's ships and the containers, plus some actual floral sprays, Master Giiett," Harry replied happily. He and Aayla, of course, had deadened their noses during the time they had been transporting the fertilizer, but doing so all the time would have been tedious at best.

"Harry did really well there, actually. The cargo hold where we've stored everything still smells, but we even banished the smell from the route we took and from our clothing," Alecto added, before he shook his head ruefully. "But while this is most un-Jedi of me, I am not looking forward to working on the actual hydroponics.

"That's odd. I would have thought you'd be rather good with plants," Lily said, looking down at Alecto from where she hovered over the captain's chair, where Master Fay had sat when they entered the room. For this jump it would be Giiett who sat at the navigation station, while the others formed an oval between them. They had learned that, for some reason, this physical formation helped the mental gestalt retain cohesion during their attempts to discover their route going forward.

"I'm sorry, but why would you think that?" Alecto asked, his face showing confusion.

"Well, you have a green thumb, don't you?" Lily asked innocently, then

laughed as Harry, Micah, and Quinlan all groaned. The other three just looked blank, and Lily sighed. "I suppose that should teach me to use phrases like that. Anyway, are we going to be jumping out right away?"

"No," Fay and Micah said as one, causing the others laugh. But it was Fay who continued after a moment. "Micah and I have analyzed the distances involved, and after this system we will move out of range of our Hypercom network. I think we should all take the day to contact anyone within the greater Republic that we wish to now. We have no idea how long this will take, but we can make an estimate, and we might be gone for five years or more."

"My, that is a most un-Jedi like concept," Lily teased, using the same phrase that Alecko had used before.

"Perhaps, but this will also allow us to touch base one last time with the High Council," Micah supplied. "I want to give them a report about what we've been running into and get an update about a mission I left undone when I came on this mission. And if whoever is out there is listening in, having each of you make calls would help muddy the issue, so long as we don't give any details."

Fay, of course, knew what Micah was talking about, as did Harry and Aayla. Furthermore, there was little reason to keep it a secret, given their long term mission at present. Yet speaking obliquely about the issue had become second nature to Micah and Tholme both.

After that the Jedi took turns in the communication room, set apart from the bridge for this purpose. Redoing the wiring to connect the ship's internal communications to the Hypercom Array hadn't been all that difficult, though like all such tasks it had been time consuming.

Micah went first, contacting not the High Council, but the planet Cimaroon, a planet in the Mid Rim settled during one of the colonization eras. The reason for this became apparent when, after he spoke to the operator on the other end for a few moments, the face of Master Tholme came up. "Master Tholme. Myself and the mission I am leading are about to step into the unknown. We will be out of communication for quite a while, and I wanted to check in with you, my friend. How goes plumbing that particular current we spoke of the last time we talked?"

Tholme quirked his lips wryly, but replied in like kind. "It goes poorly. The current comes from many different tributaries, and we have to find the one true stream to find the source of the river. As yet, none of my travels have yielded that information. Instead, each time we come upon more tributaries. Some of them are dead ends. Others end in waterfalls or merge into other streams. A series of streams

in particular led out into the desert, but alas, that stream was closed down with finality some time back. I understand that a certain sadly deceased compatriot of ours had something to do with that."

"I see. That's disappointing. And what about clearing up the air?" Micah asked, referencing the ongoing task to root out spies or corruption in the Hypercom Relay System.

"No luck there either. Our air purifiers have yet to come online. The Order is balking at the expense, though that could be because of outside pressure."

"So, no change since the last time we spoke?" Giiett said, while beside him and out of the pickup range Alecto frowned as he tried to translate what the two were talking about.

"Not on this issue, no. In broader news, Master Ranicisis has called off the campaign against the Black Sun remnants. We are not certain we have found them all, of course: given the size of the Republic, that would be impossible. But we have found thousands of bases and more corrupt officials. We have also made a point of putting behind bars as many of the criminal thugs as possible. I understand it's becoming increasingly difficult on many planets for the local criminals to find thugs for their daily operations. The Chancellor's attempt to revamp the judicial code of the Republic and the Senate in particular has yielded some results, but not nearly as much as he had hoped. And corruption and simple vote selling are still major issues within the Senate. I am afraid that, at least, will be a long term operation, and one we Jedi are becoming increasingly poor aid in."

"Why is that?" Giiett asked, honestly puzzled.

"The Order is now being seen as busybodies and outsiders sticking their noses in. 'If it works, why are you trying to fix it?' is a phrase I have heard far too often of late," Tholme replied. "But for more information on that you would need to get in touch with Master Gallia."

"I am afraid that is not going to happen. Still, I hope that you have better luck going forward on both those projects while I am out of communication."

"Yes, your humanitarian mission. I could wish that Master Fay had thought of some other way to use that giant ship of hers, but then again, if she had, she would not be Master Fay. Good luck bringing the good word to the barbarians out there," Tholme said, his tone as ironic as his words, but with his face serious.

"We can only go as the Force wills us," Micah said serenely. "And to my knowledge, no one ever said being a Jedi would be easy, nor that the course the Force sets us safe."

“Indeed. Now, may I speak with my former apprentice? I understand he was assigned to aid you?”

“Yes, he is here.” With that Micah and Quinlan changed seats. The discussion between the Shadow Jedi and the Shadow-in-training, however, relied entirely on old missions to impart meaning, causing Alecto and Micah to both lose the ability to follow the conversation. Waiting for their turn from nearby, Aayla was able to translate for Harry somewhat, but even she quickly lost the flow of the conversation.

Their conversation went into detail on the campaign against organized crime which had started after their mission to find and rescue the Nabooans from the slavers, but also spoke about the ongoing mission to find out more about Hego Damask and the Sith that Master Windu had killed on Naboo. But in the end, the discussion ended the same way, with no real clues about their origins having been found yet. Eventually the two wound down and turned to more personal matters, which ended with Tholme wishing for the Force to be with them all.

Then it was Master Fay’s turn, who wished to speak to Master Yoda before they were too far away. But whereas Tholme and Quinlan had spoken at length, the two ancient Jedi were mostly silent. The feel of the Force in the little communication chamber seemed to thrum, and all the other Jedi waiting outside for their turn realized that the two of them were somehow communing via the Force despite the monstrous distance between them.

Such skill, to be able to speak over that great a distance with the Force. No wonder Master Fay was a legend among the Order even before she met young Harry, Micah mused.

Eventually the silent tableau was broken by Master Fay smiling a serene smile at the other Jedi Master. “Be well and trust in the Light side of the Force, Master Yoda. It has not forsaken us, whatever the Veil might attempt to fool us into thinking.”

“Hrhrhrm. See you again in person, I will not,” Yoda said, sighing faintly, his image in the pickup dipping slightly. “Sadness at that do I feel. But your course, that which the Force wills. May it be with you and all those with you.”

“And with you, Grand Master,” Fay said, still smiling as she cut the connection and exiting the room. She smiled as she felt the concern of Harry and the others, making no mention of what had passed between her and Yoda. “Next?”

Alecto took the next opportunity, though he could not actually contact who he wanted to: the other member of the former Clan Saa. Such would have smacked far too much of his having formed attachments to them beyond that of friends, which in turn would not have been looked on favorably by the Order.

The same was true of Quinlan. Indeed, if the Order had learned he had formed an attachment, especially given how close he and the individual in question had walked to the Dark at one point, it was entirely possible that the Order would have ordered them to cease any interaction. However, given that the individual he wanted to talk to was on Serenno and had to explain her actions to no one at present, they got away with it. *My padawan would tease me something fierce for this if she ever found out, but it is worth it*, he thought as the image of Komari Vosa appeared on the pickup.

Their discussion was brief but meaningful, and then finally it was Harry and Aayla's turn. Like Alecto, the two of them could really not contact most of the individuals they wanted to: their friends among the Order. However, they did have some friends outside the Order they could more easily contact. One of which they had been in contact with every month or so since they had set out on this mission.

Moments after connecting to Naboo, Aayla and Harry smiled into the pickup at Padmé. "Hello, you two. How goes your trip into the hinterlands?" Padmé had not been told where Harry and the others were going or why. All she knew was that they were well and heck out there and moving further away from even the Hypercom network, which was one of the things which made the Republic actually work at all. That was worrying enough without any more details.

"Well enough so far. But this might be the last time we're going to be able to link up to the Hypercom," Harry said, taking the lead in the conversation at a mental nudge from Aayla. "So we wanted to check in with you one last time and ask how everything on Naboo is going. A slice of normality before we head into the abnormal, as it were."

"Heh. Your concern is duly noted and reciprocated, my friends. On the home front, repairs have nearly finished in my capital. The repurposing of the Lucrehulk ship we were rewarded as a system defense ship is done and its shields brought back online. We are still debating what to add to it in terms of offense, but that's a debate that I will cheerfully leave to the House of Commons and my military advisers. The Wookies and I have finalized our trade agreements. I have also begun to work with the sector senator who replaced Chancellor Palpatine. He isn't Nabooan, but I think we can work with him," Padmé said, holding up a hand and ticking off points on her fingers.

Then she let her hand fall out of the pickup and leaned forward. "Oh, and Eirtae says she is going to throttle you the next time she sees you, Aayla. Why you gave Chewie the idea that my Wookie guards should train my maids up to their standards in both combat and engineering is beyond me, but they are enthusiastic, if nothing else."

Aayla giggled, which sent Padmé into chuckles as well, while Harry rolled his

eyes. "Tell that giant throw rug not to be so hard on them, would you? I'd prefer you to have friends close by rather than let their enthusiasm for that kind of thing drive them away."

"Bah!" Padmé replied, waving her hand airily. "It's good for them. Besides, I like the exercise. These days I can actually get away every weekend for a few hours training. Otherwise the most workout I would get would be to carry my clown suit around, and I blame you for that name for my formal robes sticking in my head Harry. Going up and down stairs is particularly irritating."

"You're the queen, Padmé. I'm sure if you put your foot down enough with sufficient force that you could get them to change your formal robes to something more...good looking? Mobile? Less of a farce?" Ayala said, slowing as she tried to come up with a single word that correctly described the truly bizarre clothing the queen of Naboo had to wear when acting in a formal setting.

"Now, now, dear, I think it's more important that Padmé saves her tantrums for more important things," Harry cut in mockingly.

"Tantrums?" Padmé drew herself up, pasting a look of cool hauteur on her face. "I will have you know, Harry Potter, that I am a queen. Queens do not have to resort to tantrums to get things done; we simply command, and our peons obey."

She held that pose for a moment before she broke down, laughing with her two friends. Friends who had become as dear to her as Sabé and the others, for all that they had not met in more than a year in person. The memory of their time on Kashyyyk was one of her most treasured memories, even if she was still wondering why the two of them had been so welcoming.

The three of them talked for around twenty minutes, simply exchanging stories, funny moments, and other things since they had last spoken. Eventually however it became time for them to sign off, as evinced by Lily poking her head through the wall and informing the two lovers of this. The three fell silent, then Padmé sighed. "How long do you think you'll be out of contact?"

"We have no idea, really. Three years to five is our best guess," Aayla said, wincing. That would be a long time to be out of contact with everyone, let alone their friends such as the rest of Clan Saa and Padmé.

"Ah." Padmé too winced. "I am very sorry to hear that. These conversations have been both a balm and an aid to me at times. Your good humor and your good sense have helped me equally. Even some of the homilies you shared with me. What was that one, 'a leader's first job is to see the world as it is, not as she wishes it to be?'"

"Yes, that was it, though I think I said, 'as he wished it to be,'" Harry said dryly.

“That’s sexist,” Aayla said, pushing her lover’s shoulder. Then they both fell silent, smiling into the pickup once more. “May the Light of the Force be with you, Padmé Amidala. Stay safe, and stay well,” Aayla said, with Harry nodding agreement beside her.

Though she was confused by the odd wording, Padmé understood what it meant and nodded. “And the same to you, my friends. Come back to m... Come back to **us** as soon as you can.” With that the trio cut the connection. After a few moments alone, the two padawans sighed and, holding hands, left the room, heading to the bridge.

The two of them joined the others, and, working together once more, they found the next jump forward through the nebulae. They jumped twice more that day rather than take breaks for training. This would allow the two Masters to have the evening to meditate on their overall journey.

Alecto and Quinlan spent their evening playing a game of regicide, followed by Quinlan teaching the Duros teen how to subtly use the Force to influence games of chance. It was an underhanded use, of course, but it was surprising how often you needed such techniques when undercover. Lily joined them, offering some suggestions at purely physical means of cheating. She had apparently been something of a card shark in her youth.

To no one’s surprise, Aayla and Harry did not join the other groups. They walked around the ship, sharing ideas of what they wanted to see inside the ship in the future, or ideas on how to improve it in various small ways. None of their conversation happened in the physical world: often because they were too busy kissing one another, and other times because they just didn’t see the point. Eventually, however, they wound up back at their cabin.

Inside they spent some more time just kissing, basking in their connection. Then Aayla sat back, a spike of uncertainty, anticipation, and curiosity going through her. Harry wondered what his lover was planning, but had no time to ask before she had moved away, twisting them so that Harry sat on the edge of the bed with Aayla moving down to sit on the cabin’s deck between his legs, her head resting on his inner thigh, her hands on his waist. “Harry, you know that, um, that thing you did with your mouth the last time you gave me a massage? I want to try the same to you.”

Harry blushed hotly, remembering what Aayla was talking about vividly. She’d had a bad fall during a training session that had involved Master Quinlan and several dozen of the training balls, injuring her hip bone and bruising her rear. Harry had soothed her bones with a massage, then, feeling greatly daring, had offered to kiss the

pain away. Aayla had agreed, and eventually that had ended up with Harry going down on her. It had been touch and go as Aayla instructed him more with her emotions via their link than by words, and a slow thing too, since she had been so exhausted, but it had been immensely rewarding also. She had been far too exhausted afterward to reciprocate, and they'd been pushed hard in exercises since.

Slowly Harry nodded, a desire to feel Aayla's mouth on him in such an intimate manner welling up within him followed by a desire to do the same to Aayla. He could all too clearly remember the tangy, almost tart taste of her juices on his lips and was eager to see if she was just as tasty a second time around.

Warning: Limey scene incoming:

Her body shuddering at the imagery in Harry's head, Aayla shifted her hands to the top of his pants. With Harry helping, she eventually pulled down his pants to pull them around his ankles, then off along with his underwear. Tossing them behind her, Aayla turned her attention to the meat of the matter.

Given the fact they'd been kissing and caressing one another for so long, it should have come as no surprise that Harry was already erect. Yet the sight of his member so close caused Aayla a bit of a shock. She twitched backwards, staring at it intently.

Harry was about the size of three fingers around, she judged, fitting in her hand snugly, like a slightly thinner lightsaber hilt, while in length she estimated he was a few inches longer than those dry, horrible illustrations the Order used to describe male anatomy said was the norm. His member was also veiny, pulsing as Aayla raised a finger to gently rub along the underside of it. From the small opening on top of the slightly larger, bulbous head, the liquid Aayla knew was pre-cum had already begun to drip.

Moving her thumb up, she caressed the tip, letting the liquid pool on the end of her thumb as the penis twitched and arced further upward, becoming slightly harder, if that was possible. *Wow.*

"Oh my God, is that how I looked when I was going down on you? This is intense, Aayla!" Harry sent, moaning aloud as Aayla tightened her grip on his shaft. *"Go slow, love."*

"Mmmmm..." Aayla returned, before licking at her thumb. That sight caused another shiver to travel down Harry's spine, heightened by Aayla suddenly smiling up at him.

"It tastes good. I didn't expect that. Then again, that shouldn't surprise me. This is all so new to us," Aayla murmured aloud, bringing her other hand over from

where it had been laying on Harry's knee up his thigh to join the other that was working his member.

"True. Master Fay and my mom never went into detail on the kinds of things a couple get up to, and I doubt the Temple's instructions on anatomy ever covered sex at all. Unless they tried to do it in a 'scare them away' manner... Aayla? What's wrong?"

Harry's question was caused by a spike of unease and even disgust coming through their link. She had just run her hand from his knee to his balls. In so doing Aayla had discovered that the hair around Harry's member was not nearly as nice to the touch as the hair on top of his head. It was rather stringy, harder to the touch, and not very nice, despite Harry having had a sonic shower earlier that day.

"Are all human males this hairy, Harry?" Aayla sent, then both of them laughed at the pun.

Despite that moment of levity, Harry still felt his lover's unease and replied quickly. *"I think so. I mean, yeah, I think so. Human women are too. If, if it bothers you, we can stop."*

Shuddering once, Aayla swiftly shook her head, moving forward so that she was actually breathing on the head of Harry's member, which twitched in response. *"I think it likes me... No, Harry. It, it's not that big a deal; I just wasn't expecting it to be so different. Just tell me if I'm doing anything wrong, like I did with you, okay?"*

Getting a positive response to that, Aayla began to move both her hands up and down his shaft. Despite her words, Aayla couldn't quite ignore the feel of the hairs against her hand, so she forwent any attempt to play with Harry's balls. She pumped his shaft several times, receiving nothing but nonverbal encouragement from their link while Harry moaned aloud, unable to think coherently for a moment. The pleasure was also hitting her in a somewhat low key manner through their link, the feedback loop the two of them had felt before in action here.

After a few more strokes, Aayla hesitantly leaned forward, her tongue flickering out to lick the head of the shaft, her lekku twitching in response as the pleasure Harry felt at that hit her. She giggled then and began to lick at the head and the shaft in earnest. It was like some kind of ice cream or meat stick, the texture something that she had never felt before, though she supposed her lekku came close in a way.

More pre-cum began to drip from the tiny slit, which Aayla licked up eagerly. This went on for a while, then Aayla felt ready to move on. Harry's opinion at this point was obvious from the emotions pouring down to her from their link. So after a moment's hesitation, Aayla opened her mouth and took the head of Harry's shaft into

her mouth, sucking hard.

Harry hips bucked up off the bed, accidentally sending several more inches into Aayla's mouth. Her eyes widened, but she went with it, taking more than half his shaft into her mouth, licking and slurping as the pleasure once more arced into her via their link, her nipples hardening and her lekku slowly twitching. With so much of his shaft in her mouth, this left her hands to pump the rest of his shaft and once more forced her hands to come into contact with the hair around his genitalia.

She twitched at that, but Aayla was so far gone in giving pleasure and receiving a shadow of it in return to care. Instead, she was trying womanfully to force more of his shaft down her throat, actually enjoying the sensation for some reason on top of the pleasure coming to her from Harry.

It couldn't last. Jedi endurance training was never intended to carry over to carnal acts, despite Shmi's joke when they had met her on Tatooine years ago. Aayla was able to force about two-thirds of Harry's shaft into her throat, reveling in the sensation in a way she had never anticipated, when Harry pushed through the pleasure fugue of his mind to shout aloud, "Aayla, I'm going to finish soon!"

Pulling back, Aayla instinctively pumped Harry's shaft extra hard as she captured the head of Harry's dick in her mouth, feeling it pulse and spurt in her hands before a gooey, hot liquid filled her mouth to bursting. Much of it ran down her throat, but soon she had to pull back entirely, letting Harry's dick out of her mouth with a pop as she struggled to swallow.

With Harry looking down at her in something approaching euphoric shock, Aayla for some reason she could not define opened her mouth, showing Harry the cum pooling in his mouth. Then, still locking eyes with him, she swallowed, licking her lips clean.

"You taste good, Harry," she moaned, then found herself lifted up off the ground via a Force Grab and tossed onto the bed, where she bounced once more as Harry pounced on her, banishing her leggings and panties away before diving in to return the favor.

End Limey content

Despite the amount of pleasure the two of them gave one another that night, however, the next morning wasn't nearly so pleasant. Harry woke up to Aayla moving around on the bed next to him, accompanied by a feeling of her wanting to keep her intentions hidden from him. This was practically impossible given the depth of their mental bond, and he cracked an eye open to see her kneeling beside his waist, a small device of some kind in her hand, which she was moving towards his crotch.

Yelping, Harry rolled away and off the bed, glaring at Aayla. “What the heck, Aayla!?”

“Oh don’t be a baby Harry, it’s just a depilatory device. I **really** did not like your hairs down there. Heck, I got a few of them stuck in my mouth, for goodness sake!” Aayla said aloud, reaching out to grab his arm. “Now hold still. This won’t hurt a bit!”

“You must be joking! Those things hurt like nobody’s business without cream. Haven’t you ever seen Quinlan shaving before? Besides, did it ever occur to you that I might not want to be shaved down there? That sounds really uncomfortable,” Harry rejoined.

“You don’t have to deal with it like I do if we’re going to continue doing what we did last night to one another! Come on, Harry, isn’t it nice to use your mouth on me like that without fear of getting hair in your mouth?” Aayla wheedled via their link.

Seeing Harry hesitate, she decided to push the issue, moving forward to wrap one arm around Harry’s waist to keep him still. But once more her purpose came through their link, and he stepped back sharply. Then, as Aayla leaped for him, he raced toward the door to their bathroom. “Get back here, Harry!” she cried, moving after him.

OOOOOOO

As the Jedi had feared, Sidious did become aware of this flurry of Hypercom signals. The bots the Sith had embedded deeply into the HRS were programmed to look for any communication that was to or from the Jedi Shadows, all of whom he knew. He also had them programmed to try and keep track of Master Fay, who had become a threat both because of the way she went about her duties as a Jedi and because of all the new techniques the woman had introduced to the Order.

Because of this, Sidious had a very good idea of where Fay was going, though not why or how she was going to get there. He eventually put into motion several methods to spy on the edge of the unknown territories there, in an effort to possibly set up a trap for Fay when she returned.

Sidious’ bots, however, missed the communication with Naboo entirely. The conversation had none of the watch words they were programmed to look for, and by this point the communication between the unknown link and Naboo was well known, so none of the bots tagged it as unusual.

However, Sidious had little time to actually devote to figuring out what Fay and

her party was doing. He was beginning to do two things that would help in the long term plan to wipe out the Jedi. One was consolidating more powers into the Senate, in an effort ostensibly to cut down on corruption and bureaucracy, which was prevalent throughout the Republic. This would also allow him to slowly start building up the opposition forces he would need to then gather those powers to his personal position as Chancellor. The end of the Great Plan was close; he could feel it.

OOOOOOO

The Jedi aboard the Tyrant's Bane had fallen into a routine before they had left behind the last sign of the Republic, heading into the unchartable corridor around Ruusan. Finding a way forward took so much out of the Jedi that they could only do it as a group, and only three jumps at a time, regardless of range, before they were too mentally exhausted to continue.

So they had come up with a schedule to make the most out of every day. They would first have breakfast, then Fay would teach them some meditation techniques to help build their awareness of the world around them, making the jumps easier to calculate as the trip went on. This was followed by Harry helping the others with the new Force techniques, while at the same time all the padawans, and even Quinlan, were asked ethical questions by the two Masters on how and when they should use the Force or simply the mind. Lily would then take over with Fay, instructing the others in runes.

Quinlan and Micah didn't make as much headway as either could wish on transfiguration and conjuration, but became far better at the Reducto and Bombarda techniques. Aayla, however, became almost as good at transfiguration as Harry was, while also raising her Force Telekinesis to another level. And all of them, including Alecto, were very happy with their project in runes.

After those exercises they would jump once more, followed by physical exercises and Master Giiett teaching them all other things, just as if they were still younglings, followed immediately by a third jump and dinner. After that the group would work on the various projects around the ship, of which there were many.

Spending all their time onboard a ship and in the deep dark, it soon became the projects which really allowed them to realize how much time had truly passed. The first real breakthrough there came from Quinlan several months after they left the HRS behind:

"So... What are we looking at here?" Lily asked, floating between the various

sand boxes in the room and looking from them to the astromech droids standing by each box and Quinlan. *This can't be what I think it is... Oh, but if it is, the results could be...*

"This, Mistress Lily, is the result of me asking myself a question: do all the runes in an array need to be written out by a Jedi in order for the array to work? The answer is no. I took the four astromech droids we had onboard and programmed them to follow the examples of the runes Master Fay had written out, and then started to work with the lighting array, removing myself from the construction one rune at a time," Quinlan said, a certain amount of un-Jedi-like pride on his face. "It turns out we need to etch out the first rune and the following power runes, the ones that actually take in the Force for the array, but that's all."

Lily and Fay promptly began to question Quinlan about his programming of the droids and his methodology, while Aayla beamed at her master, and Harry began to question the droids themselves. Droids could, of course, be programmed to do fine detail work to a degree that most sentients would have trouble matching, so if they could really be programmed to do rune work, that was going to be a major help for their larger projects. *Of course we'll have to make certain that the droids aren't allowed to leave the ship, but that's a minor detail.*

Harry, Aayla, Fay, and Quinlan began to work with the droids immediately the next day, breaking from the routine to get the work done. Once the last rune was done, the array activated, lines of sharp yellow power leading off in every direction, the third of the eight cargo holds of the *Tyrant's Bane* expanding as they watched. A moment later they were in darkness, the only light a small area around the hold's entrance. Quinlan looked around into the darkness and chuckled. "Um, I think we did not think this through."

"Hmm, needing to write each power consuming array as we go is going to be an issue yeah. For now," Harry said, holding up a hand and conjuring a flame above them, "let's start our way back. I can already hear my mum warning us about being trapped here again."

Not all such experiments went well, of course. One such experiment, done after they had finished creating their massive, would-be hydroponics garden, that did not start out well at all was sparked by Aayla. "I wonder if we can use the Force to try and accelerate the growth of these plants?"

"We should be able to, though I have never used the technique before," Master Fay murmured, dreaming of what a farmland this size could mean in the future not only to them, but to any needy planet they came upon. "Did Knight Ti ever

describe the technique?"

"She did, though she never actually taught me. Still, it should be easy enough," Aayla said confidently, leaning down to touch the soil of the garden beneath their feet. At her request Harry moved to join her

Seconds later she and Harry quickly backed away as a tree exploded out of the earth, moving from sapling to ancient tree within seconds before collapsing to the side with a booming crash as it aged to death. "Too much power?" Lily quipped.

"Too much power," both padawans replied ruefully.

Master Fay had a little more luck. She was easily able to measure the amount of power needed, but somehow she treated the plant the first time as if it was a living animal, somehow imparting to the plant a semblance of life. The plant showed this after it burst out of the ground next to the downed tree. Its vines—it was a local ground crawling bush which was supposed to have something like a strawberry on it—reached for Master Fay and the others, forcing them to jump back. "Now, how did I do that, I wonder?"

Her mishaps continued from there, somehow the plants attaining a measure of sentience from her Force touch. "This is hilarious," Lily declared after the third such attempt. "If I ever needed proof you really weren't an elf, this is it."

"Oh, hahaha," Fay drawled, rolling her eyes at her best friend cum semi-lover. "Were you any better with plants?"

"Ha, me? No, God no. I was good with potions, the end result of plants, so to speak, but I think I killed my mother's rose garden so often trying to help, it gave Petty Petunia a complex," Lily retorted.

Watching his two mothers, Harry cocked his head. *So that's how it is, is it? Well, I have to say I don't know how that would really work, but I suppose I'm happy for them. I hope they are happy together too.*

They did eventually, however, come up with the proper Force technique to encourage the seeds they had planted to grow appropriately, with no additional life to them beyond an occasional twitch in an unfelt wind. This gave them a ready supply of spices, grains, and fruit, though they would need to eventually add some meat animals too for added protein.

Of course there were other ways to note the passage of time than just their various projects and their various visits to the planets they came upon along their route. The progression of Harry and Aayla's relationship was one of them.

Masters Fay and Micah had decided that everyone should get a day off after the group had successfully finished work on third hold, the last one they had enough

parts to light and power, and thus the last one they would be working on for a long while. It had been a very busy few months finishing up the wiring for the third hanger, redistributing the parts, and moving things into it. So despite their training, all the Jedi, including the two Masters, were eager to spend a day simply drifting in the deep black between stars.

Micah, Alecto, and Quinlan spent the day reading or playing Sabaac together. Lily and Fay spent the day with the two young lovers, then split off after lunch to simply talk in Master Fay's room.

For their part Harry and Aayla spent the entire day together. After their parental figures broke off, the two of them traveled around the ship, not saying anything aloud, but occasionally kissing or hugging, all the while flirting with one another via their mental link. At dinner time they did not join the others, instead having a private dinner in their room, which Harry had prepared via his cooking skills and judicious use of transfiguration. Aayla had decided that she was ready to take the final step in their relationship, and Harry was determined to make the whole evening as special as he possibly could.

He succeeded admirably. Aayla was practically floating on air next to him as they finished cleaning up after the meal. Then she smiled, pushing Harry down to sit on the edge of their bed before backing away, her hands going up to her cloak, which she tossed to one side.

Warning Limey moment:

As Harry watched, his mouth drying, Aayla began to dance. She wound around the room, her moves so sensual it set his heart to racing. She slowly removed her clothing piece by piece, ordering Harry to remove his own. He did so, simply waving his hands and banishing his clothing off his body save for his underwear so as to not take his eyes off her. Their bond throbbing with love and desire, neither could concentrate enough to actually send one another words as Aayla removed her last article of clothing, leaving her standing in front of a nearly naked Harry.

For a moment they simply looked at one another, the bond between them literally singing with desire, love, and a certain amount of anticipatory tension. Harry had not added much in terms of height over the years since they had been on Naboo, still standing around six feet two inches. He had, however, grown into his frame, a process that wasn't finished yet, but was well on its way now, with wide shoulders and a well-muscled frame complete with a trim waist. Which, Aayla was pleased to note, showed no sign of any hair. His face had lost what little fat it had, becoming thinner, marked by lips which readily quirked into a smile or a laugh, complete with dimples.

From there Aayla's eyes flicked down, seeing the visible reaction to her little show, a tent standing up proudly from Harry's underwear.

Aayla had grown up in far more obvious ways. She had shot up in height, becoming around six feet. Her bust size had also increased to a low C-cup. They stood out proudly on her chest without a hint of sag, her purple nipples standing out proudly from the small dime sized areola around them. Below that Harry's eyes tracked down to her extremely trim, flat stomach, and down further to the petals of her flower. It too was purple, as Harry had already known. The petals of her flower were visibly engorged, pulsing, almost, under Harry's gaze, and he could see nectar already pulling there, dripping down her thighs.

Harry held out a hand, and Aayla took it, letting Harry guide her forward to sit on his lap, his erection trapped between them for a moment as they kissed. They kissed slowly, languidly, lovingly. Neither wanted to rush this night; they just wanted to **feel**. Eventually Aayla pulled back, moving her arms from around Harry to push him back to lie flat on the bed. Crawling after him until she crouched over him, Aayla wound one hand down, removing his boxers. She gleefully found then that Harry had thankfully continued to follow up on her suggestions to shave down there. *Thank you, Harry*, she thought at him gratefully, unwilling to break their liplock..

Eventually, though, they did need to breathe. "I love you, Aayla," Harry said aloud, whispering the words against Aayla's lips as he also said them through their link, his hands falling from her back to wind down to her hips. Aayla replied in like manner, then reached down a guiding hand as Harry pulled her to him...

End limey moment

And so life went on aboard the *Tyrant's Bane*. Elsewhere, life and its accompanying events also proceeded apace.

OOOOOOO

Master Ranicisis stared around at the other High Council members. It was rare these days that this many of them were in the temple at one time, and he knew that there was no doubt going to be some kind of debate now that Master Bilaba was due to be rotated out. One lone wintry eyebrow rising in query, he decided to confront the issue quickly. "Good evening one and all. I take it there is some topic you wish to bring up to the Council?"

For a moment there was silence, then Eeth Koth spoke up. He looked serene, but the other Jedi could feel that that serenity was only on the surface. "The separate

training center on Serenno is becoming a divisive point. The techniques being taught there and on the training frigate under Master Saa are not spreading fast enough through the Order from the top down. More padawans are learning them, becoming...emotional and imaginative. There are questions, questions being asked about the Oath, about the nature of the techniques, and many, **many** Masters and Knights are becoming...disgruntled. It has taken time to build up as the techniques have spread and more people discover they cannot learn them for whatever reason, but it has now."

The training center at Serenno was set up to have classes of one youngling clan, up to eighty children, along with fifteen or so unassigned padawans and thirty to forty Masters and Knights at a time for retraining in lightsaber skills. The groups would be rotated in or out once they learned what were being called the main three and once their lightsaber training was done. The Masters could, if the teachers agreed, leave before they learned the techniques and their lightsaber training had reached an acceptable level. This process could take as short as three months, as had been the case for the youngling clan Padawans Potter and Secura had taught, or as long as a year. The lightsaber retraining process could take even longer.

Before the training clan had been created, Clan Saa had shared their techniques on a very ad hoc basis, all while under the watchful, even censorious, eye of the Council of Knowledge. While word of the techniques had spread quickly through the Order, and a surprising number of younglings, padawans and knights had learned one or other of the main three, the others had often eluded individual Jedi, to say nothing of some of the other techniques that Master Ti had taught a few other Knights and Masters over the years since she had taken up permanent residence on Serenno. This was made worse by the fact that the more set in their ways a Jedi was, the more certain in the Force, as many would put it, the harder they found the new techniques to learn.

There were over 11,000 Jedi in the Order. Upwards of eight thousand of them were Consulars. The vast majority of Consulars used Niman, the lightsaber technique derided as 'Jack of all trades, master of none,' which had been directly linked to Jedi deaths in the field. Even though the Temple was also running a retraining program, the process was slow and painful.

More than half the Council agreed with that, with Master Poof taking point. "I have been approached by several hundred Consular Masters and Knights over the past few months. Many believe the Consular class is being demeaned, almost denigrated, by the push to retrain their lightsaber skills. And many of them are very, very

concerned about the amount of, of imagination and emotion that seem to be needed to make the most of the new techniques. They complain, rightly, I feel, that it gets in the way of their connection to the Force, to the balance that must be at the heart of any Jedi's ability to perform his missions."

Poof looked seriously at Yoda, Koon, and the others who had learned the new techniques, whereas he, Tiin, and several others had not been able to. "If we could bring them here to the Temple, teach them here, then we could combat some of that. This way, it seems as if we ourselves do not truly trust the people teaching it or learning the techniques in the first place."

As Grandmaster, Yoda normally would allow the others to have their say on something like this before he gave his own opinion. However here he spoke up quickly, shaking his ancient head. "No. Meditated on this point I have. New techniques, a danger they are, if not as you describe. Feed arrogance, pride they do if we are not careful. Further, a danger there still is. If taught here on Coruscant, the new techniques, aid in spreading the Dark Side as much as the Force."

Yoda could also have mentioned the runic training area and wanting to control access to that subject as much as possible. But with Fay gone, only Shaak Ti knew anything about them, and Knight Ti had refused point blank to teach anyone else without Lily or Fay around to vet them. A fact that Master Yoda had discovered via closed courier message, thanks to the growing concern about the HRS, and this was a decision he wholeheartedly agreed with. *Even if this old canine, desire to learn new tricks he does.*

"We are in danger of seeing a split within the Order," Master Koth said, backing up the other Master and drawing Yoda's mind back to the present. "These techniques are being spread throughout the Order at an ever increasing speed, but they are being spread by the younglings and padawans for the most part! And both groups that come out of the training center are changed: more emotional and less devoted to the Oath of the Order. Many of them have evinced a desire to take the Old Oath as the members of Clan Saa have to a sentient."

Master Poof nodded, while Gallia indicated agreement too. "That is a **very** bad precedent, especially since in a few years we will see many of those padawans going through with that statement. And all of this doesn't even consider the change last year about allowing physical relationships! We need to control the training center further if we do not move the training here to the Temple. Perhaps add a class on the Oath and why balance and serenity is more necessary to a Jedi than emotions."

"Going to join Master Ti and Knight Vosa I will be, replacing Master Bilaba,"

Yaddle said, smiling serenely. "A High Council member, there at all times there has been. Continue to be the case it will. Attempt to show the padawans and younglings the proper path we will. Suffice that will for the concerns?"

The discussion continued from there, but Yaddle's suggestion had taken some of the starch out of the other team, since she, while having learned some of the new techniques, hadn't embraced them and was a strong proponent of the Oath as it was administered today rather than the Old Oath. Tiin and Ranicisis also spoke up in favor of the training center, mentioning the survey that had been done linking the lightsaber styles to Jedi deaths. Having a separate retraining center, they argued, was simply good sense, adding to the seriousness of the retraining. And since the existing Council of Knowledge had failed to embrace the new techniques, why try to instigate a fight on that point when the alternative was working?

Yoda let them all talk, leaning back and removing himself from the discussion entirely now that Yaddle had stepped forward on his side of the argument. He knew that Ranicisis would keep the training center going, just as he had the learning frigates: because the Thisspassian, like Yoda, Windu, and several others, understood that the Dark Side was still gathering strength, the Brotherhood was still out there, and the Order was still in danger.

Though none of the High Council seemed to have realized the implications of what Yoda's meditations about the future if they taught the new techniques here on Coruscant really meant. *If danger there still is of bringing the teachings here to Coruscant, then an enemy within the Order we might have. Search for him, I must. My task that will be.*

OOOOOOO

Master Windu knew his strengths and weaknesses as a Jedi Master and as a warrior. In fact, the honesty with which he addressed those weaknesses turned them almost into strengths. Therefore, while most Master would have been leery of letting their padawan fly them, he allowed Anakin to be their pilot on missions that may or may not involve high-speed space chases or combat.

Their specially modified Delta-6 Sprite had room for two plus the astromech droid, which had been given to Anakin by the queen of Naboo as payment for his service years ago. It was armed with two forward facing lasers and a six magazine proton torpedo 'box' launcher. The term 'box launcher' in this case meant that Anakin had modified the proton torpedo launchers so that they could launch the full spread of

the starfighter in one long wave rather than having to fire them in dual launches. It would burn out the launcher and damage the ship, but if they ran into a capital ship that they needed to bring down quickly it would prove its worth, Anakin was sure. Mace wasn't, but then he preferred to put his faith in the Force and in people rather than mechanics.

"Space traffic control, this is Daran and Colrain of the Ultrafighters. You should have us in your books, so please don't let anyone get itchy trigger fingers," Anakin said into the pickup, his voice sounding cocky, brash, and arrogant.

Not that that is much of a stretch for Anakin, Mace thought ruefully. For all his efforts, Anakin still could be an arrogant little so-and-so at times. *If only he didn't prove to live up to his own arrogant view of himself most of the time, it would be much easier to polish that out of him.*

His eyes closed as he began to meditate on their mission. Mace allowed Anakin to handle the conversation with the local space traffic controller, knowing that the youth had their identities straight for this mission. Such was the danger of their target running away the instant she knew that the Jedi were looking for her, that they couldn't come in officially. Instead their identity was that of a scout team for a mercenary guild coming in to see if this planet had any local contracts. The mercenary company in question, the Ultrafighters, were known to have a variety of different starfighter designs among their group and to be primarily a fast assault and elite strike group. Indeed, they were one of the more reputable mercenary groups out there. *Which, of course, means nothing at all. But at least the identities will convince anyone who looks at our arrival that we are who we say we are.*

Moments later the starfighter was cutting through the atmosphere, and Mace opened his eyes. "I sense much danger about this mission," he said without preamble. "We will have to be on our guard."

"More Yinchorri, master? They do tend to dog our steps," Anakin said, his voice a mixture of dusty dry sarcasm and humor.

"Not so much, recently, though I am still concerned about how they had any idea where we would be on that last mission," Mace replied, his stern features becoming even harder.

"I still say it was because of that homing device I found on our Consular class ship we used last time. Artoo did a great job noticing and disabling the little thing," Anakin said, while the droid in question let loose a cheerful beep-boop noise from behind Mace.

"Perhaps, but how did they get that bug there in the first place?" countered

Mace.

"Easy. That first time we tussled with them we had to wait for a ship to be sent to us to take us back to Coruscant. So a few of them were ordered not to attack us, and instead they bogged our ship while we were still dealing with the locals. It was the same ship we were assigned the last two missions, master," Anakin said with a smile. "You don't have to complicate everything. Sometimes the simplest solutions are the real ones."

"And you do not need to try to simplify everything to the point where you dismiss complicated matters too much to see the whole picture," Mace retorted, but there was a smile on his face.

In the years since he had taken Anakin as his apprentice, the boy had grown, and had grown on Mace in many ways. The boy was still arrogant at times and headstrong, but it had been tempered with experience, and Mace had infused in him a certain calm acceptance of the Force. He was powerful in the Force, a dedicated student, and understood the Force far better than most his age could boast, though, there again, the fact that he did boast about it was a decided negative. His skills in piloting and mechanics were also incredible, making Anakin one of the best light starfighter pilots in the Order despite his young age. His skill with mechanics was also very sought after, as evidenced by their souped-up starfighter.

They had also worked out quite a bit of the anger that had boiled within the boy at slavery and other such things. Allowing him to contact his mother occasionally had worked wonders, though he was still, generally speaking, unpolished, and seemed to have a rather decided interest in the ladies.

As they exited their starfighter, Mace leaped down, turning to look at Anakin as he followed quickly. Anakin had changed greatly, not only mentally but physically, over the past few years, while Mace had pretty much stayed the same, save for the first signs of wrinkles on his face. Many of which, Mace knew, Anakin had caused at certain points during the years.

But Anakin had changed greatly. He was more than a foot and a half taller than he had been, grown into a teenage body with wide shoulders, well-muscled, with the typical swordsman's build. He wore his simple brown and black pants and shirt easily, moving with all the athleticism of a trained lightsaber duelist. His face, too, had grown. Gone was the baby fat, and in its place was a strong, teenage face, a cocksure smile easily appearing on his mouth. Looking at him and thinking purely academically, Mace could understand why Anakin had begun to garner a lot of interest from the younger padawans and younglings of the female persuasion.

And so long as it is only physical, the Order is willing to look the other way now, Mace thought sardonically, half worried, half amused at the idea. *I would never have anticipated that all those years ago when Padawans Secura and Potter challenged us, but I cannot deny that the Order has changed greatly since then in how it views relationships.*

That was one of the strangest and, in the eyes of many, the most damning change that had come over the Order in the past few years. Yoda had been pushing for more than a decade now to do away with the idea of not allowing bonds to form between Jedi. But he had made little to no headway until Harry and Aayla had proven so unequivocally that bonds such as theirs could be made to be of the Light.

Mace still remembered that: that moment where Harry challenged the rest of the High Council, his hand shining with Force light, as Aayla stood behind side him, grasping his other hand in hers. As the days grew darker, that moment helped Mace realize that there was also light.

But their bond had not been replicated, and, because it had not, the push to allow emotional and mental attachments had reversed itself entirely. The Council of Knowledge, the Council of Relocation, and even more than half of the High Council itself had simply not seen the point of allowing bonds like that. Not allowing such had kept the Order together for one thousand years of peace, after all.

Conversely, they had been forced to acknowledge that humans and other species like them did need some physical outlet for certain urges in order to be completely effective. They weren't happy about it, and a lot of the aliens who didn't have that imperative, such as master Ranicisis, Yaddle, and others, had speculated on the idea of using certain drugs to suppress such. But that idea had been dismissed, since such drugs had negative effects on the psyche. The arguments about it had been quite vituperative, warranting Master Windu's casting a deciding vote on the matter.

Eventually it had been decided to allow Jedi to form physical bonds. However, even there, there was a noted need for oversight. If padawans or younglings formed attachments like that, they were watched closely, and if the watchers believed that the bond was changing from purely physical to emotional, they were separated swiftly. Most of the time this seemed to work, and the separated individuals went back to normal or formed further physical attachments with other people in their new clans. Other times the couple's protests had shown that they would have to be educated further in the need for serenity rather than emotion.

However Mace and several of the other human Jedi knew this was going to change one way or another. Yes, it was possible to separate physical pleasure from

love, but it actually wasn't all that healthy to do so. Humans and the species like them who almost required sex in order to truly function could be celibate or fully active. This limbo between the two was bizarre and unsustainable. But as a stopgap to appease both the New and Old factions, as they were being called, it seemed to be working. Fewer Padawans had taken the Old Oath since the rules had been changed, and some of the tension between the factions had disappeared. Some, not all, and he knew there was building dissent among the Consulars, aided along by the sheer number of combat related missions the Jedi were getting now.

Anakin had, to Master Windu's certain knowledge, two, perhaps even three girls that he was frequently physical with. Yet at least in this Anakin had decided to completely follow the Order's tenets. He had not formed any emotional attachment beyond that of friendship to any of the girls, and Mace knew he had broken it off with one girl when she began to feel an emotional connection to them.

Now if only I could persuade myself that it was because Anakin doesn't want to form emotional attachments to people. But that could not be further from the truth. Anakin is a man of fierce emotions of all sorts despite my best efforts to curb them. There will come a time when Anakin will want to form an emotional attachment to someone, and I am afraid that, as with everything he really wishes to do, Anakin will embrace it wholeheartedly.

That will be a trying time. His power, strength, and abilities have already made him someone to respect and look up to, even emulated by many. Many will not react kindly to his skirting the rules of the Order, while others will see it as a wedge to force further changes in the Order's rules.

Still, it is not yet come, and I cannot see its specter in the Force, so I will cheerfully leave those thoughts for another day. Besides, this mission will probably call upon all of our abilities anyway.

In order to better solidify their cover, Master Windu and Anakin stayed a few days in the city first, looking for jobs for the mercenary company they were using as cover. There was no one hiring, however, the jobs for said, as three local merchants having recently hired mercenaries for an anti-pirate strike in the local star cluster had dried up the job market by the time they had arrived. The middlemen for those merchants were sorry, but that left the two ostensibly at loose ends. Further adding to their cover, the two then gambled away the money their company had supposedly given them, forcing the two to look for local short term jobs to pay for fuel to get off world once more.

This brought them to the bio-tech company, Zoa-Guard, where their target

was working. While Anakin performed his morning meditations, Mace, his features still changed from his normal appearance, called ahead on their second morning on planet about interviewing for a short term security job to pay their bills. He received the okay to come in, but was warned that the interview process would take some time. After agreeing, he logged off the telecom and turned to his padawan. "You heard, of course?"

Anakin's eyes popped open and he nodded. "Yes, master. I'll be ready." He hesitated, then blurted out, "Master, why aren't I allowed to go to the Serenno Training Center?"

"It is not a question of being allowed, padawan, nor is it a matter of trust, but of need," Mace said with a faint snort. "You have no need of going there, not with having learned many of the techniques watching me."

"But not all of them, master. Only the main three," Anakin rebutted. "The STC trains younglings and Masters alike in a lot more than simple shielding, color changing, and stunning. You yourself have said as much before, so why aren't I, or even both of us, taking some time to retrain there? I'm certain that, between the two of us, we wouldn't need to be there for very long to learn everything they can teach, after all."

"Trying to appeal to my ego is beneath you, Anakin, as Jedi having egos at all should be beneath us both," Mace admonished, his face noticeably hardening. He waited until his padawan nodded, looking down at the floor, before going on. "And while you are correct that I can only use the main three, as has become their name, that is enough. More and more Masters and Knights are being rotated through the training center to learn them and retrain their lightsaber skills, Anakin, which was the main reason the Serenno Training Center was begun, and that is an area you certainly do not need help in."

That made Anakin perk up a bit and Mace once more fought not to roll his eyes. *In many ways he is so advanced, but his ego is still an issue at times. After this mission I will push for further mediation and mental training for a time. A few months spent on Coruscant will do Anakin good.*

With that thought Mace went on. "Anakin, you have already been favored above your fellows in many ways. You should have joined a youngling clan when Qui-Gon brought you to the temple, but instead I took you on then as my padawan. You have been allowed to retain contact with your mother, while the Order in the main is still trying to organize this for other younglings and padawans. I even started training you in lightsaber skills because your body control and Force Precognition were so advanced years before you would normally be allowed a live weapon. This does not

mean that you should always expect to be treated as special. Indeed, because I have favored you so much, I demand more from you to offset that. Do you understand?"

"...Yes, Master Windu," Anakin said, with a somewhat arrogant smile curling his lips. "I will not let you down."

This caused Mace to frown. *Yes. Some more mental training is definitely necessary. I will need to carefully balance it, though, so that he realizes both that he is being chastised and does not get his back up because of it.* "Now, prepare yourself. We need to leave within an hour, and I want you to practice your accent for a time just in case you have to talk during the interview."

"Guh, yes, master," Anakin grumbled, bringing out a throat lozenge and setting it to the side. "I still don't see why we can't just Disillusion ourselves and walk in."

"Because Disillusion techniques don't work on robotics at range, and our target is known to prefer droids running her security. If not, we would already have done so, Anakin. Now take your lozenge and let us begin practice."

The Zoa-Guard company's facility was an out of the way set of buildings about ten minute's flight out of the capital, well away from anyone else, like most bio-tech company buildings were both on this planet and on many others. While the universe needed bio-tech, given the proliferation of diseases, that didn't mean the work was trusted by the locals. After all, a serum designed to get rid of bacteria could spiral out of control all too easily, and that was just one example of the Pandora's box that was biotechnology.

The interview happened in a small, out of the way room off of a corridor through the facility, which was small but sprawling, a single story set of buildings all connected by walkways. It was distressingly like many rooms in hospitals the galaxy over, white and almost aggressively bland. The interviewer sat across from the two Jedi in disguise, a Gran who was a rather obese example of his race, his voice a drone.

Windu fielded all the questions quickly and easily until the Gran began to wind down. "...and finally, as the last part of our medical background, you will have to submit a blood sample."

This caused Windu to lock his expression down as wariness crept into him, the Force beginning to niggle at his senses. *Our target needs no further access to Jedi blood given her experiments in that direction from before her incarceration!* "Why'd a need to be doin' that, eh? It be well beyond what most be needin'."

"Because this is a bio-tech company," the Gran said, his voice shifting into a 'talking to idiots' tone. "We need to see that you are not carrying any diseases before we allow you to work here, even for a short term protection job like this."

Windu allowed his face to shift into a wary look before sighing. "A'ight. We's be agreeing to that, so long as we take's it with our own equipment." The Gran scowled, and Windu went on, gesturing at the IDs on the table between them. "We's be mercs, boyo, and we's not be so without getting' our hands dirty. Ain't gonna let you keep a sample and turn around and sell to da authorities after dis when it comes time to pony up the creds."

As he spoke Windu reached out with the Force, using the hand he was gesturing to the IDs with to direct it for a moment, influencing the Gran's mind to agree to that point. This, coupled with Windu's reasoning, which matched what a real merc would be worried about, worked, and the Gran nodded.

However, an instant later the mission went to hell in a handbasket. Sitting beside Windu, Anakin's Force Precognition flared a warning, and he looked around wildly, catching a glimmer of movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he saw a vent opening there in the wall, and, needing no further warning, he broke character, shouting, "Watch out, master!" hurling up a Force shield at the same time.

Both Jedi swiftly stood up, but there was no physical threat at the moment. Instead air was simply blasted into the room, an odorless and colorless gas quickly spreading towards the three sentients in the room. "Shrink the shield! Make it impervious!" Windu barked, joining his power to his padawans as he did. Normally a shield had to be slightly permeable in order to let in air, but facing a gas like this, that would have been just as useful as no shield at all.

"Do you take me for a fool, Jedi? Your features might not match any Jedi on record, but the phrase 'it is only paranoia if they aren't after you' is a survival trait!" said a female voice from a nearby speaker. It would have sounded nice, possibly even attractive, if not for the strident, almost manic tone. "I don't know what twiggled you to my presence here, but you won't be leaving!"

Mace scowled at that, while the Gran, caught up in their shield with the Jedi along with his desk and the three chairs, looked around wildly, his three eyes waving wildly on their short stalks. "Jenna Zan Arbor, you are under arrest for breaking Republic Bio-tech regulations, the Rights of All Sentients Act, by experimenting on sentients against their will, illegal kidnapping, and jail break! Come along quietly!"

"Oh please, you Jedi and your self-righteous pap! I've done my time for all of those already, thank you, and breaking out of jail was simply me releasing myself on my own recognizance," the voice said, almost conversational now, but this was merely a cover.

As Arbor spoke the door opened with a bang, and several attack droids, the

same type favored by the Trade Federation but with somewhat larger shoulders and a recessed head, came in. They immediately opened fire on the Jedi, their blasts battering at the Force shield.

“Now!” Mace shouted over the blaster fire, but Anakin had already released his shield, racing forward with his lightsaber already activating. The first two droids were cut down by a single slash of his blade, but the others backed away, firing at Anakin and falling back into the corridor.

Behind him Mace let his own shield drop, looking down at the Gran. “Don’t try to run. We might be questioning you later,” he said, before moving to follow Anakin out the door. As he did he reached out with his Force senses, making certain that Anakin’s trail of destruction was going in the direction of their quarry.

It was, and Mace hurried to catch up, just as the room they had been in exploded. Later Mace would discover some explosives had been emplaced in the Gran’s desk, but the Jedi had escaped the room too quickly, and a hurried Force Shield saved Mace from injury, though the effort took some energy out of him. The Gran, however, was not so lucky, his body shredded by the explosion before he could even scream.

From the entrance to the building they had entered from came more droids, and Mace turned in that direction, his lightsaber flashing. He could have used another Force Shield, but he wanted to concentrate most of his Force powers on trying to discern what Arbor would do now that she had been discovered. *Will she run or try and fight?*

The answer came to him just as Anakin reached the end of the corridor and found himself being attacked from both sides. But Anakin handled this easily: a Force Push in one direction coupled by a brief Force Shield to block the bolts already shot while he concentrated his lightsaber defense to the other side.

She’s going to trap us here and run, Mace sensed, a feeling of great danger and death welling up from one direction. “Anakin, switch off!” he ordered, sending a Force Crush out, destroying the droids coming in from the exterior of the building.

“What? Why, master?” Anakin asked, not turning to look at the older Jedi as he dueled with both several guard droids at the far end of the corridor and two quad laser barrels which had swung out of the walls.

“She’s going to run! we need you to...” Mace said, catching up to the youth just in time to be caught in yet another explosion, the floor of the intersection exploding up at the two Jedi. The Force was screaming at them, but, unable to raise shields in time, both Jedi were **just** able to leap away enough to avoid a messy death.

Anakin jumped forward, landing in among the droids, only getting his back seared slightly. Being closer, Mace had to leap up onto the ceiling and then away, only to fall short as he was caught from behind by the explosion.

Pain shot through Mace's back, side, and head, as his shirt was fried from his back along with his leggings, his skin burning and shrapnel slamming into his back and shoulder, but Mace was an old hand at using the Force to deaden the pain, and he did so now without even thinking about it. Rolling to his feet and making another leap to land near his padawan while hacking down one of the two quad lasers, Mace continuing talking almost as if the explosion hadn't happened. "She, she's going to run. We need you to be in the air to stop her. I can't imagine the locals will be able to close down the space traffic, and if she breaks the gravity well she'll jump. The Republic can't afford a bioterrorist like her to run free. Go!"

Anakin nodded, quickly racing off, the Force pouring into his body and heightening his speed to a level few Jedi Masters could match, as he made for the company's tarmac. Windu, meanwhile, moved forward alone, using more of the Force to keep from fainting due to the pain of his wounds and using the Force to jumpstart the healing process at the same time. Anakin was still too late to stop a small, single person yacht from taking off from a hanger to one side. The ship, however, thankfully didn't have any weapons and simply raced for open space.

But Anakin was on its heels almost immediately in the modified Delta-6. Lining up a warning shot, he fired while, at the same time, linking his system into the local space traffic. "Attention, local space control. This is Jedi Skywalker. Am in hot pursuit of an intergalactic wanted fugitive. Do not get in my way." With that done he switched frequencies using the Force to figure out which one to use to contact the escaping yacht. "Arbor, put down now or I will be forced to blow you out of the sky!"

"You wouldn't dare, Jedi, if you know what I have left behind. Don't think mere explosives are all of it. I've left a little surprise, just waiting in my lab to add to the surprise I left behind on the penal world you lot stuck me on! You'll need to take me alive to get the antidote, or else it'll be released into the planet's air. Needless to say, it will go viral quickly. Do you want the deaths of this planet on your conscience? Let me go, and I'll give you the code to shut the release agent down safely when I reach open space."

Scowling, Anakin frowned, reaching out for the Force, testing the sincerity of her words and the future. Realizing with a sick horror that she was telling the truth, he started to wrestle with his conscience as the two ships made for space.

Two Headhunter type starfighters rose from behind him. But Anakin, without

any pause, cut his engines for a moment, letting them roar past. An instant later he stitched up both of them with his blasters, sending first one then the other down, tapping the second with two of his ship's proton torpedoes to kill it quickly before racing after the yacht.

"Anakin, I have found and am disarming the device," Mace said over their communicator, just as Anakin regained his former position on the fleeing yacht, both ships breaking out of the atmosphere. "I was able to start up the building's emergency security program and am now locked in here. You'll have to make the call."

Anakin could sense his master's pain and something else, a sickness of the body, and realized his master was stuck inside with whatever the madwoman had tried to release. With that in mind the decision was easy to reach. Not even giving Arbor a second chance, Anakin locked onto the yacht. "You are wrong, Arbor. We want you dead a lot more than we need you alive."

The Force warning him that he'd need it to make sure of the ship's destruction, Anakin flicked a switch, activating the modified box launcher he had designed for the ship, ripple firing all four of the remaining proton torpedoes in one burst. The torpedoes struck the ship astern, the first three overloading its overpowered shielding, and the last exploding the ship's engine, vaporizing the craft in a soundless explosion.

"I'm sorry, master," Anakin said into the communicator of his ship, his face hard and cold, while his back began to twinge, forcing him to use more of the Force to stop the pain. "I couldn't take her alive."

"You will be questioned on this, Anakin," Mace said after a sigh. "However, I cannot deny that she was going to get away, and I would rather have her dead than free to ply her vile trade." The weakened Master, most of his mind and will on his own body, trying to keep the contagion at bay, allowed a rare look of unvarnished approval to appear on his face in the pickup, and Anakin beamed back wearily, even though he could see his master was not in a good way. "You did very well, my padawan, very well. Now I need to meditate and fight this contagion. That means that you will be in charge of making our preliminary statement to the High Council and the Chancellor."

Anakin winced, holding a hand up to his head and touching the lightly burned portion. "Oh no, master, my head. I think I need a few hours of healing mediation too."

Mace raised an eyebrow and slowly shook his head, not to really emphasize his point, but more to make certain said head didn't fall off of his shoulders from the pain his body was in at the moment. "Your acting skills do not match your skills with the Force, I'm afraid."

"Feh, it was worth a try," Anakin muttered, before straightening and bowing

formally to his master. "Don't worry, master. I'll handle it."

While Master Windu concentrated on healing himself, Anakin first took the time to change his clothing, then waved the Jedi Order tag for the locals, who attempted to scream his head off for the brief dogfight in atmosphere and the exploded remains of the yacht in orbit, which according to them would be a traffic hazard for some time. Once he had browbeaten them or shoved off their concerns to the side to let Master Windu deal with them later, he finally was able to use the local Hypercom network to send his report to Coruscant.

Given the fact that this mission had been given to the Order by the Chancellor's office and the severity of the threat to Republic that someone like Arbor could have become, it came as no surprise to Anakin that two of the High Council were involved in the call along with the Chancellor himself. That last might have been a surprise for most, but Anakin had been on several missions before this where the Chancellor had been involved. While the two of them had never talked, Anakin felt the older man was, if not a friend, and least friendly towards him after Anakin's part in freeing Naboo of the Trade Federation when he was a young boy. He didn't really know the man very well beyond that, and his master's distrust of politicians had sort of rubbed off on Anakin, but he was willing to give the Chancellor the benefit of the doubt more than most other politicians.

Anakin gave his report in as concise a manner as possible, not going into detail on how the two Jedi had changed their appearance, as was common practice when giving a report to anyone outside the Order. He did go into detail on the number of traps they had run into and how Arbor's paranoia had forced their hand. He ended the report by telling them all why Master Windu was not the one doing so, and how he had activated the building's security features despite still being within the building himself.

"And we are certain that once the building has been cleared that Master Windu himself will be, be clear of this contagion? Forgive me, but I do not know the medical nomenclature or anything about the Jedi's ability to heal themselves," the Chancellor said at that point, looking to one side as he addressed the two Masters, Adi Gallia and Master Koon. Obi-Wan Kenobi, who Anakin vaguely recognized from their time together years back, was also there, though he remained silent, waiting until his knowledge of Jenna Arbor was called upon.

"Yes, he will be clear of it, but we will send a Jedi Healer out just in case to make certain. They will be involved in both that and will have to certify that the building has been cleared of the contagion before we open it to allow Mace out," Adi replied, while Koon simply nodded.

The Chancellor took their words at face value, and Anakin continued his report. There Koon spoke up, asking Anakin if enough of the ship had been left in one piece to identify the body. "That will be my next task, master. The Force is telling me that she was aboard, but it is best to be certain in this case," Anakin replied.

"Very well. We would have preferred her alive, but it is better that she has been dealt with rather than let free to continue her heinous experiments. The disease Arbor somehow incubated on the penal colony she was kept on will have to be solved by other means," the chancellor said sadly.

The two Jedi, however, while agreeing on that point, were more worried about how the two Jedi had been recognized. Anakin had no answer there, having simply believed that it was the way they hadn't submitted their blood for sampling immediately. Which it very well might have been, the two Masters acknowledged, but they wanted Anakin and Windu to make certain. "If Master Windu's voice was recognized despite his assumed accent, that is a problem, since such things can only be fooled so much by the Force. It would be a bad sign if records of the voices of well-known Jedi have been making the rounds of the underworld."

The two of them looked at Obi-Wan, who answered their question. "Jenna Arbor was perhaps the most intelligent, brilliant bio-chemist in the Republic at one point. She was also paranoid to a level many criminals don't reach, even before Master Qui-Gon and I captured her. If she had a hint her escape was known, she would have developed that paranoia to a fine level. I think that this was simply a sign of that paranoia rather than a sign of a larger problem. Taking precautions against any future attempts, however, should be a given. And I also believe that any nearby Jedi should be rerouted to back up Anakin while Master Windu is stuck in that building."

Koon nodded, while Adi looked quizzical, her fellow master enlightening her a moment later. "We have known for years that the remaining Yinchorri raiders have prioritized Master Windu's death over all others. If it becomes known that he is stuck in one place for a long time, they may learn of it somehow and move against him in greater numbers than they have been able to bring together in the past."

Anakin barely kept back a scowl at the idea that he would need more Jedi to help him protect his master, simply nodding instead. "That makes good sense."

"We don't have any Jedi in the area, but we can perhaps reroute a nearby Consular Master/padawan pair," Adi mused.

"I am afraid the Republic doesn't have any police forces in the area, though I will contact the planetary governor and order him to aid you in any way he can, Anakin," the Chancellor said, smiling at the teen.

Anakin smiled more happily at that, eager to have a bigger stick to beat the locals into line with. The Masters asked a few more questions at that point, with Obi-Wan warning Anakin to be wary of traps when he began to investigate the remains of the ship. “It would be just like Arbor to want to take someone with her into death. She would believe doing so would let her make one last mark on the galaxy.”

After Anakin acknowledged that, the High Council signed off, not realizing that the Chancellor didn’t follow them. The old man asked several more question about the mission and the response from the locals before leading the conversation gently onto more familiar ground, giving Anakin the impression that he was using the conversation as a break from his work as chancellor.

Smiling into the pickup, Sheev’s eyes gleamed with amusement. “I realize that I haven’t been able to follow your career as closely as I had promised all those years ago. But I believe I speak for both myself and those who knew you as a young boy that you have done our expectations proud. I was actually speaking to Padmé the other day and she, like I, remembers what you did for Naboo back then.”

Fighting back a flush at the memory of the girl he had called his angel when they first met, Anakin smiled proudly before tamping the expression back down. “I am happy to hear that, Chancellor.”

OOOOOOO

As Sidious had feared, Mace had kept any outside influence away from Anakin over the years, and in many ways the boy was a poster child for the Jedi Order now. But there were still cracks there, and the boy’s ego had grown too much.

Push the two of them to take more important and more visible missions from now on; force him into the limelight and start creating a public image that Anakin will feel as both his just due and something to live up to, thereby manipulating both him and Windu further. Windu will not let that go too far without nipping it in the bud, but that can be used to drive a further wedge between them, one Windu will not see coming.

After that I can initiate further conversations about the nature of power and why Windu might be purposefully holding him back. After all, what Master would like to be surpassed by his student at such a young age... Yes, that message will find fertile ground here.

On top of that are the interesting feelings I was able to sense when I mentioned the Amidala bitch, Sidious mused after signing off, allowing his public

persona to slough off his face, revealing the cold, controlled visage of Darth Sidious beneath. *Whether a crush, 'love,' or obsession, that could be used later on to manipulate the youth further. It is certainly not a mere physical attraction, though that would no doubt become part of it if they met again.*

I can manipulate events to create such a meeting soon, but not quite yet. Perhaps... Yes, Amidala has already started to be courted by the disarmament faction in the Senate, despite the fact her own planet has a native military that is among the best, if least offensively minded, in the sector. If she joins them she will bring numerous votes to join that group, a threat that needs to be dealt with by the Armament faction, many of whom I can use as a fall out for the assassination attempt via my confederate patsies. Place Anakin in a position to save her, and that will make for a fine reintroduction.

Setting aside those thoughts and, indeed, thoughts on the Senate as a whole, where the Great Plan was proceeding like clockwork, Sidious turned his thoughts to the portions of the plans which were not going as well as he wished them to.

The Order is not the weak, moribund, and, above all, paranoid and reactionary thing it should be, at least not all of it. There are more Sentinels and more Guardians now than I would have liked to see at this stage. And Jedi deaths are down from where the Great Plan projected them to be. Master Ranicisis' reforms and Yoda's push for these new techniques are slowly remaking the Order. But they are going too slowly.

Still, because they are pushing for those reforms there are many cracks within the Order. Many of the Order's members might be more ready for what is to come, but the Order as a whole has lost much of its unity. There are fracture points which my agents within the Order can use, and, once their unity is shattered, more Jedi will fall to the Dark Side, thus wrecking their public persona further and leaving them all more vulnerable.

My plans to set C'boath and others up as the voices of the true Jedi, making them the head of the Secessionist block, is not proceeding as well as I could hope, but it will come in time and will possibly even spark an outright civil war within the Order. The fact that Serenno has become such a hotbed of secession will also force the Order to take sides within the next year or move off planet. At this point I would take either as a win, given my frustrating inability to get an agent into the training center on a full time basis and my equally frustrating inability to rouse local sentiment against them. I don't know who to curse more, Tholme and his security reforms, or Vosa and the way she has been able to keep the Jedi's public persona there so positive.

On further reflection, Sidious decided that it was Tholme, since despite its

importance in its sector, Serenno was not important in itself: rather, the training center was. *Yes, Tholme and that Vurk, Trebor, are a threat I did not foresee, despite the fact I have been able to lead the Order's attempts to find 'the brotherhood' around by its nose. Still, my tools to deal with them are ready now...*

That thought was sparked by a nearby computer screen beeping at him, the sign that a series of codes had been activated, telling him that the Scimitar, or rather, a Scimitar, had arrived. The ship had been replicated five times now, though its current pilot had no way of knowing that, nor the fact that he himself was one of many.

Sidious smoothly finished some more hours of his work as Chancellor before retreating into his public quarters and from there into his sanctum, hidden from any attempt via electronics or the Force to find him. There he found Darth Maul, or rather, the first clone of said to return. He had several new scars and a few missing horns, but beyond that the Zabrak looked none the worse for wear from his duel with himself.

"Good, my apprentice, you have arrived. I knew the original would defeat that foolish creation of Plagueis'. While you have been gone I have continued the plan apace, else I would have halted the duel between you on Wayland. It is one of many mistakes I have been forced to clear up in the past few years. Still, you are here now, and that is important, for the Sith have need of you." Sidious said all this while watching his apprentice for any sign that the indoctrination had failed or had developed cracks, his Force powers reaching into the other's mind so subtly that Maul himself didn't feel it, let alone any Jedi up in their Temple through the intervening minds of Coruscant's masses.

There was nothing, only the enhanced rage, anger, and paranoia which Sidious had hoped to see. Having been forced to give himself to the Dark Side to a greater degree than ever before in order to combat himself, Darth Maul was now even more of a blunt object than before, but an even more dangerous one. *Good. He is no longer truly worth the Darth name, but he will perform his tasks well. The experiment has proven itself.*

"What is thy bidding, my master? I am your blade; direct me!" Maul said, going to one knee.

"Rise, my apprentice. We must start to strike at the Jedi, but in a very specific way. I have a task for you: a Jedi which must die without any word of how getting out. You must kill the Jedi Master known as Tholme. He will be on Ord Padron soon. Strike him there or somewhere else, I care not, but his continued push for more internal security within the Order must be halted." Sidious gestured, and a datapad flew through the air to be caught by the red-skinned Zabrak male. "You will find further

information on him and his abilities on that. I will trust you to plan his assassination on your own. Do not fail me.”

“Yes, Master,” Maul replied, taking the datapad and leaving the room without another word.

Sidious smiled, moving to take a seat in his throne, letting the warm darkness of the room soothe his soul as he once more centered himself in the Dark Side. The next two clones of his former apprentice, winners of matches against their fellows, would soon be online, and, given the way this one’s indoctrination had worked, Sidious was certain theirs would too. One would lead the other ‘special’ clones into the Corellian Sector in Nubus, further causing disunity between the so-called Green Jedi and the rest of the Order, while also causing trouble for a major thorn in Sidious’ side in the Senate.

A third would be sent back to the defunct Orsis academy with everything Sidious had collected about the new techniques the Order had developed, both rumored and not, to train in how to combat them. Sidious had developed the stunning technique and even refined it to a lethal level, and he had begun to be able to change his appearance slightly, but not a lot. The Force Shield still eluded him, let alone the remainder of the techniques C’boath had warned him that rumor within the Order said could be learned on Serenno.

I now have my true apprentice, who in turn has his own assassin and the clones of my former assassin. I have my secessionist block beginning to gather forces and my own army building. Another two years and the clones will also be ready, my dagger at the Order’s back. Yes... Yes, despite all the minor setbacks, despite the changes the Order has made, despite their searches for what they thought was the Brotherhood, the Force is still on the side of the Sith. The Jedi’s days are numbered...

OOOOOOO

Master Micah Giiett stared at the small, extremely distorted mirror hanging on the bulkhead in front of him. He had become so used to the distortion by this point that he discounted it easily, his razor moving across his face quickly and surely. Wiping his face with a wet cloth, Micah then stared at his face in the mirror.

Most wouldn’t have even thought of it as a mirror at all because of how distorted it was, but to Micah it was the first physical item that he had any kind of attachment to beyond his own lightsaber, because it was the first thing that he had ever been able to conjure. To many people being able to do something after years of

attempting it would not have seemed worth the price, but Master Giiett was a Jedi, and he had treasured the little mirror since the moment he been able to create it.

At the moment, however, he was more concerned with the few strands of hair he was holding in front of his eyes at the present. "Yes," he said aloud. "Yes, they are indeed gray. If I was the type to be vain about my appearance, this would worry me."

Four years. They had been traveling through this vast, barely hyperspace capable nebula for four years since moving out of range of the HRS array. Most of that time had been spent on the ship, which for all of its size would probably have driven many an individual insane. But each day had brought new and interesting challenges, not only to Giiett, but to everyone aboard. And not all of them had come from trying to fulfill the vision they had all come to share of what this ship could be and was becoming under their care.

Giiett knew and remembered each incident, the clarity of his memories owing nothing to his mastery of occlumency.

Five times in that time they had been forced out of hyperspace due to an emergency jump because something had shifted into their path, and five times they had repaired the ship and the hyperdrive. Three times they had been attacked in space and had to repulse the attackers. Ten times they had discovered planets who were violently isolationist, remembering the time of the Republic in the most negative manner possible.

And most importantly, three times they had come upon planets that desperately needed aid.

The first such planet, a tiny little moonlet, really, had simply destroyed its ecosystem entirely due to too much homegrown industry. It was too far gone for the Jedi to even try to bring back. Being more mechanically inclined than the others, Quinlan and Harry had taken the lead. Quinlan and Alecto knew how to build hydroponic gardens by this point, having done much the same thing for the Tyrant's Bane. They had designed and led the construction of several space-based gardens.

And, thanks to the unique abilities of their ship and Harry, Aayla, and Fay's abilities to transfigure things, the Jedi had been able to actually share enough food with the populace of the planet to let them get by for a few weeks until their own gardens were operational. While they couldn't create filling food out of nothing, they could change protein packs or energy bars into full meals, something which had astonished the populace.

The next problem had been solved almost entirely through the Force rather than through both the Force and engineering skill. They had come upon a planet in

danger of a plague that was threatening to spread to the entire planet. No one knew where the plague had come from, but since the planet had been racked by several devastating, if short lived, conflicts, there was little doubt of its basic origin.

Master Fay had led the way on that mission, figuring out a way to cure the plague and then disseminate that cure to the populace before more than a tithe of the populace had died, while the others did what they could to help or to halt the spread of the plague. It had taken everything they had to halt the plague, and Master Fay had pushed herself to the point of collapse several times during their stay there. It had gotten to the point where Harry had actually drugged her into sleeping for a time, though that hadn't stopped the ageless Master for very long.

But perhaps the most dramatic moment had been the mission where Master Fay had not taken part. Because while she had taken the lead on the mission against the plague, Master Giiett had to ruefully admit that it had been Harry who had been the one to take the lead on the next.

Start Flashback:

"How is Master Fay?" Micah asked softly as Harry closed the door behind him to Master Fay's personal room on the *Tyrant's Bane*. They had just entered orbit over a new planet, one only two jumps away from their last port of call.

"She's tired, of course!" the younger man said sharply, before sighing and visibly centering himself in the Force. "I apologize, Master Giiett. That was both rude of me and beneath a Jedi. But she is still asleep. I can feel the Force within her slowly refilling, but she gave far too much of herself dealing with the plague for far too long. I realize we all did, but not to the extent she did," Harry said with a fond if exasperated smile on his face.

"And isn't that always the way with Fay, giving too much of herself like that," Lily quipped, coming out through the closed door behind Harry.

"Well, in any event, her yacht is ready to go. Who is going to head down? I vote me, since I still haven't caught up with the rest of you in terms of exploring new planets, after all," Alecto said in an effort to lighten the mood.

Harry was about to volunteer to stay, but Aayla felt that before he could and told him he was being silly. The new planet might well have more dangers they would need to face, and they would already be two down. So instead he simply sighed.

"Well, let's go, then. I don't want to leave Master Fay alone for too long."

"She's a big woman, Harry," Lily said, ruffling her fingers through his hair. The

feeling was a strange one, but Harry had long gotten used to it and felt better for it.

The planet seemed very nice, at least at first. Again it was a low-tech world, though the last three hadn't been. One in particular had had a truly massive home-grown industry, with four different planets having space stations around them, including the original one, and a very advanced asteroid mining industry. They had spent several months there learning what they could about their mining technology and buying several large, fully automated factories, which disappeared into one of the holds of the ship.

It had also been one of only four systems they'd seen so far which had more than one species living in it. They had been humans, an insectile race called Verpines, and two gas-breathing species.

As soon as they spotted their first settlement on this planet, the number of planets where they had seen multiple species living together went up by one. Here again there were humans, causing Aayla and Alecto to exchanged amused glances. "You humans," Alecto said with a faint laugh. "So prolific."

"We're survivors," Harry said, shrugging his shoulders. "Though we're not the only ones on this world."

"Indeed not," Aayla said with a smile, exchanging a nod with another Twi'lek who had just walked past them. The population of this community was evenly split between Twi'lek, humans, and what were probably the native sophonts: short, shaggy looking creatures with three legs and wide, dexterous fingers on the ends of short arms. And Harry and Aayla couldn't help but notice that there were many people who looked to be of mixed species.

"So that's what our kids will look like if we have any?" Harry thought, sending the thought to Aayla as they walked down the street having just passed a family: a Twi'lek woman and a human man with four kids. Oddly enough, all of them were carrying large packs, something that made Harry frown.

"They look nice. Certainly not malformed as far too many cross-species children are," Aayla replied, her mental tone brimming with love. She could tell Harry was interested in having kids at some point, but he had turned that decision entirely over to her, one way or another. He would never pressure her on that point, which was just another reason that she loved him.

However, as the group continued looking for local delicacies—spices and other things they could trade for—all of them became aware of a tension in the air. Aayla was the first to notice that it was everywhere rather than an isolated incident, and spoke aloud. "There is a tension here, and quite a bit of fear, I think."

"It isn't another disease or something," Harry said, having just turned the corner, his back straightening as he gestured for the others to look around with them. The courtyard beyond was probably some kind of bazaar normally, but it had been cleared entirely. In its place were around seventy to eighty of the locals, drilling with swords and spears. Further away Harry could spot other people working with slug throwers of some kind, putting in the magazines and aiming downrange.

"I think we need to figure out what is going on here," Micah said grimly. "This looks like something we might wish to get involved in."

All of them, once more covered in their Force Cloaks, moved around in singletons to cover more ground, listening in on all the conversations they could. Quickly painting a picture of what was going on, they came back together within about an hour local time.

It turned out that this settlement was a little ways away from a border to something called the endless sands, which Harry recognized as one of the features they'd noticed from orbit. Out there in the desert lived another species, which locals simply called the Horde. They were centauroids, like Wulo, at least in body shape. But there the resemblance ended. The Horde were warm blooded reptiles of some kind, who swept out of the desert every hundred years or so, smashing every nation around them and subjugating the people for a few decades before returning to their deserts.

Much like the rest of the planet, they used a very eclectic variety of weapons: slug throwers of all sorts, spears, and swords.

"Was anyone able to get a sense of the direction that this Horde is coming from?" Micah asked. He'd been preoccupied with figuring out what sparked these massive migrations and if they could possibly broker a peace between the two groups. But apparently the Horde did not believe in talking with the other species and would much rather wipe them all out then talk to them.

"I did," Quinlan said grimly. "West by southwest from here, apparently. They're not that far away either, I don't think. Have you noticed how few people are actually in this city for its size?"

Alecto spoke up then, explaining what he had seen. "The refugees are meeting up outside of town to the north with more of those furry locals, the Dheas, with these huge beasts of burden. They are slow, but I'd bet even one of those critters could tug Master Fay's yacht."

"But the others, those of fighting age, are moving in the opposite direction," Lily said, shaking her head. "I spotted several groups like those we saw training being herded in that direction by a few others. I think somewhere out there is the local army,

trying to stop this Horde.”

The three padawans looked at Master Giiett and Quinlan. “What do you wish us to do, master?” Alecto asked formally.

“I would like for us to go and at least observe the horde,” Micah said reluctantly. He knew that all three padawans had faced combat before, of course, but there was a vast difference between raiding a pirate’s enclave, fighting in space, or even fighting a group of soldiers, in comparison to facing barbarians in a full on war.

“We will not engage unless absolutely necessary. Keep your Force Cloaks up at all times,” he admonished, a faint smile on his face as he did so, though, taking the sting out of being told such an obvious thing.

Several hours later found Quinlan and the three padawans all kneeling behind various bushes, covered by a Disillusion technique which mixed visually blending in with mentally keeping people from noticing you. Master Micah had gone ahead with the ship to do a flyby over the horde. He hoped to use the ship to overawe the reptilian centauroids into retreating, or at least into coming to the parley table, but Harry didn't think that was going to happen.

To get to their current position, the Jedi had gone around the local army. Harry estimated that they were around forty thousand strong. But they were the equivalent of untrained levy units. And there was a palpable aura of fear around them, according to Aayla.

“I’m over the Horde now,” Micah radioed. “This isn’t an attack as we understand the term. I’m seeing family units, beasts of burden carrying tents, children... This is a migration, an entire people are on the move out here for some reason. I can’t see anything beyond them, so I’m going to peel off and head deeper into the deserts for a bit before returning.”

After hearing that Harry and the others watched as the Horde came into sight over the horizon. They were tromping along, the first few rows, at least, in impeccable lockstep and now the Jedi could make out their equipment. The humans, Dheas, and Twi’lek favored swords; the Horde, on the other hand, favored long, heavily weighted spears which became visible as the Jedi waited for them to come closer, analyzing what they were seeing as they did. They also had large slug thrower rifles and looked immensely strong.

“Size isn't everything,” Aayla said in Harry's mind. “With that size and those four legs, they have to be slow.”

“Maybe. But if they can end a fight with a single stab from those spears, then they don't actually have to be very fast.” And they were very fast. It had taken them

barely ten minutes to cross the distance between where the Jedi had first spotted them to where they were nearly right on top of them.

All the Jedi looked at their communicators in surprise when Micah's voice came through it once more, interspersed with static. "Mayday, Mayday! ...have been...storm, going down!"

"What the hell?" Harry yelled, surging to his feet, trusting in his Disillusion technique to keep him hidden. "Master Fay's yacht can take more of a pounding than a cruiser with all we've done to it over the years! No way could it be knocked down like that!"

"Regardless, it is going down, and Master Giiett didn't say they were under attack, Harry, only that he ran into a storm. Perhaps something has interfered with his systems and he is being forced to crash," Lily said.

"Mom, if you could scout out the Horde for us, the rest of us are going to go rescue Master Micah," Harry decided quickly, before any of the others, even Quinlan, could speak up, holding up his communicator which could be used to home in on the downed ship. "I'll teleport the four of us forward in large jumps to get there."

"Good luck, everyone," Lily said, before turning and zooming off towards the oncoming Horde.

"Oh, this isn't going to be pleasant at all..." Aayla moaned through their link, but she still took Harry's hands willingly as he stared forward toward the horizon.

Once the others had grabbed onto them, Harry began to teleport them forward in jumps. With all of them covered with Disillusion techniques to hide their presence, they passed directly around the forerunners of the oncoming Horde and then passed several other groups in quick succession.

All this meant was that the Jedi had nothing to concentrate on other than their own queasiness. Aleto had been teleported like this precisely once before, but Quinlan had never had this specific ability tested on him. Indeed, no one but Harry had been able to use the teleportation techniques, though there was a rumor that Dooku had been able to, and perhaps Master Fay. His face was quickly a very nasty shade of green, while Aayla grimly kept her eyes tightly shut, clenching Harry's hand so hard he began to lose feeling in the appendage.

Despite Harry's teleportation, however, the Horde was closer to where Master Giiett had gone down. They passed several groups of Horde troops, mostly young men and women, who looked more like youth gangs than anything else, along with several family groups moving towards it.

Stopping within sprinting distance of the downed ship, which, he idly noted,

was buried nose down into the sand of the desert, Harry let go of the others, allowing them to gratefully fall forward. Jedi training allowed the trio to keep their gorges from rising, but all of them were still looking a little green around the gills after the numerous teleportations.

"Quinlan and I will deal with those," Harry said, pointing to the nearest groups of the Horde. "Aayla, you and Alecto check on Master Giiett."

"Right," Quinlan said, slowly pushing himself to his feet, one hand still on his stomach. "Illusions?"

Harry nodded, and the two of them swiftly began to work, conjuring up a large illusion of several 'more' meteors coming down from the sky. Harry created the imagery, while Quinlan began to create the sounds of their passage through the air above them and to work on the minds of the Horde members, making them more credulous for a time to ward them off the area.

It worked. The majority of the Horde groups coming towards their ship peeled off and away, shouting and trembling, holding their hands above their heads in a vain attempt to ward off the meteors. It wouldn't have worked if even one of those groups had been slow enough for the illusions to touch them, but thankfully the reptilian centaurs were as naturally credulous as they were barbaric. This still took some time, and by the time they had reached the ship, Alecto and Aayla were already inside having found Master Giiett.

"He's unconscious, Harry, master. Took a nasty hit to the head. Alecto and I can stop the bleeding, but neither of us are good enough healers to try and fix his brain if he's got a concussion, and he's not waking up," Aayla reported aloud for the benefit of Quinlan.

"Don't try then," Quinlan ordered, sighing. Master Fay was their primary healer, but she was still down from Force exhaustion, of course. And messing with the mind, be it the squishy bits or the thoughts said squishy bits contained, was tough.

"Do you think it's dangerous to move him?" Harry asked.

"No," Aayla replied before Quinlan could. "Alecto and I already had to in order to get at the cuts on his face."

"In that case, one of you come and help Quinlan and I try to figure out why the ship crashed. I'm not seeing any damage on the exterior," Harry said, his voice trailing off as he sent what he was seeing to Aayla via their link.

"Some kind of ion pulse weapon?" Aayla asked via their link.

"No," Harry said in the same manner. *"The ship's shielded against that. Given the strengthening runes we inscribed on the hull it would take sustained heavy fire to*

break through its armor, even if you take out its energy shields. I don't know how the physical defenses from the Force enhanced plates would react to a ion cannon, but there's no way any kind of handheld weapon could force the ship to crash. And look! There's no external damage, not even from the crash."

As Harry finished speaking, Aayla exited the ship moving towards the back of it where Quinlan and Harry were making their way around it looking for why it had crashed.

After Harry repeated himself aloud, however, Quinlan shook his head with a faint chuckle. "Ah, Harry. Never try to complicate matters too much. Look." The others looked to where the older man was pointing and saw that the engines at the back of the ship were lined with dust.

"Okay?" Harry said cautiously, "What about it? It's just dust."

"Yes. Dust, Harry," Quinlan said, now somewhat more amused. He hopped up to hold onto one of the engine cowlings to look inside. "Lots and lots of dust. Dust which can get anywhere, which can foul systems, engines, and even cause a crash."

Alecto joined them then, hopping out of the ship and moving to join them. "Duros apparently has a lot of dust storms on it, and they play merry hell with air-speeders if they aren't routinely maintained. If the ship ran into one of those..."

"Could that be the reason behind the migration?" Harry asked.

"Oh, you betcha, Harry," Alecto said with a nod and a shudder. "Dust storms will rip a person's skin off his bones almost as quick as if you had entered the atmosphere of a gas giant. And they come up suddenly with no real warning. If Master Micah didn't know what to look for even the Force wouldn't be able to help him."

Aayla had hopped up to the top of the ship by this point and was staring back the way it had come out into the desert, after making sure that none of the rest of the Horde were coming towards them. Luckily, Micah had barely turned around before he had crashed, so there were no more Horde members near them thanks to Quinlan and Harry. The other way, however, was a different story entirely.

"Um, Alecto..." Aayla said, and Harry looked up sharply at the feeling of consternation and actually a little bit of fear in their link. "Could, could you come up here?"

Alecto hopped up to join her and stared. "That would do it," he said, his tone almost dull with sudden worry.

The others joined them quickly and saw instantly what they were talking about. From one edge of the horizon to the other there was a massive cloud of swiftly moving dust over the desert, shifting this way and that as they watched.

"Right..." Harry said slowly. "Right, so this migration really does have more of a point behind it than just simple aggression."

"I wouldn't say that," Quinlan said, turning away and leading the way down off the ship, heading inside quickly while the others followed. "You felt the emotions from the Horde forerunners, correct, Aayla?"

"I did," Aayla said sadly. "A lot of aggression, bloodlust, and associated emotions out there. I imagine that the migration aspect is being fueled by these storms, but there's also a lot of true desire for conquest in the Horde."

"So we won't be able to talk them out of it... Damn it. All right, Aayla, with me," Harry ordered, quickly taking charge once more. "We'll clear the engines of the dust. Alecto, keep on high watch. Quinlan, can you clear the interior engines?"

"I'll have to open up a lot of the baffles, but yes," Quinlan replied, and with that they quickly got to work, with Alecto pulling out his blaster rifle and heading back out to take up a position on the hull. Through the use of low powered Force Pushes designed around a cleaning charm Lily had taught them, the lovers got rid of the dust in the engines quickly, while Quinlan made certain each of the engines' interior parts were still in working condition. He had to call in Harry's expertise with Reparo for a few parts, but other than that they were quickly able to get the ship back into working condition.

By the time they were finished, Lily had returned from her scouting mission. "The Horde is making camp within striking distance of where we found the native army," she reported sadly. "They've separated into four separate camps. Only one of them is dominated by family groups, and it's at the back of the diamond formation the camps are set up in. A little more sophisticated than I expected from barbarians, really, even barbarians who have slug throwers. One of them, the forwardmost camp, is for the more established groups, the ones made of older males: blooded warrior types, you could say. The other two are made of younger men, and let me tell you, the ratio of men to women in that horde is kind of scary."

"It normally is that way in barbarian cultures, especially ones which routinely see wars between various clans or tribes," Quinlan replied clinically, looking up at the Force Ghost appreciatively. "First, were any of them Force sensitives? Did they see you, I mean? And what is their aim for this invasion, or migration, whichever it is?"

"I got close to them, but while Fay was able to teach me how to use magic to translate," Lily said, using the word magic deliberately to get groans out of her listeners, "I couldn't understand a lot of what they were talking about. I heard talk about setting the balance right, teaching the outworlders and the Dheas to know their place too, but

that is it. I'm afraid they're really looking for a fight here."

Harry nodded, touching the scar on his forehead as he thought. "All right, here's what we're going to do. Master Vos, I want you to return to the Tyrant's Bane with Master Giiett. Get to work on the droid starfighters; we'll want as many of them up and running as you can give us."

The Tyrant's Bane didn't have many starfighters in the first place, only sixty or so, and most of them were more parts than working units. But they had started to put some of them back in working order before this. Quinlan, as chief mechanic for the group, would know what to do to get a few of them up and running, so he agreed to go.

As he did, he paused, rather bemused that he had not even hesitated to follow Harry's orders despite the younger man being a Padawan rather than another Knight. *Still, it isn't as if I have any better idea of what to do. And leadership has never been my strong point... or working well with others in any capacity,* Quinlan thought with amusement.

"Shift as many of the droids to that as you need," Harry went on. "If Master Fay is awake, get her to heal Master Micah and then ask them what we should do. Until we're countermanded, though, I think the best bet would be for us to work with the locals. Against this large an army, the three of us or even the four of us would not be able to stop them without the starfighters. But if they're already targeting the allied army, we can use work with them in order to hold them back until Quinlan arrives with overwhelming firepower."

Quinlan nodded. A more advanced army would have a general staff: leaders that could be targeted, taken out, or captured in order to force the army to surrender, just like taking the king in regicide. Or, if they had more time to work with, they could start a guerrilla campaign. As it was, they were swiftly running out of time and options. "Agreed. I'll keep working on the droids until halfway through tomorrow night no matter how many of them I've been able to get online. Will you be able to hold that long?"

Harry nodded, looking at the others, who nodded just as grimly. "We'll be here. Or there, anyway."

After Quinlan had dropped them off, the three padawans made their way through the grasslands to the army camp, having disembarked well out of sight of the camp. As they approached, Harry indicated they should cancel their Disillusion techniques, and they walked up boldly to a guard on duty.

On this side of the army camp there weren't many guards, but the ones there were fearful. This was an army that knew it really didn't stand any chance: that they

were just going through the motions in hopes of a miracle. "Well, just call us Mist'ers and Mrs. Miracle," Harry sent back as Aayla relayed that to him. Her empathic ability had given her a far better and faster understanding of the emotions of the camp than Harry or Alecto could have gleaned.

Harry nodded to the guard as he walked up to them, but before the guard could say anything Harry spoke. "I am Jedi Harry, and these are Jedi Alecto and Jedi Aayla. Take us to your general."

The guards looked startled at that, but put their hands on their swords and glared at them, especially Alecto. "Is that supposed to be some kind of joke!?" they said in the native language, which all three automatically understood via the Force. "Jedi don't exist! They're just some story from the old times before the Sundering!"

"We don't have time for this, Harry," Alecto said, stepping around Harry and waving his hand in front of the guard's faces. "You will take us to your general."

"We will take you to our general," both of the guards said.

"Nice," Harry whispered as their three of them followed the two guards. He hadn't really gotten that good at the offensive mental techniques like that, Master Fay having concentrated on the softer side of such. But it was obvious that Micah had given Alecto a good grounding in them.

Eventually they were led to the general's tent, which wasn't guarded, though it was marked out by its size. It was obvious that the Army didn't fear any dissension within the ranks: they had far too much to concern themselves with with the Horde coming towards them. Inside they found four people: one human, one Twi'lek, and two of the other kind of locals, the Dheas. Three of them were listening to the fourth, one of the two Dheas who was taller than the other one with quite a bit more gray in its fur.

All four of them turned and stared at the three young newcomers, in particular Alecto after he removed his hood. "Forgive our deception for getting in to see you," Harry began before any of them could do more than gape, "but there is very little time until the Horde attacks tomorrow morning. We are Jedi and wish to help you."

The human scoffed, and the Twi'lek looked as if he was about to murder all three of them, but the two locals simply blinked, looking at one another. The general said, "We have heard of Jedi: there are legends of them from before the Sundering. But forgive us, how can you help us here? There are but three of you. Even in the legends the Jedi were mortal and could be overcome through numbers. Numbers which we are facing here.

"Unless your arrival means we can look for more help from the stars," said the

human, looking at the three young beings askance.

"We are actually five. Two of our number are working on whipping up said aid at present, but it will take time. The three of us, however, will work with the army to hold off the Horde until that cavalry arrives," Harry said. "As for what we can do..." He gestured, and suddenly in his hand he was holding a sword, a heavy scimitar like the locals wore at their waists, something that could never have been hidden in his sleeve. "This is a simple sample of what we can do. Myself and Alecto here will help create a defense, while Aayla will help your logistics."

"You can conjure up bullets?" the general asked quickly. "We have more than enough gunpowder to last through a full five days of combat, but we don't have nearly as many bullets or canister rounds for our cannons."

Aayla nodded and stepped forward to stand beside Harry on the opposite side from Alecto. "I can. Give me a sample of a few of your bullet types, and I can duplicate them."

"That would be a major help. But what do you mean when you say 'create a defense?'"

Alecto smiled, showing white teeth standing out from his green skin. "Why don't you come with us and find out?"

A moment later the four officers followed the three Jedi out to the section of the camp nearest the Horde. There the locals had begun to create a series of stakes and mounded earth as defense, while also creating ditches here and there. But it was evident that the work would not be done by the time the Horde attacked, the barbarians' speed having taken the multi-species army by surprise.

Harry looked at Alecto before clasping his friend's shoulder with one hand, funneling his Force powers into his friend, giving his own energy and strength to Alecto for a time. Alecto knelt down on the ground, touching it with his hands and concentrating, then opened them and spread them out either side as if thrusting them through clay and pushing it to either side. There was a great rumble followed by shouts of exclamations and shock from the officers behind the Jedi and the army troops nearby as a ditch grew out in front of Alecto through the land.

Those shouts continued to rise in volume as a mound of rocks, dirt, and mud rose up towards the camp like a wave. Then it began to harden, solidifying until it was a tall, very thick wall about two stories tall with a series of steps on the interior side. Both the wall and the ditch only covered only about eighty yards or so, but it was a very defensible position.

Ignoring the shouts of shock and awe from the camp, Harry and Alecto turned

to the general. "That is what we meant," Alecto said simply. "It'll take us a while, but we can put up a wall like that around the entire camp."

Throughout the night, that was what the Jedi did. Harry and Alecto created a wall around the entire camp, huge and wide, going all the way around just in case the Horde surrounded them. "Do you think it'll be enough?" Harry asked as they finished the job at around three or four in the morning local time.

Thanks to their Jedi training neither of them were tired in body, though the amount of Force power they had to use had made them somewhat weary in mind, even Harry. Still, they would both recover somewhat given time. Recovery and control, the ability to use just enough Force to get a job done, had been the main thrust of Master Fay's training for Harry for several years now, so he no longer simply brute forced his techniques any longer. Sometimes, however, brute force, or rather, Force, was still called for.

"We seriously need to find someone who is as good at manipulating water as Mak and I are at manipulating earth, Harry," Alecto said mock grumpily, pushing his friend's shoulder playfully. Despite the upcoming battle, both of them were somewhat upbeat about it. After all, they only had to last until Master Quinlan arrived with the cavalry.

As they reentered the camp they saw the work going on. All three species were already moving up onto the wall, hauling up several of their small cannons and a few crew served machine guns. Lily had taken one look at them and said that they looked like something from World War II, and the cannons next to them looked like they were from the American Civil War.

"Yeah, a moat would be nice," Harry said, sighing. "I suppose I could do that, but Aayla needs help on creating more bullets."

Alecto shook his head. "Leave Aayla to that, Harry. Go check in with the general," he almost ordered. "I'll help out the locals in creating further defenses."

Harry's lips twitched, but he nodded, considering that that made good sense. And it turned out that the general did indeed have an idea of what to do with Harry's powers. They asked him if he could transfigure or conjure larger, more complex items than bullets, and when he answered in the affirmative with a caveat, they brought him to several cracked and malformed cannons which had failed their firing tests, asking him to turn them into workable pieces. After looking at a working cannon, Harry could do that, using a Reparo technique to repair what damage he could, then strengthening them.

He was also asked to transfigure bits of coal and other metal into canister

rounds, lots and lots of canister rounds. The image of what they would do to the invading army made him shiver. But he knew intellectually that there was no real difference between what a canister round could do when fired to some of the things he had done in the past with Bombarda or Reducto techniques.

He and Aayla worked alongside one another for a time, silent to the rest of the world, while talking to one another quietly about the upcoming battle and what they would have to do. Giving what they were already doing, there was little left that Harry would be keeping secret, and if there was any time to go all out, this was it.

They were also listening in on the locals and asking questions to learn about the planet. It turned out that while the Sundering, as they had called it, cut off this planet from the rest of the universe like all the others in the sector, it had really hurt this planet. There were no gas giants in this system, so there was no local source for the gas needed to power most of the modern Republic technology, from blasters to engines. There was also a massive war between a few of the nations on the planet directly after the Sundering, which had further shattered the planet's infrastructure. From that point the tech had simply collapsed until they reached a level that the planet could sustain on its own. It had been like high end physicists trying to figure out how to work a lathe and smithy. It took a while, and a lot had been lost very quickly.

As dawn broke, Lily came back from both checking out the enemy army, and Quinlan's progress. "He's got five of them ready at this point, and seven more that he should have finished within the next few hours. The droids have been a decent help, but we're running into bottlenecks on parts, as usual," she reported.

"And Master Giiett and Master Fay?" Alecto asked.

"Master Fay is still asleep, and Quinlan says she still isn't really ready to wake up. She really exhausted herself fighting that plague," Lily said fondly, shaking her head. "As for Micah, he was up and moving around. The two of them were talking as I left, but he didn't have any other orders for you other than to trust your judgment."

"Damn," Harry said mildly, nodding at his mother while ignoring the looks of the locals as Harry seemingly carried on a conversation with thin air. "I'd sort of been hoping for him to come up with some kind of brilliant scheme to get us and these people out of this without a pitched battle, but I suppose that even the Force has some limitations."

She sighed, looking around at the army. "I suppose some things never change. The nature of the universe, and you being too damn noble for your own bloody good, Harry Potter!" Lily said with a wan chuckle.

"I like to think I come by it naturally," Harry said, smiling up at her impishly.

"You do that." Lily said then went on more seriously. "I'll head out again to look at the army out there, see if they have any specific plans we need to know about more than roar and charge. I also want to make certain that I know who all the leaders are."

Harry nodded, becoming serious in turn. "When you get back, go straight to Alecto to tell him how to recognize them. He's far and away the best shot of all of us." Harry looked over to where Alecto was still working on his own with the earth, creating large towers here and there within the camp. Some of them would be turned into cannon towers, while others were for the general and his officers to have a view of the battlefield.

Lily nodded again and kissed his forehead on his scar before moving off.

"They moved the earth with a wave of their hands, walk unseen unless they want to be, and speak to spirits and conjure things out of thin air. Truly, the Jedi are wizards indeed," one of the locals whispered nearby.

Harry and Aayla exchanged a look at that, then went back to work, while inside their heads their mental avatars collapsed to their knees in laughter.

As they had expected, the Horde moved forward quickly once dawn broke, clans and sections of clans moving forward till just out of cannon range, hooting and hollering, their drums and whistles blaring as they began to pump up the blood of their warriors for the battle to come. Harry, Aayla, and Alecto stood on the ramparts, staring out at the Horde as it slowly coalesced.

"Do you think they'll honor parlay?" Harry asked as he stared out over the incoming Horde. They were moving slowly for their species now, resting up for the final charge once they got within range.

"Maybe if only to taunt us," Aayla said with a shrug. "But that shouldn't matter. We're trying to buy time, remember?"

Harry nodded before conjuring a white flag. With that done he hopped down, moving forward as the Horde began to come into sight.

He cast a technique on his throat and shouted, his voice coming out in a bellow, the Jedi technique automatically translating his words in the minds of his listeners. "Parlay! I call for parlay!"

For a moment it looked as if the Horde was going to disregard that despite the Force assisted bellow. But then one larger than average Horde member, his scales noticeably thicker and also grayer than the others, started to roar out instructions for them to back away, and he moved forward with about fourteen others of similar stature, stabbing their spears into the ground and crossing their arms as they stared

first at Harry, then at the tall wall behind him. "Why should we deal with you, spacefarer?"

"You know I come from the stars?"

"We have legends of spacefarers, you humani, coming from the stars with the nice soft tenties!" said one of the others, spitting to the side while one of the others leered at Aayla. "You came and you took the planet, but that was then! The star ways are closed to you now. The gods have given us the chance to regain our lands, to return to the cycle that was. We will not be stopped!"

"The people behind me have just as much right to their lives as you do," Harry said, channeling his inner Master Fay. "What have they done to you for you to feel such enmity? Would not trading for what you need be easier? Would not getting what you want without loss of life be easier?"

"We are not like them! We are the trueborn!" one of the reptilian centaurs shouted, looking affronted at the very idea of trading for what they needed. "We were here long before the star people came and befriended the Dheasia! They were created by the great Earth Father to serve us, but you star people broke the cycle. We will set it right!"

"If you continue to pursue this, myself and my friends will have to stand up against you," Harry said grimly, knowing the dialogue was going to end soon. "If you have knowledge of those who come from the stars, perhaps you have heard of Jedi. We are far stronger than we appear."

There was another moment of silence at that, but then raucous laughter broke out. "Jedi! Jedi! We have heard of Jedi, but you are few! We are many! What can you do against us? We are an army! We are the Horde! This parlay is over!"

Harry growled, but then reached deep within himself as he felt Aayla's wordless reassurance. *"Do it, Harry. We're ready."*

With that Harry began to glow, Force Light pouring out from him, causing the Horde leaders to shy away, even to retreat as he knelt, bringing one of his hands down onto the ground. "You want to know what kind of army?! This is **my** army!"

For years since Master Fay had first taken him as her apprentice, Harry had studied, experimented, and trained with transfiguration, conjuration, and Force Light most of all. This had allowed him to master the concept of Force Constructs to a degree that no one, no Jedi, Sith, wizard, witch, or Jed'ai, had ever come close to matching. And now he called on that ability to the greatest degree he ever had before.

All around Harry there appeared Jedi Masters, Knights, and the padawans of Clan Saa, their features so lifelike that Aayla and Aleto let out a gasp from behind

Harry. These real-life constructs were interspersed with large, armored Knights astride chargers, armed with lances like those of the Horde.

Harry wavered slightly on his feet for a moment, but since most of these constructs were made of the Force, conjuring them into being did not take as much out of him as it would have if he had used straight up conjuration. And, like the Patronus charm Lily had taught him about as a starting point to this technique, the Force Constructs had some limited ability to act on their own as the animals, or, in this case, people, they were constructed to look like.

"Now," Harry roared, his voice magnified to such a level as to almost be a physical weapon. "You can bloody well come ahead, and we'll gladly be cutting your Horde to ribbons. Or you can retreat like intelligent beings, and we can talk about you inhabiting some of this land peaceably. There is more than enough land to go around from what I can see.

"Really?" Aayla drawled, shaking her head from where she stood on the wall.

"Moving straight to threats after proving you were not negotiating from a position of weakness is a legitimate tactic for discussion," Harry shot back defensively.

Whatever Aayla might have replied was held back as the Horde behind their leaders roared and charged, the first rows firing their large slug throwers as they came. The Leaders too roared, many of them grabbing at their weapons and attacking Harry or the nearest Force Constructs. Others, the older, more experienced looking leaders, fell back, but Aleto took them under fire from his position on the wall. Single shots rang out, bolts of plasma taking three of the five retreating clan leaders in their backs or sides.

Harry activated his lightsaber quickly, bringing it up with a snap hiss to slice through the lance of one reptilian centaur before leaping clear back to the wall. "Defend this camp!" he shouted to his Constructs, sending the words out to them with a brief Force Pulse to accompany it.

The Horde charged forward, the entire army. The main camp's worth of troops, which alone outnumbered the allied army four to one, raced straight towards the wall and Harry's Force Constructs. They covered the intervening ground frightfully quickly, running into the hail of fire from the locals. Their armor and their armored hides seemed to halt a lot of the local bullets, but they still died in droves to the fire from the wall and the cannons.

Harry landed on the wall and watched as the first row of charging barbarians ran into the same problem their braver leaders had already discovered: the Force constructs were just that, creations of the Force, with no real substance to them. The

warriors of the Horde could not hurt them any more than they could discern the Force in the first place.

The reverse, however, was not true, as two of those leaders had already found, bisected by the blades of the conjured Jedi who simply held their positions, cutting down any Horde member that came near them. The armored Knights, in contrast, had spurred forward on their chargers, slamming into the Horde's own charge such that they burst through in segments, running some of the Horde under their hooves while spitting or smashing others aside.

It wasn't enough. The Force Constructs and the defenses in place to face in this direction had a good chance of stopping this aspect of the assault. But elsewhere this was not the case. The two groups made up of younger, un-blooded, or clan-less warriors had skirted around the main charge, eager to encircle the allied army, though Harry doubted they had any idea of finding a weakness. No, they were simply wishing to come to grips with the defenders.

Cannons fired continually all around the camp, and the machine guns, rifles, and, above all, canister laden cannon wreaked a truly bloody slaughter, but the Horde didn't break. They didn't even seem to notice, dying in droves in the ditches until their bodies filled them end to end. There were over a hundred thousand warriors in both those wings, and they simply absorbed the losses and raced on.

Once they were close enough to the walls, they hurled makeshift grenades forward in places. Some they sent at the wall itself, intent on blasting through. As centaur-like creatures, they couldn't climb, but this wasn't the first wall defense they had come into contact with. What at first seemed like single grenades were actually long strings of grenades, the power of which blew chunks out of the wall. Any wall made of solid stone would have been shattered, but the wall Alecto had made was mostly made of earth and better absorbed this assault for a time.

Other grenades were thrown up among the locals, and they began to die. Others paused within rifle range to exchange fire with those on the wall, laying down covering fire for dedicated sappers.

With the main assault being bogged down by his Force Constructs, Harry looked over at his fellow padawans, who both nodded grimly. "The left, Harry," Aayla said. "The fear I can feel from the army is stronger in that direction."

"Alecto, do you want to stay here and see if you can shoot any more of their leaders?" Harry asked, already turning in the direction Aayla had indicated.

"No. Killing their leaders just seems to make them mad, darn it," Alecto muttered. He holstered his rifle in its sheath along his back and nodded to his friends.

"Let's go."

"How are you feeling, Harry?" Aayla sent via their link as they ran, leaping down into the camp and straight towards the left flank.

"I'm...tired. That didn't take as much out of me as it would have years ago, thanks to Master Fay's training, but it sure as kriff wasn't easy on top of last night," Harry sent back, then paused, gesturing into the air and concentrating for a brief moment.

He didn't conjure anything physical, but instead conjured illusory flying dragons and other things, with Aayla joining in quickly to supply his illusions with more realism. The illusions soared out and began to dive bomb down onto the Horde, all around the camp. There was a lot of consternation and confusion, which was what Harry was going for.

But despite being simple illusions it still took a lot out of his remaining reserves. And Aayla wasn't faring much better after last night, since her reserves were not as large to begin with. Alecto was even worse off, despite most of the power for the wall having come from Harry.

Alecto got ahead of them since they were busy concentrating on that the illusions and was the first to see segments of the wall being blown inwards from the explosives of the Horde sappers. Through these gaps in the wall the Horde streamed in, cutting down any of the army they could and firing up onto the wall or racing up the staircases set up here and there to close with the men on the walls. Dozens of the cannons in this segment of camp went silent, and the death toll began to mount. The generals ordered reserves in to stem the gap, but before they could get there the trio of padawans were there.

Cutting through the first barbarians to have gained the wall, the Jedi leaped down into the gap. Harry thrust out his hand, a massive Force Push crashing into and flinging the barbarians in the gap backwards like toys, but the nearest group that had already broken in turned to engage them, and the Horde absorbed this impact like a wave would have, continuing to crash forward. The Jedi were quickly surrounded, facing bullets flying at them from all sides and hundreds of reptilian centaurs attacking them with their short lances, while thousands more bayed for their blood.

Even as all three of them lashed out with Force Techniques and used Force Shields to ward off the bullets, they knew they were in danger of being overwhelmed through sheer numbers and weight of bodies. And if they could not close this gap, the horde's numbers would allow them win this despite the Jedi's best efforts. Worse, the fight was so in their face that Aayla and Alecto couldn't concentrate enough of their

attention towards calling up their more destructive attacks.

“Bombarda!” Harry shouted, pushing as much energy as he could into the technique, watching as the blast of explosive Force energy erupted into the mass of barbarians in front of him. It also drained him to the point that he nearly stumbled, but Aayla was there, defending him until he could regain his breath. She nearly fell in turn, however, when she miscalculated how to redirect a few of the slugs the locals were firing, but Harry got his own blade up and between them at the last minute.

“This isn’t working!” Aayla shouted so both Harry and Alecto could hear. The two boys merely nodded. Even with the advantages Force Precognition and their lightsabers gave them, there was only so much the three of them could do now. They had exhausted themselves to help the local army, and were now paying for it. There was just no way a trio of padawans, no matter how good they were individually, could hold back the tide of barbarians.

No, no trio of padawans individually could... But as a team...? “Aayla!” Harry shouted via their link.

As soon as he’d had the thought Aayla had picked up on it and knew that it was probably their only salvation. “Alecto, open yourself to me!” she shouted.

The thought was a simple one: Harry and Aayla worked together on an almost instinctual level when they weren’t trying. When they were trying, when they used their link to its greatest degree while in combat, they formed a team that was nigh unassailable. They’d never tried it under such circumstances as these, and they were both far more tired than they had ever been before when trying to do so, but the theory was sound.

The idea of bringing in a third person was also sound, if untried. They had brought Master Fay into their bond, Kass and Mak for practice, and even Master Giiett for a very brief moment. And adding a third to the link should theoretically make the bonded trio more effective, like a stool with three legs being stronger than one with two legs.

In theory. In reality, under stressful conditions, it was a toss-up as to whether it would work at all.

Alecto gaped at the two lovers, then out at the slowly reforming Horde, while behind them the barbarians which had already passed through the choke point clashed with the army reserves. They’d stopped the slaughter of gunners and there were no more barbarians trying to get up the inside of the wall at the defenders, but a goodly portion of the cannons had been wrecked by this time, as the Horde’s use of grenades had proven devilishly effective. So none of the cannons could be used to secure the

gap.

That left it up to the trio of padawans, who right now had barely any Force strength left between them. *Desperate times call for desperate measures*, Alecto thought grimly, before closing his eyes, lowering his defenses, and looking Aayla in the eyes.

In turn Aayla and Harry lowered their defenses. With Aayla's empathic ability guiding them they reached out and...

Suddenly Alecto was there, within their mindscape, staring down at the twin worlds, the night-side Ryloth sphere that was Harry's mental world with the rock ship of Aayla's world orbiting above it. His own mental plane was a 3D maze made of different pieces of timber, now floating in-between the other two.

At the same time, his thoughts, some of his deepest buried secrets, flashed out, shared in this place because he had been worried about sharing them a moment ago. Like in the trial of Spirit, the more you thought about it, the more it was prevalent in your mind, which meant that here, Aayla and Harry could see it.

They could see some of his anxiety when they were younger at how much Harry outshone Alecto, who had thought he would be the older, wiser student of the two. They saw his irritation at being slower than some of the other Clan students at the Temple; they saw how he was jeered at for learning lightsaber skills so slowly, for being the first to learn the Shield Charm and the last to learn any of the other techniques. They saw how his first master had derided his skills and told him to abandon them along with his emotions if he wanted to become a better Jedi.

"Bah, he's a rock: rock for brains, rock for reflexes, rock-head for learning," jeered some of the older padawans after he couldn't learn some of the lightsaber skills or had fallen behind in math or one of the other everyday classes.

"So you're a rock. **Our** rock, Alecto," Harry replied, with Aayla's mental voice shouting encouragement. The two of them matched each of his bad memories from the Temple or with his master or even before that with the times when he'd helped them. When Alecto had made them laugh, helped Harry get used to life in the Order, helped Aayla deal with her own irritation at the Temple, the adventures they'd had since starting this journey... How much Alecto had helped.

Harry's mental comments that the pair of them had had a lot of unhappy memories about dealing with the Temple and certain members of the Council of First Knowledge were deemed Not Helpful. Though shouting at him did help Alecto laugh.

And just like that, Alecto's buried insecurities and anxieties disappeared, and he actually laughed. He laughed in the real world, a sound, loud and clear, thrown in

the face of the horde as the three padawans moved into a triangle, holding the breach.

The Horde made no notice of the laughter and closed in, firing as they came. But the Jedi moved as one unit, a fused gestalt that would have put the greatest blade master to shame. Since they were defending a single spot rather than moving around, Aayla forwent her normal Ataru style, merging instead with Harry's Shien and Alec's Soresu. Harry's Shien helped them against the bullets, the heavier ripostes of that style being better for redirecting the heavy slugs of their enemies, while Alec's Soresu could adapt easily to fighting the odd lances of the horde rather than blasters or lightsabers.

Harry routinely called up Force Shields to defend them for a few moments as they rested, while Aayla and Alec used earth or air to disrupt larger attacks. But in the main, they had to rely on lightsabers and Force Precognition.

Alone, it would not have been enough. Together, it was. The three padawans held until the roar of starfighters in atmosphere reached their ears, followed quickly by the 'Pshew' sounds of heavy blasters ripping into the Horde. They held until the Horde broke upon them, moving into the realm of local legend.

End flashback

Chuckling as he remembered the look on Fay's face when she woke up, Micah returned to the here and now. 'Can't let you out of my sight for a moment,' *indeed. Well, at least with her aid we were able to broker a piece between the Horde and the allies.*

Master Giiett left his room, walking the corridors of the ship for a time. He could feel his padawan working in one of Bane's cargo holds for some reason and moved in that direction. Alec was supposed to be working with Quinlan at the moment on his lightsaber skills, since Micah had been on duty on the bridge last night and thus was allowed to sleep in that morning. And Quinlan was... Giiett paused in his steps for a moment, frowning as he sensed that the Knight was in the training area where he was supposed to be.

As he walked the Bane's corridors, Master Giiett folded his hands in his robes, smiling as he entered the first of the two hydroponic gardens. The bright lights of runes above him drew his attention, and he smiled, seeing them, before staring out over the expanse of this first section, hearing the twitter of birds and the chuff of distant creatures. Out of the eight cargo holds of the Tyrant's Bane, five of them had been enlarged by this point.

One had been enlarged just enough to house the planetary shield generator and numerous 'fabbers.' That section wasn't fully online yet and wouldn't be until the

ship had access to a lot more electronic parts than they had found on this voyage or had been able to take from Serenno clandestinely. They had raw material aplenty, and the fabbers they'd picked up at Harry's insistence would help in churning out more parts, but the computer systems controlling them were not ready just yet.

But the shields were now fully operational, at least. The *Tyrant's Bane* didn't have the starfighter punch that a typical Lucrehulk had, but defensively was a different story entirely.

This cargo hold had been turned into a jungle with transplanted plants from several different worlds competing, creating a unique bio-system. They were watched by various heavy droids, and there were dozens of different kinds of animals in here as well. Aayla had led the way in its creation, and Micah felt it was a marvel, far larger than the Temple's equivalent space. They got their spices here, on top being a prime spot for mediation on the Living Force.

He nodded to a few droids moving through the jungle, heading through it towards the real farms. This area was like the jungle, but turned over to agriculture in a far more organized fashion, dotted with farms of all sorts, including those that contained livestock on them. The livestock had come from the plague planet and were their newest addition, but Micah could already see them, an animal that looked like a sheep crossed with a bantha but without the smell, being a major source of trade in the future.

Enough farms to feed a continent for weeks, Micah thought, still feeling a sense of wonder as he stared across the expanse. *And all in a single Lucrehulk class ship*. Oh, a normal Lucrehulk could, of course, actually transport enough food to feed a continent in protein packs and emergency food rations. But grow fresh food and in just one of its cargo holds? It was at times like this that Master Giiett truly fundamentally realized how their perception of the Force had changed since Harry and Lily had arrived in this universe.

"Master," Alecto said, getting out from under one of the larger farm droids, a massive combine with a droid's body in lieu of actual operator. Before Giiett could say anything, the young Duros, who had aged into a fine young man over the past years, went on. "I'm sorry I'm not at practice with Master Vos, but six of the droids somehow developed a virus on that last planet that took a while to get through their firewalls, somehow sort of sticking there until they got through rather than being deleted. I've been dealing with it all this morning."

"That's not good," Giiett said mildly, reaching out to grip his padawan's shoulder lightly. "Still, I trusted you had a good reason. Was it an actual attack, or just

malware?”

“Just regular malware, I think, master. The last planet really had a very sophisticated Internet system, and our droids just didn't have appropriate protections against it.”

“Yes, the infamous repeating 800 numbers. I don't think I've ever seen so many advertisements for male sexual enhancement before,” Micah replied drolly. “If the perpetrators had been human I might have felt rather jealous.”

The two of them laughed, but then Micah squeezed his padawan's shoulder. “However, did you inform Master Vos that you would be late?”

Alecto paused, then sighed and bowed his head. “No, master.”

“In that case, I think you will have to both apologize and volunteer for some extra training,” Giiett said somewhat sadly before pausing. “However, I think that might have to wait for later...”

Micah had just felt a tingle of anticipation through the Force. A moment later he felt Master Fay reach out to him and the others. “I believe Master Fay might want us on the bridge,” he said dryly, but Alecto had already turned in that direction staring through the walls towards the bridge. “Where are Harry and Aayla this morning?”

“It's supposed to be their day off training, master,” Alecto replied, looking at his master askance.

Giiett sighed. “Yes, I did just ask a rather stupid question, didn't I?”

OOOOOOO

Warning Lemon incoming:

Letting out a moan, Aayla threw back her head, meeting Harry's lips with her own as he slowly ran his length in and out of her from behind. His hips moved on their own, crashing into her backstrokes, while his hands were busy elsewhere. One was across Aayla's chest, his fingers playing with her purple nipple and helping to hold her upright while he pounded her body slowly into so much orgasmic mush. The other was playing with her Tchin, her leftmost lek.

Their lovemaking had started slowly and lovingly as it always did. Both of them reveled in bringing the other pleasure, that pleasure feeding the pleasure they felt via the mental plane. That link seemed to carry more from the physical to the mental than vice-versa for some reason, which they both supposed could be set down to their Occlumency shields. But eventually, as it always did, their lovemaking became somewhat frenetic after the first hour or so of interspersed foreplay.

Deciding that she had enough of being almost entirely on the receiving end,

Aayla pulled forward slightly, pushing back with one hand to push Harry away from her before turning. As Harry sat with his back against the wall beside their bed, Aayla crawled into his lap, reaching down as they whispered I-love-yous to one another both verbally and mentally. So conjoined were they via their bond that both of them felt both aspects of the act as she slid Harry's cock home into her aching flower. So intense was the pleasure loop, the physical feeding into the mental and vice versa, that Aayla let out a scream, throwing her head back,

Harry was in similar straits, but he had enough presence of mind to add to his lover's pleasure, leaning down to take one of her purple nipples into his mouth. The spicy taste of Aayla's sweat merged with the somewhat rubbery texture of the nipple as Harry worked it with his tongue, lashing it from side to side before sucking lightly, then, feeling Aayla's response, harder.

As this was going on Aayla recovered from the overwhelming moment of pleasure to find that Harry was concentrating on her nipple so much both because he really enjoyed playing with them and as a way to not let the sensation of his cock being squeezed by her insides overwhelm him. *Heh, well that will never do.* With that thought Aayla took command of their coupling, pulling back just enough to somehow loop her legs around Harry's waist, then beginning to use her thigh muscles alone to bounce up and down on his shaft, moaning in happiness as she felt Harry's pleasure rising along with her own. One hand clasped the back of his neck, while the fingers of her other hand wound through his hair. Unlike her disgust for hair anywhere else, Aayla actually enjoyed the feel of Harry's sweaty, perpetually windswept hair. It felt silky smooth under her fingers, not so coarse. *And on his head there's little chance that it sticks in my teeth or gets up my nose.*

Feeling that thought and the gurgling laughter accompanying it, Harry responded in kind before pulling away from Aayla nipples to first lick and bite at her neck and lekku before capturing her lips with his. Then he began to match Aayla's thrusts down with his own thrusts upward. *"Fuck, Aayla! You feel sooo good around me, love! I can never get enough of this!!!"*

"Mmmmm, me too, Harry! Oh God, I love you so much, so much!" Aayla replied.

"Always, always love you!" Harry roared mentally, the cycle of pleasure once more overwhelming them. That was a problem with their coupling like this, if it could be called that: once they were conjoined so tightly like this, their minds and bodies merging, the pleasure became too intense for them to keep going for very long.

Soon that pleasure started to rise to another crescendo. Feeling it coming,

Harry grabbed Aayla's ass with his hands, forcefully lifting her up just enough to lay her back down on the bed, never stopping as he continued to saw in and out of her. Finally Aayla humped up against his downward thrusts once more, her whole body going rigid, her legs splaying out from where they had been locked around Harry's waist as her eyes rolled back in her head, her lekku also going rigid.

A second before his lover's pleasure overrode his self-control, Harry pulled his cock out just in time. The instant he was out Harry erupted all over Aayla stomach, several shots going so far as to hit the undersides of her breasts.

End Lemon

As his seed flowed down Aayla's side, Harry smiled as he felt her thanks and surging love through their connection. It was very, **very** hard to pull out of her like that, but they had run out of contraceptive pills and condoms nearly a year ago after leaving the Dheas homeworld.

Harry routinely cursed himself for not thinking to try and copy the contraceptive pills when they had them. But none of them had any idea what went into those pills, and they hadn't yet found a planet that had anything they could use. The last few planets they had seen hadn't had any kind of contraceptives that could work on humans or Twi'lek, their inhabitants having been gas breathers. Harry still could conjure up condoms, of course, but they had no wish to even tempt fate, and it was a serious issue since, as they had seen on the Horde world, Twi'lek and humans could breed, so pulling out was a necessity.

"I want to be a mother some day, Harry, but not right now, so thank you," Aayla said, feeling Harry's rueful agreement even as she said the words aloud.

It had not taken the two lovers very long after they had left the Republic behind to take this final step in their relationship. This had surprised no one, though the two of them had been surprised by how differently going all the way physically differed from their mental attempts to do the same. The pain of Aayla's first time had been very real and had carried through the link so much that it had nearly been enough of a turn off to cause them to almost stop, so shocking it had been.

They had come through it, however and ever since their lovemaking had become part of their relationship. They didn't, as Alecto had once crudely put it after trying a juice made from an unknown fruit which acted on him like rotgut, "go at it like Rancors". Most days they were just too tired from all of their duties and training by the time they got to bed. They made love inside their heads every night, as they had for the first year of their travels aboard the *Bane*, but that was a far cry from the physical expression of their love. So they did it as often as they could, and their

relationship had somehow deepened because of it.

They exchanged a slow, languid kiss, both of them thinking about whether they could get away with starting another session. But then they felt Master Fay reaching out for them mentally, and Harry quickly responded with the mental equivalent of a, 'be right there.' The lovers had quickly learned to respond to such mental nudges promptly, lest Master Fay or someone else send a stronger probe their way. The blushes Quinlan and Fay had when the two lovers showed up on the bridge after that had been fun, but not something any of them wanted to see again.

Harry quickly hopped off of Aayla, while Aayla lay back, taking a moment to watch him move through their shared room, smiling at what she, admittedly from a biased point of view, thought was the most attractive male ass in the galaxy. He turned to her dryly, sending back the thought, "It takes one to know one, love," causing Aayla to let loose a gurgle of laughter.

Even as she did, though, she felt a sense of triumph as her eyes shifted once more down to his genitalia, which was completely hairless. Aayla had never gotten used to the hairs down there, so Harry had figured out a way to use the body morphing technique to completely stop hair from growing back down there as a birthday present to her.

In return, Aayla had grown her breasts somewhat. Not to the point where it was completely stupid, but to the point where they were certainly a little larger than they would naturally have been.

Now she preened a little as Harry paused in his pulling on his pants to look at her as she stood up, her breasts and lekku twitching as she moved.

"None of that, love," Harry admonished, shaking his head. *"You won't tempt me into trying to convince us to stay in bed again. You felt Master Fay just like I did."*

"True," Aayla said with a chuckle, turning around quickly and moving to the dresser they shared without any further overtly flirtatious moves. The anticipation they had felt in Master Fay's mental sending was such that both knew immediately what was happening. They were there: they were at Ruusan.

As the two of them had known would be the case, the others had already gathered on the bridge, watching Master Fay, who had once more taken the captain's chair, her eyes closed in meditation. "We are almost at the center of the disturbance in the Force," she said simply, her eyes not opening as she addressed them all. "We will be coming out within the next three minutes, and I wish us to be prepared for anything."

"Do you expect physical danger, master?" Harry asked. He could feel the

oddity that they were closing with, though couldn't really tell anything else about it in hyperspace like this. Nor could any of the other Jedi save for the two Masters.

"It is not impossible that we will face physical threats, though I believe that the majority of the threats we face will be more metaphysical in nature," Fay replied in a roundabout manner.

As the others looked at her, Fay opened her eyes and smiled at them all even as Micah closed his own, concentrating on sending his mind out in turn. "The Dark Side and the Light Side are literally at war with one another at Ruusan. It reverberates around the system as if the Thought Bomb that ended the New Sith Wars and killed most of the Army of Light had just gone off rather than a thousand years ago. What odd permutations this might've caused in the physical realm I do not know and cannot predict. My senses are swamped with it, so you'll forgive me for not being any more clear."

Harry moved over with Aayla as one, putting their arms around Fay in a wordless hug, with Lily resting both of her ethereal hands on Fay's shoulders. Behind them Alec and Quinlan looked on, concern visible on their faces. All of them remembered how she had nearly killed herself fighting the plague and had no wish to ever see it again.

Her fingers twisting into Lily's ethereal ones and Harry's physical ones, Fay smiled. "I'm not close to collapse, dears. It's just that I've been feeling this for the last few hours, and it's beginning to wear on me. The emotions both sides of that conflict felt are still there in the Force, and they are hammering at my mind now. It's making me a bit..."

"Tetchy," Lily supplied from her position behind her friend.

"...That works for now, yes," Fay replied dryly, looking up at her friend. Lily had been there throughout it all, and talking to the ghost had soothed her.

The other Jedi exchanged glances. "Will we have to deal with the same kind of thing?"

"I'm afraid so. Coming here was necessary, but the Force never indicated it would be simple."

"I suggest we all take a few moments to shore up our mental barriers," Harry said, looking at the others. "Just in case."

Fay nodded grimly. "I've been doing that ever since we got close enough for me to feel what was going on. You'll need to devote at least part of your attention to it at all times while we are in this system."

Quinlan and Alec both winced at that. Their mental defenses were not as

strong as those of the rest. Quinlan in particular was vulnerable to being attacked mentally, thanks to his powers as a Kiffar.

"We're coming out of hyperspace," Lily said, having kept one eye on the hyperspace computer. Harry idly noticed that she and Fay were still holding hands, despite the drain it must have been putting on both of them. "I'd say, prepare yourselves, everybody."

The ship came out of hyperspace into a system that had numerous planets but no sign of space-faring life. There was a bright yellow star close in while another white dwarf was in the distance. At least two of the planets were in the life bearing range, the others were either too far away or too close. Already they could see that many of the moons and outer planets were pockmarked, signs of ancient battles still evident, preserved by the lack of atmosphere. But the view of the system was nothing in comparison to the feel of the place.

Hate, anger, fear, **fear**, determination, shock, grim understanding, **hate**, resolve, a love of duty, a love of people, cold rage, obsession. All these emotions and more whirled around them as they entered, hammering the Jedi's minds like a tornado against a series of bunkers. The emotions were not accompanied by any specific imagery, they were just there in the ether, trying to overwhelm their senses.

"Pull back your Force sense as much as possible," Fay ordered, gritting her teeth as they all reeled under the assault.

Now within the system, the effect was far, far greater than she had felt in hyperspace. Quinlan in particular looked as if he was fighting himself. His hands were clenching and unclenching, his teeth grinding, and his breath coming in short, sharp gasps. Harry and Aayla had it slightly easier than the others, their shields reinforcing one another's, but even they were reeling slightly.

"Do not give into it. Do not let any of those emotions in, good or bad, light or dark. They are not yours. Do not let them affect you!" Lily said, her voice a mantra, almost, which the others used to latch onto before reinforcing their mental defenses as much as they could. This helped somewhat, but it was like standing on top of a dam as a tsunami hit. While it was still battering your senses you were in no danger so long as the dam stood, but you knew it could break at any moment.

Lily too was shuddering, the feelings and emotions hitting her despite her not actually having a physical brain for them to target. "This is not fun," Lily muttered. "This is not fun at all."

Harry and Aayla exchanged a glance, communing silently, before Aayla spoke for them both, looking at her master. "If anyone needs to rest, we can pull you behind

our mental shields for a bit.”

The older man hesitated, but nodded. The two lovers had developed a certain ability with that over the past few years: being able to temporarily join their minds to the other Jedi, bringing them into their mental planes as they had Alecko during the battle against the Horde. Here, that would actually allow the Jedi to rest themselves mentally. It would put somewhat more of a strain on the two of them, but the two of them were withstanding this mental chaos better than anyone else, even Master Fay.

“I’ll take you up on that at some point, I think,” Quinlan said with a smile at his padawan.

“Harry, give us something to concentrate on,” Lily ordered. “Tell us what’s on the sensors, someone. And Fay or Micah, you tell us about the history of the place.” They had, of course, all heard about the New Sith Wars and what had occurred here, but it would allow them to concentrate on something real for a time until they got used to the new mental strain.

“Sensors indicate some plant life, but not a lot. Most of the planet is arid; the seas have receded dramatically,” Harry reported as the giant ship moved through the space lanes of the dead world. “The plant life is mostly concentrated around a few equatorial regions. The southern hemisphere is dominated by a series of giant mountain ranges with scattered plant life, though not a lot. The northern hemisphere has a few scattered craters and what might have been settlements. Nothing in orbit, of course, but I can see some signs of nomads out there. Humans maybe, but definitely not a large population. Um... There could be something else there, but our scanners aren’t good enough for me to tell.”

“That matches with what we expected,” Lily said, looking over Master Fay.

Fay nodded, then elaborated. “We know the planet was inhabited at one point after the war by non-Force sensitives. But when the hyperspace lanes began to disappear, the planet was evacuated.”

“What are we looking for exactly, do you think?” Harry asked. Having pulled in his Force senses, he could no longer tell what they were supposed to be doing here. He knew that they were here to find him a lightsaber crystal, but how, and why here, of all places, eluded him.

“That is up to you, Harry,” Master Fay said firmly. She gestured him over to her, and then to kneel in front of her as she put her hands on his shoulders. Lily swiftly joined her, her ethereal hands resting on either side of Harry’s temples from behind, cold, yet immensely reassuring. “Reach out with the Force, Harry. Tell us where we

are supposed to go.”

“Okay...” Harry said, breathing in deeply. He looked over at Aayla, who quickly joined them, taking one of his hands in hers. These physical connections would work as a lifeline like Lily’s earlier mantra as he sent his astral projection out into the Force.

It was like diving into a whirlpool. Harry had to fight to keep his mental projection in one piece. Trying to find a single string of light which would point him to where he had to go in the torrent of the shadow of memory made it even worse.

“It, it’s called the Valley of the Jedi,” he said aloud, his face strained, his knuckles white-streaked as one hand gripped Fay’s hand and the other gripped Aayla’s. “The Valley of the Jedi. It is a name that I am seeing, a place. A deep valley marked with statues of some kind. S, south somewhere on the southernmost hemisphere.”

“That’s enough, Harry. Come back to us,” Lily ordered, her ethereal hands still on his temples. Fay and Aayla did the same with their free hands, their hands overlapping on his face. “Come back, Harry.”

With their touch Harry was able to pull his consciousness back, and he almost physically felt the snap of Aayla’s shields coming up around his mind as his projected self merged with the rest. He sagged against Master Fay’s legs and felt Aayla’s arms going around him. “By the Light, that was... Oooh wee, that was **really** tough!”

“Indeed, but it told me much,” Master Fay said, running one hand through Harry’s hair. “I think I know what we are here for, and it is not just to find you some lightsaber crystals, Harry.”

“No,” Harry said with a nod, while Aayla stiffened beside him, feeling the words before he said it, going through what he had felt out there and coming to the same conclusion. “It isn’t. Those thoughts, those emotions we’re feeling. They aren’t just echoes of what those caught in the Thought Bomb were feeling when it went off.”

“What do you mean?” Quinlan asked intently, while Alecto and Micah also frowned.

“They’re actual psyches. I think both Jedi and Sith ghosts are trapped here, unable to pass on,” Harry said, his voice ringing with certainty.

“You mean to say...that the Thought Bomb trapped them here,” Giiett said slowly, his voice showing his horror at the idea quite clearly. “That both sides of that conflict have been trapped here for one thousand years? Why didn’t the High Council try to free them before the nebula closed this place off from the rest of the galaxy?”

“I have no idea,” Master Fay said tiredly. “I may be old, but I’m not **that** old! The only Jedi who was around back then who is still with us is Master Yoda, and even he was but a newly made padawan at the time, certainly not privy to the workings of

the High Council.”

“Maybe they couldn't. I mean, we all know that a lot of the ancient abilities of Jedi were lost around that time, right? And the best and brightest of the Jedi, both the High Council and the Jedi Lords, were part of the battle on Ruusan. Maybe no one survived who knew how to free them,” Aayla said.

“Or maybe they thought the Thought Bomb was too dangerous,” Alecto said. They looked at him, and the Duros snorted. “Maybe trying to research the after effects was too dangerous for any of them. Who among the Jedi Order even knew how to defend themselves like we can with Occlumency? The Jedi Order teaches us to be open and to send our thoughts out to filter through the Force for information, not to defend ourselves from it.”

“That is a distinct possibility,” Micah said with a nod. “Indeed, it makes too much sense for us to ignore.”

“So... Will we be able to do it?” Quinlan asked, looking both determined and yet wary of the coming task. “After all, there are Sith minds out there, just as many as Jedi minds.”

“I don't know,” Lily said thoughtfully. “There were a few spells back in my and Harry's home dimension to exorcise ghosts. But they often failed depending on the power of the ghost or the individual doing the spell. I am uncertain if those kind of spells would even work in this dimension; we've never tried them before, after all. And these are Jedi. Their connection to the Force will be much more powerful than most ghosts I could think of.”

Master Fay frowned thoughtfully, working it out in her head, but Harry was the first one to speak. “Their entrapment will be in two parts,” he said, his voice still grimly certain. Next to him Aayla was still working through what he had sensed out there, but she still nodded agreement. “I felt it in the Force. There is a central hub, almost, something physical which is part of what keeping them here. Destroy that, and exorcising the various spirits will be possible.”

“But if we do that, each spirit, I think, will need to be dealt with in turn,” Aayla said, speaking up now, having reached her own conclusions from what Harry had sensed. “If we take out that physical thing, the spirits will gain in power.”

“A mental fight, then,” Quinlan said with distaste. “I'll admit that doesn't sound pleasant,” he said, his irony and deadpan tone rather withering.

“Well, we won't be finding out anything more up here,” Harry said philosophically. “Should we leave someone up here to guard the ship?”

“No,” Fay replied. “There is no physical threat to us here. There's no sign of

anything in space. The human's population seems to be preindustrial and nomadic at this point, and what I am sensing down there in terms of other species seem to be friendly enough."

"Those, what are they called again? The ones who look like furry balloons?" Harry asked.

"Bouncers, dear," Fay replied almost absentmindedly. "And yes, they are here. I feel as if they have been waiting for us for a long time. There is a sense of welcome there, buried beneath the rest of the Force miasma of this planet."

The other Jedi took turns to reach out, with Quinlan being the only one who didn't, fearing the effect it would have on his mental defenses. One after another the others all nodded, having felt the same thing.

"It will be fascinating to meet them, I think," Fay said. "An entire species of telepaths."

Harry and Aayla led the way, communing telepathically as was there wont. *"You do know that the majority of this fight will probably fall on you, Harry?" Aayla said. "You're the reason we're here, after all. This is supposed to be your...your trial, I think."* The words were sent without rancor. After all, Aayla was precisely where she would want to be, but there was no use hiding the fact that they were here because of Harry.

"I know," Harry said with a sigh. *"But there's nothing for it. We'll just have to do the best we can like always. Together?"*

"Like always, together!" Aayla said, squeezing his hand and sending a rush of love down their link, almost tempted to pull him into her mind completely for a moment to give him a more quasi-physical response to that statement, but not doing so. They tended to lose track of time in the real world when they did that kind of thing.

Moments later the Jedi headed down in their various starships as Master Fay directed them to a spot on the southern hemisphere where she felt the Bouncers were congregating to welcome them. The ships touched down, one after another, the Jedi getting out of them to look at the Bouncers as they approached. Master Fay stood forward, her hand raised in welcome as the other Jedi did the same.

The Bouncers were very odd to look at and even more odd to think about in terms of being sentient. Because, as Harry had said, they looked like large balloons covered with green hair. Their eyes were dark and luminous, indicating their nocturnal heritage. They had tentacles falling from their bodies which ended in spade like ends. Several of them were using these as feet to stand there as they watched the Jedi move towards them, while others were moving around through the air, these tentacles

floating behind them like tails. Their only other features were little flaps on the sides of their main balloon-like bodies, which seemed to move and sway with them, aiding them in controlling where they went through the air. They had no mouths, but instead multiple small creases around their faces and nose which showed what limited change of mood or emotion they conveyed physically rather than mentally.

"Greetings, Jedi," said one of them, his telepathic voice echoing into Master Fay's mind. *"Fascinating. Your friends are closed to us somehow. We understand the reasoning, but if we could, we would speak with all."*

"A moment please, good Bouncer," Master Fay said, turning to her fellows and indicating that they needed to open small holes in their defenses to allow the Bouncers to communicate.

Once that was done she turned back, and the Bouncers addressed them all. *"Greetings, Light Sided ones. We have heard of your coming through our dreams. We dreamed a Jedi would come to free the souls trapped here so they could resume their journey to eternity. Many centuries they have been caught here, unable to leave, unable to go to their rest."*

"We understand. We have felt this problem through the Force. And we wish to do what we can to aid them," Harry said, stepping forward to join his master. Aayla and the others did as well, the Jedi forming a line with Lily floating between Master Fay and Harry. "But these spirits, even the Light Sided ones, are out of control. We feel them pushing in on us from all sides here. Can you help us get to the Valley quickly?"

"We can," the Bouncer replied. *"We know where it is. We can take you to it. But you must agree to something first. You must free all the spirits, Dark Side and Light Side both. There must be balance. We will not help you if you only seek to free the Light Side apparitions."*

"We will attempt to, but we cannot promise to free them all. We are here to make the attempt, but the future beyond this point is blocked to me," Fay said. "And I am the best at seeing the future of all of us here. If you can see more clearly, that could help us."

"Your attempt is all anyone could ask. Certainty is for the young and the foolish," one of the Bouncers said. His green hair was noticeably marked with white, here and there.

There was a sense of laughter from the others, and Harry grinned suddenly, feeling a little better for this conversation. The other Jedi felt that too and nodded at the Bouncers. "Lead the way, please."

As they walked the Jedi made small talk with the Bouncers. For some reason

the telepathic communication with the locals helped to keep the emotions of this planet at bay. The Bouncers were somehow immune to it, and their telepathic communication gave the Jedi another anchor to their physical reality, further shielding them from the Force storm of emotions.

At least, that was what they thought, until one of the Bouncers burst their bubbles as darkness approached. "The spirits, they feel your presence. They know either their deliverance or damnation is at hand. They have pulled back and prepared for what is to come."

"That can be both good and bad," Harry said with a groan.

"It **is** both good and bad," the Bouncer said, no sense of irony or joke in it's mental tone. "Some will welcome it; some will attempt to cling to even this shadow of life. Others will attempt to take you over. I am sorry that we cannot help you further."

"You will have helped us enough if we can just get to the Valley. We sensed... Well, I sensed," Harry corrected himself sheepishly, "that there was a physical manifestation of the trap that the Jedi are in. Is that true?"

The Bouncers looked at one another, communicating amongst themselves, before a few of them replied. "Yes. There is a central orb, created during the Thought Bomb, which acts as the jail cell, almost, of the spirits. It will need to be destroyed before you can begin to dispel the spirits.

"But that too will be difficult. Others have tried, but only the Force can harm it at all."

"Well, in that case, at least the Light Side of the Force chose the right lance for this particular boil," Harry said dryly, causing his fellows to laugh.

With the Bouncers helping them it didn't take the group of Jedi very long to reach the Valley of the Jedi, with the Jedi using the Force to augment their bodies and the Bouncers simply bouncing around. Watching them move was just fun, Harry reflected, staring at a few of the smaller Bouncers. They were playing tag using little movements of their tentacles tails and ventrals to sweep around one another in an intricate dance even as they kept up with the rest of the group.

Soon, however, their simple enjoyment of the trip faded under the continuous battering assault from the despairing emotions of the Jedi and Sith trapped here. It wasn't quite a physical presence, but it certainly was battering at their mental senses.

More than once Harry and Aayla were asked to pull Alecto or Quinlan into their mental planes. Quinlan was not very comfortable with this and left almost as soon as he arrived. He simply wasn't comfortable with sharing all that he was like that. Alecto was better, having experienced it before during their battle gestalt. Micah and

Master Fay needed no such help, and Lily, for all that she was fighting the feelings like they were, accompanied by a wind trying to push her away from them, persevered.

A bare few hours after they had started their journey from where they had landed, the Jedi and their guides reached their destination. The Valley in question was more of a gorge, in Harry's opinion, steep-sided and extremely rocky even at the entrance. But despite that, there was nothing really unusual about the site until you were so deep into the gorge that you had trouble seeing back the way you came. Then any visitor to the gorge ran into the statues.

These were massive monoliths, about three stories tall, carved into the living rock of the mountain that the gorge was set into. The Jedi noticed as they moved forward that each stature was different. One of them was wearing armor plate, another was dressed as a traditional Jedi, robe and all. Each of them had a replica of a lit lightsaber as part of the statue and were separated from their fellows by perhaps a yard or so of flat rock before the next statue began. As they continued onward, the statues slowly began to be almost pushed out of the rock, carved out, rather than carved into the stone. The effect was interesting: the further down into the valley you went, the more alive the statues seemed to appear.

"This is amazing," Master Fay said softly as they passed the third pair of statues. "I can almost recognize some of these from the Jedi archives. Their faces in particular are fantastically well-carved. Good Bouncer, who made these?"

"The denizens of this planet made them with the aid of a few non-force survivors of the Army of Light. It took them twenty years, and they could barely leave the planet before the nebulae closed in around us." The Bouncer paused, seemingly pensive for a moment, then moved closer to the two Masters in the lead. *"Good Jedi, does your arrival mean that the nebula has settled down?"*

"We're afraid not. It took us many years to get here, and even if we had simply traveled in it would've taken two or so. We will make better time leaving since once this Force anomaly is dealt with, that should carry over into the physical realm," Master Micah said, shrugging his shoulders. "We will have to see."

"Might I ask why you ask? I can sense you are both interested and concerned about the idea of Ruusan being connected to the galaxy at large once more," Master Fay asked gently.

The Bouncer was silent for a moment, then replied slowly. "Those who come from off world bring great wonder and sorrow in equal measure. Our world was changed greatly one thousand years ago. We are not certain if we would rather welcome the greater universe back, or would prefer to stay in our exile."

“Say, rather, isolation. You did not make this choice, good Bouncer,” Harry said from behind the two Masters, interrupting them while using the same form of address that Master Fay had. After all, none of the Bouncers had given them their names, if they even had individual names. “If the rest of the universe does come back, it will be your choice to let them in. This is your planet, and if we have anything to say about it, any offworlder will respect that.”

There was a feeling of a chuckle from the Bouncers. “You speak well and honestly, young Jedi, and yet you also speak arrogantly. Do you think you could truly speak for all of the offworlders?”

“No, but we could, at least, try,” Alecto said, moving up with Aayla to stand with Harry in an almost automatic expression of support.

Again there was a chuckle, but the conversation tapered off at that point as they had reached the section where the statues truly seemed to be coming out of the rock. Between the final two statues there was a slight raised dais on top of which was a stone throne, the back of it gone.

On top of the throne hovered a massive crystal of silver. It was taller than Master Quinlan, who was the tallest of them by an inch over Harry, and wider than any two of the Jedi shoulder to shoulder. As they watched the surface of the orb shifted under the faint light coming in from above them. It looked almost as if something was inside it, and some pinkish and orange light glimmered from within.

The sight took the Jedi’s breath away for more than one reason. It was gorgeous, but it was also both the center of the Force storm that they had been weathering since coming into the system, and was wrong. Fundamentally, completely, bizarrely **wrong**! The mere sight of the thing made all of the Jedi shiver, fear coming into even Master Fay’s mind as they looked at it. “That, that has to be the physical sign of the spirits’ subjugation.”

“That is the Thought Bomb itself, I would wager,” Master Fay said, frowning in something approaching anger. For Fay, this was a sign of something closer to fury than any of the others had ever seen her show before.

“How do we do this?” Harry asked intently, his fingers flexing violently. “Do we just launch Bombarda techniques at it? Just shatter the thing? Do we have to be in physical contact with it?”

“I would not recommend that,” one of the Bouncers said, his telepathic voice somehow dry. *“When the statues were being carved, several workers attempted to touch that orb. Their reasons are not known to me, of course. I was not around at the time. All of them died. Their bodies were taken away by their fellows, but none ever*

dared to touch it again."

"And the Jedi at the time could not deal with it," Master Fay said. "That points to the need for the techniques you and Harry have introduced, Lily."

"Agreed," Lily said, frowning in thought as she moved ahead of the others, floating in the air a few feet away from the orb. "I wonder if I could touch it."

"No!" Harry exclaimed along with Fay. "We have no idea what would happen, mom. You might be sucked into the thing for all we know!"

"It was just a thought, dear," Lily said, scowling and turning her head away so that neither of the others could see it. After all these years Lily was rather used to being a ghost, but that didn't mean that it had become any easier to see her son in danger while she simply stood by, unable to help. Admittedly, she had discovered ways to do so, as had been shown against the Horde. But she still had a tendency to want to protect him physically.

"I believe Bombarda techniques. Yes, our most destructive pure Force techniques. I doubt that anything with a physical component will be effective here," Master Fay said, gesturing for Lily to join them as they all backed away. "Form a circle around it; attack from all sides."

"That sounded surprisingly martial for you, Master Fay," Micah said in an effort to alleviate the gravity of the situation.

The quip fell somewhat flat, but everyone still smiled, moving around the thing. Lily joined them in the circle, hovering between Harry and Aayla, with Master Fay on his other side. To Fay's other side sat Alecto, then Master Giiett, then Knight Vos who sat next to Aayla on her other side. As one the Jedi lifted their hands, holding them out towards the Thought Bomb.

The techniques lashed out, crashing into the silver orb from every direction. As the Jedi poured their will power into their techniques, the silver seemed to shimmer, trying to take in their power but failing, the shape of that power thwarting its ability to absorb the Force. Minutes into their attack, the silver of the thing began to crack, then crumble away into what looked like dust, the light within flickering and becoming more and more visible.

Suddenly there was a cacophonous roar as the orb seemed to give up the ghost, shattering into a thousand pieces, each of them dissolving into nothing, releasing the energy within. That energy was only barely felt on the physical plane, but in the Force it reverberated, and the Jedi staggered back as if they had been hammered by a tornado. At the same time, all of them could feel a vast susurrations in the Force as the spirits within the Thought Bomb were released from the physical trap which had

contained them within.

Most of the spirits moved on in that moment. Harry realized with a jolt that the spirits, both Sith and Jedi, who had passed on had understood the great answer to all wars: that in the end the dead are all the same, and the only winners are the crows.

Wiser by far than their former lords and masters, then, Harry thought sardonically. He could feel that the vast majority of the Jedi passed on then, leaving only those who had an ax to grind, or had, perhaps, been driven mad in the centuries trapped with their Sith adversaries in the Thought Bomb. But there were over a dozen, perhaps more like two dozen, Dark Side ghosts in the ether around them.

“That was perhaps the easiest part,” Master Fay said after the physical repercussions had faded. “Now comes the difficult part of exorcising the remaining spirits.” She looked around at the other Jedi seriously. If she had thought for a moment that she could do this alone or even with just Master Micah, she would probably have ordered the others to leave at this point. But feeling the power reverberating in the Force around them, she knew that would be impossible.

And better to risk them now than to risk those spirits remaining here. Besides, this is Harry's task for some reason. His techniques allowed us to destroy the remnants of the Thought Bomb, and I think his and Aayla's bond will allow the two of them, at least, to deal with the remainder.

“We might as well get comfortable, then,” Harry said, thinking for a moment before gesturing around the circle of Jedi. Chairs appeared there, simple affairs, but comfortable enough.

They all sat down before looking at Master Fay. “The Force be with us,” she said simply, pulling her legs underneath her as she began to meditate to send her consciousness out into the Force to do battle with the remaining spirits.

The others followed her example, Harry and Aayla sending a final ‘I love you’ to one another before concentrating and sending out their thoughts into the Force at large. As Master Fay had known, this acted like a lightning rod attracting all of the remaining spirits to them. And all the spirits who had refused to rejoin the Force attacked them, Jedi and Sith both.

Harry found himself elsewhere, the Valley gone, or perhaps its time rewound to a thousand years ago. The sky above was red, casting shadows from the rock faces all around, but the walls of the valley were far wider and less sharply defined. *So this is some kind of mental plane, then? Or the land between the living and the dead?*

Behind him Harry could feel his connection to Aayla, like a bridge coming out of his back into the sky and beyond. Unblemished and perfect, it shimmered with pure

platinum light, helping Harry to center himself.

Around him, Harry could feel the personalities of the trapped Jedi and Sith coalescing, preparing to strike. Here this was represented to him by a heavy cloud bank of some kind appearing all around him, obscuring everything.

Before they could attack, Aayla appeared there too, her mental representation stepping out of midair and landing lightly on her feet next to Harry. For some reason their connection was still there in the sky, heading off somewhere from her back just as did Harry's. *"So our main minds, I suppose you could say, are still back there somewhere on the physical plane. But we shouldn't be complacent,"* Harry warned via their link.

Aayla nodded, then, to their great shock, Lily appeared there as well. She too was connected to Harry by a thin, almost invisible thread. Here, however, her body looked to be actually solid, her body dressed like a Jedi Master's for some reason, rather than the clothing she had been murdered in. *"My, but this is a surprise, though a pleasant one,"* Lily said, showing a true British woman's mastery of understatement.

She smiled then, looking down at herself and then to her son, reaching to clasp his body to her and leaning in to kiss his forehead. For only the second time in his entire life Harry felt his genetic mother's physical touch, and he trembled slightly as he hugged her tightly.

A moment later, however, Aayla sent him a nonverbal warning, and the two Potters shifted their attention elsewhere. The two Jedi padawans moved back to back, their lightsabers coming out. Harry's was still the green-bladed lightsaber that Quinlan had taken from Aurra Sing. But both of them waited to activate them, staring out into the mist surrounding them.

There was a vast push towards them, and the mist coalesced into a few individuals, while the rest of the mist simply boiled forward. Realizing somehow that the mist itself was also a threat, Lily raced forward, her hands outstretched. The air around her hands reacted to Lily's will slamming the mist away. As it did, ghost-like figures, tortured faces of dozens of people representing almost as many races, appeared there, wailing and trying to get around the mother bear. *"You will not have them! You will not have my children, you bastards!"* Lily roared into their teeth, her hands flaring with the Force as she struck out at them.

This left Harry and Aayla to deal with five attackers whose sense of self was still strong enough to allow them to form physical bodies here in the realm between the living and the dead. Three of them were Sith, their lightsabers blazing red as they moved to attack the two Jedi from one side. The other two were Jedi, and they too

moved to attack the two padawans from the other side of their former adversaries.

"Is it just me, or is there something wrong with the fact that all of you are attacking us rather than one another?" Harry asked sardonically, his voice carrying to both Sith and Jedi.

"Foolish boy!" spat one of the Sith, standing forward slightly from his fellows. His skin was reddish, a little darker, maybe, than their friend Zule's. He had long, black hair down to his shoulders, lanky and unkempt, framing an angular face that might once have been handsome. However, the face was dominated by eyes of pure yellow, and a rictus of madness had set into his sneer.

"The Jedi spirits might think themselves free, but they are not!" the man continued. "They are subservient to me! They cannot see myself or my Sith brethren; all they can see are you, and you have flaws enough to infuriate any right thinking Jedi."

"Yeah, I call bullshit on that one," Harry said, cracking his neck explosively as he activated his lightsaber. "Still, it makes my job a little easier."

But to his surprise the man who had spoken was not the one to attack first. That dubious honor went to the man next to him. He was taller than the first man and powerfully built, reminding Harry strongly of Master Glaive. He also wielded a longer than average lightsaber with a thicker than average plasma blade, for all the universe like the lightsaber equivalent of a claymore.

"RAAAHHHH!!" With that wordless roar the man attacked, his eyes pure yellow with reddish irises to them, the sign of a berserker. Harry met him with a flash of his lightsaber followed by a Force Push that hurled him away. He then had to duck, covering himself with Force Shield as the third Sith attacked him while behind him the two Jedi swiftly engaged Aayla, separating the two padawans for a moment. Their bond here was not nearly as close as it was in the real world for some reason, forcing them to fall back

The third Sith was a woman. She had dark skin, the color of light mocha. Her hair fell to her shoulders in a cascade of black ringlets, and she had full, pouting red lips. She also a small tattoo of some kind on one cheek, but rather than take away from her beauty, it gave her a darkly sensual appearance, adding to the effect of her lips and her deep brown and yellow eyes. Those eyes were the only ones of the three facing Harry that were not pure yellow, the sign of someone who had completely fallen to the Dark Side.

She was also using a light whip, a whip made of reddish plasma. As it crashed against his Force Shield, Harry leaped away so that he could face all three of them without turning his body. "That's new and is giving me some very, very bad mental

images,” Harry said impishly, staring at the woman.

“What's the matter, boy?” she asked, whipping the light whip around her in a show of significant skill. “Don't think you're man enough?”

“I think my bond mate would object if I said anything beyond ‘no comment.’” Harry replied. He then watched as her eyes narrowed, suddenly glinting with more yellow than before. Then they all attacked as one.

“Aren't you lot going to even give me your names?” Harry asked while conjuring up a more powerful Force Shield, keeping them all back for a moment as he studied them in turn. However, he had never seen any faces in the histories he'd read which covered the New Sith Wars, and even their weapons were not really helping him figure out who was who here.

“I am Lord Skere Kaan, boy!” the first man said, stepping back slightly and raising his rather normal looking lightsaber in comparison to the other two in a classic Ataru stance. “You have some very interesting tricks, and you are powerful. More powerful than even the other two Masters I sensed with you. Your body will serve me far better than theirs could have once I excise your spirit from it.”

“Ah, well, it's nice to know the stakes!” Harry replied, wincing internally as he realized he was facing the man who had led the Brotherhood of Darkness, the man who had betrayed the Jedi High Council to become a Sith, gathering most of the Sith alive during the New Sith Wars under one banner. *Not good.*

With that in mind Harry stopped taunting them and went on the attack. Bombarda spells lashed out at the feet and faces of the woman and the larger man as he rushed to engage Lord Kaan in a lightsaber duel, or so Kaan thought. Before they clashed, however, Harry teleported away, flashing a fireball towards the man. At the same time he tried to conjure up small stone needles and knives, but the technique fizzled, the images in his mind not superimposing themselves on the reality around them.

Realizing what that meant, Harry turned, roaring mentally as he engaged the larger Sith blade to blade, pitting his Djem So against the other man's for a brief second before popping away once more. “*Aayla! Transfiguration and conjuration doesn't work here!*”

This timely warning saved Aayla's life as she had been about to conjure up a stone wall to slow down the Jedi facing her. Instead she switched her spell to a Force Shield of some strength, watching as the blade of one Jedi impacted it, bouncing off and away. A blast of air caught him and hurled him backwards mid leap, his Ataru style having opened himself up to that before he could realize it.

"You are no Jedi! You feel love; you let your emotions rule you. There is no passion, there is serenity. You are not worthy of being a Jedi!" said one of them as she circled Aayla to the left. She was a Bothan wielding twin lightsabers like Aayla's, only the longer, normal variety rather than her short shotos.

The two of them exchanged a swirling dance of Ataru for a few moments before the other Jedi came back, striking at Aayla's back. He was surprised when she conjured a Force Shield once more to block the blow, twisting around his attack as it dissipated. He barely got out of the way of her riposte. This Jedi was a Miraluka man. However after that near brush with death (or whatever the equivalent was here), he seemed to gather himself, bringing up his lightsaber to block a flurry of blows while she sent a blast of wind towards the Bothan woman. *"Hang on, Harry!"*

"Even now you show your divided loyalties," said the Miraluka man, shaking his head. "How far have the Jedi fallen from our time to allow someone like you and this Harry to have that bond. It will lead to darkness! There is no emotion, there is serenity! We did not sacrifice ourselves so that more Jedi could fall to the Dark Side by allowing for soft emotions."

"How can you be so certain I will fall to the Dark?" Aayla said, bringing her lightsabers up in a Soresu stance for a moment while she tried to get through to the two Jedi with her words. "Harry and I might've bonded accidentally when we were younger, but neither of us has ever regretted it." She paused, then added, "Well, except for when we were going through puberty."

"You revel in your bond, which has become more important to you than the very Force we as Jedi are meant to serve!" the Bothan retorted, attacking even more furiously. But she couldn't get through Aayla's defenses. Aided by Force Shields and Air Blasts of significant strength, the padawan was holding her own against both Jedi Masters with an ease which would have been impossible in their own time. She hadn't even used the Bombarda technique yet, waiting for it when it would be most effective.

"Every time a Jedi has allowed his emotions to rule him in any way they have fallen to the Dark," said the Miraluka, almost sounding sorrowful as he, too, attacked. "We are not doing this out of petty mindedness or a false understanding of the ways of the Force. We are trying to save you from a fate you cannot truly comprehend. The Force is a harsh mistress. It demands balance and control."

"Control, yes, but not unfeeling control!" Aayla countered, using some of the same arguments she and Harry had used numerous times before. *Gah, even ghosts want to give us a piece of their minds about our bond.* "If you feel nothing, if you banish emotions away into the Force because you do not understand emotions, when

they come upon you suddenly, of course you will overreact, of course you will give into the darker emotions. Because you have nothing to combat them!"

"Sophistry!" Bothan woman said, attacking all the more furiously. Aayla could feel her Force Shields dimming in strength as the fight went on, dozens, hundreds of flashing lightsaber blows exchanged in this place beyond time.

But that idea gave Aayla a clue as to another weapon at her disposal. *If this place really is part of the Force, then I should be able to share my memories here with these two like if we were in a pensieve.*

Reaching forward and within at the same time with the Force, Aayla thrust out the memory of her and Harry's discussion with the High Council, followed swiftly by what Harry had protected her from in Jabba's palace. As the memory reached its critical moment, she flashed out a blast of Force Light at the Miraluka male, blinding him and sending him reeling backwards. She wasn't nearly as good at using Force Light as Harry was, but she could at least conjure it into being for a short amount of time.

"I am of the Light!" she said as Harry's memory did the same. "Can you still say the same? When you look down on me for what I have done, for what I feel, for loving, caring, for being **alive**! If you cannot feel, if you cannot understand that being emotionless is not serenity, are you truly alive? Do you truly serve the Force like that, or just the balance? And which is closer to the Dark Side, the ones who stand on the balance point, or in the Light?"

The Bothan woman stared at her, then down at her own lightsabers, deactivating them as true lucidity returned to her face, her fur falling flat to her body from where it had risen. She looked into Aayla's eyes and nodded a silent affirmation. "Do it."

Aayla struck then, her lightsaber flicking out almost gently to decapitate the spirit.

In that moment the woman had realized that she was indeed serving the Dark Side, regardless of what she thought she had been doing a moment before. And in death came release. "Thank you," the spirit whispered as it slowly disappeared to join several of the unformed spirits who Lily had already banished.

That left Aayla facing off with the male Miralukan. This Jedi seemed more caught up in his own diatribe and had simply ignored the vision that Aayla had shared. Moreover, he now attacked using some of the same techniques Aayla had been while utilizing more Force Pushes, and his Force Precognition had become stronger too.

This is going to take a while, Aayla thought, glaring at the man even as she heard the fight around Harry beginning to escalate.

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Despite not facing as many spirits, Quinlan faced just as legitimate a threat as the two younger padawans. He was only attacked by one, a Rutian Twi'lek like Aayla, although her skin had dark whirling tattoos of red on the blue skin to go with her yellow eyes.

She attacked with a ferocity that he could barely match, while also reaching deep into his mind, battering through his defenses unlike the spirits attacking Aayla and Harry, who had been unable to do so. Every dark moment, every fearful instant, every angry battle where Quinlan had nearly fallen to the Dark Side, every moment where he had used his powers to pull images from objects and felt the previous user's anger, hate, or fear whirled around him. The Rutian Sith used them like physical weapons while their lightsabers clashed and clashed and clashed again, the woman's mastery of Djem So giving his own skill in Ataru a run for its money.

"You are of the Dark already! You know its power. Join me, let me in, and we will become more powerful together than either of us could ever be alone! It will be sweet," she said, suddenly ducking under his guard, putting one arm around his shoulders and pressing her body flush against his as she whispered seductively into his ear. "You know it to be true. The memory of your parents' death to Anzati started you down this path. Your master knew this, forcing you into the shadows every chance he could. Take your anger and your rage and use it!"

Frozen for a moment, Quinlan didn't try to dodge as the woman thrust her lightsaber through his chest. The pain was agonizing, but no more than her words were here in this strange realm between the living and the dead. "That's right, give into the Dark," she whispered, moving with him so their bodies were still pressed together.

"The Dark Side is a curse, a trap," said another memory in his mind, a memory of his discussions with Knight Komari. The two of them had talked to one another about things he'd never even told his own master, things that she had only talked about with Master Luminara during her recovery. He had shared the darkness about his past, his parent's murder by Anzati and the way he had been forced to view it via his psychometry, the rage and anger and fear that had spawned in him which he'd had to deal with numerous times since. In return Komari had shared her torture by the Bando Gora, how she had learned to embrace the pain and feed off the hate to free herself.

“But it is a curse,” she said, shaking her head and touching her eyes. “It sears out all other parts of you. Every Dark Side user has spouted out that only they understand the true nature of the Force, but the moment they allow themselves to be controlled by their Dark emotions, they lose everything. You lose everything, becoming less than you are. Do not fall for that; do not fall for the seduction of the Dark.”

With that thought Quinlan pulled himself forward and lashed out behind him the blow barely blocked by his attacker’s lightsaber. “No,” he said slowly, pushing himself to his feet and feeling at his chest where the blow she had dealt him had disappeared. He was still in pain, and still far weaker now than he had been a few moments before, but he was still in one piece. “No, I will not be turned. I will not be used by the likes of you.”

That seemed to enrage the woman, and she wore it as she charged forward, her lightsaber flashing out to meet his own in a welter of sparks and the “Fizz-thrum!” of lightsaber combat.

OOOOOOO

Like Quinlan, Alecto was attacked both verbally and physically in this odd realm between life and death, his mental defenses not up to the level of the two Masters or the bonded couple.

But he handled it far better than Quinlan had at first. He had known about his slight jealousy for some time, his feeling of inadequacy in comparison to Harry. He had dealt with all of that during the Force gestalt the padawan trio had used against the Horde. He also had realized something that had eluded the others, facing immediate attack upon their mental forms.

The two Sith spirits attacking him were astonished at the strength of his response, hurling the mental attack out of his mind as he clashed with their own physical representations.

“That’s right,” he said calmly. “I am a rock. I am their rock.” With that, Alecto reached into himself, using one of the body changing spells. Elsewhere he couldn’t use that spell beyond changing his skin color, but here, in a realm where his physical body was a product of Alecto’s mental concept of himself, he could, and did so now to an astonishing degree.

The two Sith, one seeming human and one Nautolan, watched in shock as their target’s skin shifted, becoming rocky. Their lightsabers actually bounced off his

changed skin, though Alecto had to hide a wince. Forcing his image of himself to seem more powerful than the memories of their lightsabers had hardened his skin a lot, but the heat had still gotten through. Despite that he smirked at the two Sith. “Do you know what swords do when they meet rock? They break. Your words will not hurt me, your power does not tempt me, and you will **never** break me!”

OOOOOOO

Micah was able to keep out the attempts by the spirits to get into his mind, and he had an easier time of it, at least at first. Four low ranking Sith who had somehow kept the memory of their physical bodies after all these years attacked him almost immediately upon their arrival in this odd, in-between space.

But while they were strong enough to actually form into a physical representation, unlike the spirits that Lily was dealing with, they weren't very good at fighting as a unit. They got in one another's way, and none of them seemed able to deal with his Bombarda or Shield techniques. It took him some time, but he dealt with them all, the last falling to a strike to the side as his other lightsaber blocked the blow the Sith had intended to decapitate him.

But the next round of attackers were two Jedi Masters. They assailed him with words as they did with their lightsabers, trying to castigate him for using those techniques. Micah tried to debate the point, tried to point out that just because they were new and unusual and, indeed, had never seen before, did not mean they were evil. He tried to point out that the bond between Aayla and Harry meant they would never be able to fall to the Dark Side through jealousy, that at the heart of their love was a selflessness that was simply astonishing.

He tried to explain that the two of them were a force for the Light Side, but the Jedi were not listening. Micah, and by extension the others, were different to what they knew and were therefore Dark in their eyes. *Is this the result of fighting the New Sith Wars, that anything different becomes the enemy?* Micah would have liked to think so, on top of their long, pain filled incarceration. But he knew that the Order could well have reacted the same way if not for Fay, Tholme and others.

Shaking that thought off, Micah began to fight them in earnest. *All I can do for them now is to free them.*

OOOOOOO

In stark contrast to the others, Master Fay's presence seemed to put off most of the spirits from attacking her for some reason, even after she projected her mind out into the Force. But several of the most fanatical of the Jedi attacked her one after another. The first was a Jedi knight named Turpimir, the same name which was given to one of the planets in the system. But he had been driven mad by the pain of the Dark Side, and she could only kill his body image, releasing him to move on.

He was followed by three more. These were all so-called Jedi Lords rather than Knights, men who had commanded troops of Jedi and volunteers against the Sith. Despite their arrogance and pride, Fay was able to convince two of them to rejoin the Force with her words. The third she was forced to help on his way.

The fifth spirit she faced, however, was someone else entirely, someone who Fay recognized from several sealed segments of the Temple archives. "Lord Hoth," she said, nodding her head, still somewhat bemused by the idea of having a body here in this realm between the living and the dead. "I would say it was a pleasure to see you, but seeing as you have decided to assail me thus rather than passing on to your well-deserved rest, I fear that any pleasure I get from the meeting will be quixotic at best."

Lord Hoth was a tall man, as tall as Skere Kaan, but built on a broader scale. He wore Mandalorian Beskar armor plate, vambraces, and armored leggings, along with a reddish, fur lined cloak coming from his shoulders down his back. He had long, silver hair done up into a ponytail, was in desperate need of a shave, and his face, overall, would never be called handsome, but perhaps could be called commanding.

On said face at the moment was a glare, which he was directing at the Elfin Jedi Master. "You, **you** are believed to be a Jedi Master? Where is your lightsaber?"

Fay cocked an eyebrow. "If a Jedi's worth is defined by a weapon, that is what he or she is. A lightsaber should be a tool, not a symbol of authority."

"Ah, a Consular," Lord Hoth said sneeringly, activating his lightsaber as he moved forward. "The kind that allowed the rise of the Sith in the first place. The type that tried to lift Kaan above all others as a Chosen One to do their fighting for them. Never understanding that nonviolence will never be a solution, never realizing that their arrogant belief that they knew what was best led us and the universe into darkness!"

With those words he attacked, blinking in surprise as his lightsaber hit a Force Shield several feet away from Master Fay, who simply stood there calmly, her arms folded in her robes. "Things have changed since then. And just because I do not carry a lightsaber does not mean I am not a threat." With that she lashed out with a Force Push of such magnitude that Hoth could not combat it, despite having prepared

himself, and found his body hurled away from Fay.

But it didn't hurt him, and he quickly leaped back, coming back with his own Push, hammering against the shield and even creating a large cutting Force, like a technique Harry had created, but more powerful. But Master Fay simply stood there calmly, weathering the storm without apparent effort, her shield sustaining his assault with ease. This was not really the case, but it seemed so to Lord Hoth, and seemed to prick his pride.

"What would you have done in my place! You with your ivory tower beliefs, with your nonaggression!? You would have died to the Sith! The whole universe would have fallen to them were it not for me, my army, and my lightsaber! The Dark Side, evil, must be fought no matter the cost!"

"I would've fought, but in my own way," Fay said, her serenity an ocean of calm that Hoth's heated words could not penetrate. Suddenly her shield disappeared and Lord Hoth's lightsaber flew past her. Before he could recover she had stepped into his reach, touching his face with one hand. "You took so much on yourself, but it is time to let go. Let go of this anger and obsession, Lord Hoth, and become one with the Force."

A blast of Force Light lashed out from her hand, but Hoth had somehow seen it coming with his Force Precognition, and he jerked away, bringing his lightsaber up and around into where Fay was standing, only to find that Fay was gone, having teleported away. The two of them stared at one another for a brief moment, then Hoth roared and attacked once more.

"Stubborn man," Fay said with a sigh, readying herself for his charge. *This looks like it might take some time.*

OOOOOOO

While the Jedi passing on felt nothing but bliss after being released, the Sith felt nothing but fear. Because at the bottom of the Dark Side was not hate, but arrogance and self-importance. They felt they were each singular, not part of a whole, and because of that could not rejoin the Force. For them death was an ending, whereas for the Jedi it was simply a merging into a greater whole.

Harry learned this as he decapitated the larger Master Glaive look-alike, while holding his side where a near collision had occurred. A Force Crush, or the Sith equivalent, anyway, had gotten through his defenses, breaking several of his metaphorical ribs. But Harry had dodged just enough of the blow that it hadn't

crippled him. He was then able to concentrate through the pain to lash out with a Reducto to the large man's head, blowing it to pieces as he gaped in shock at Harry's survival.

*How the heck is that even working, anyway? I mean, I know this isn't really my mind—I can feel the connection to the rest of my psyche out there, protected by mine and Aayla's shields—but I'm still hurting **here**!* Shaking off such existential thoughts, Harry quickly brought up his lightsaber to batter aside Lord Kaan's once more, followed by ducking underneath a blow from the woman.

All along, all three of the Sith had been attempting to get through the bonded pair's defenses to attack Harry both verbally and physically, but it hadn't worked. Now angry and becoming fearful at the number of techniques the young padawan was using, the as-yet unnamed woman backed off, staring around them for a moment, fearing that this battle was going against them. Only the three of them plus the two Jedi thralls had been able to form their bodies once more, and one of those thralls had somehow broken free of Kaan's power. The other was slowly being overwhelmed by the Twi'lek girl.

Looking around, she at last spotted the link between Harry and Aayla and scowled, her eyes once more flickering yellow. "You!" she said, pointing her light whip at him as it coiled in the air. "You! What is so special about you that you are allowed to remain within the Order if you love someone like that?"

"Is this really the time to ask me questions, miss?" Harry shouted back, yelping as a near cut from Kaan nearly scored his side. The heat from the near miss stung something fierce, despite all this happening somehow in his head-and-yet-not. Worse, Kaan was adapting quickly. Every time Harry used a specific technique against him he won some ground, but then Kaan would come right back and either use the same technique against him or simply allow for it with his Force Precognition.

"Answer the question, boy, or I'll join the attack on you or your little lover over there," the sultry beauty retorted.

"GAH, you've got a point. But it's easier to show you, miss," Harry said while dodging another attack. *Anything to make sure she doesn't join in again!*

With that thought Harry lashed out with a Force Light blast. He couldn't form actual constructs here for some reason, but the Force Light forced Kaan away screaming. He actually dissipated his physical form for a time, only to reappear several yards away. Sith Lightning lanced from one hand while the other sent another Force Crush at Harry, but Harry got up a shield in time before turning his attention to answering the woman's question.

With a wave of his hands Harry brought out the memory of the time he and Aayla had bonded, then the memory of their confronting the High Council. Throughout this the woman stood and watched while Harry and Skere Kaan dueled, moving around the area, even teleporting occasionally, both of them. Kaan's lightning was matched by Harry's fire manipulation, his greater speed and strength, and by his Force Light. Their Force Precognition abilities were too close in skill for either to have an advantage there. Even their lightsaber skills were equal, Harry's odd mix of Makashi and Djem So against Kaan's style, the style known as Juyo when the man had been actually alive.

"...children—dumb, foolish children—were able to, to create something so selfless," the woman murmured. Then, as the memory of the confrontation with the High Council played out around her, she grit her teeth, her eyes once more flickering yellow as she turned and roared, rushing toward Harry, who thankfully had moved well away from the woman during his fight with Kaan. "I was kicked out of the Order for less than this! I was forced to choose between my love and the Order! Chastised, thrust aside, and then left alone, and, and you are favored like this!"

"Left alone?" Harry asked, even as he fought with Lord Kaan, idly noting the woman had sort of ignored both the fact that the bond had let him save Aayla and his use of Force Light, which at the time seemed to have overawed the High Council. He thrust out another Force Crush, which was blocked by a hasty Force Shield, and then Lord Kaan once more was forced to dodge a fireball to the face, not noticing the Force Push coming right behind it until it slammed him up and away from Harry.

He landed on his feet and began to circle Harry's position, and Harry started to feel several dozen probes attempting to get into his mind: failing but doing far better than any mental assault he'd had to deal with before this. They got past the first line of protection, the imagined shield Aayla and Harry both maintained around their minds. There the probes were caught by the more active defenses, a series of animals that attacked the probes, tearing several asunder.

This allowed Harry to concentrate on trying to talk the woman down from attacking him again while he tried to use the Force to heal his injuries. "What do you mean, left alone? Surely if you were in love with someone, that other person left with you, right?"

"He chose the Order over me!" the woman's shrieked, attacking despite Harry's words. Her light-whip lashed out, switching this way and that, and Harry struggled to match it with his own lightsaber. A Force Push at Harry's legs nearly caught him off balance. Whipping her light whip around in a display of Makashi and Ataru, she pushed the now off-balance Harry back. Eventually he had to just throw up

another Force Shield before she could finish him off. This opened Harry up to an attack from Kaan from the side, having stopped his mental assaults.

Even as he tried to fend the Sith Lord off, however, Harry replied to the woman. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said sincerely.

"What?" she said, actually pausing in her attack, much to Harry's well-hidden relief.

This opening let Harry shunt his power away from the Force Shield holding her at bay. Instead he locked blades with Kaan, then grabbed his legs with a Force Grab, hurling him into the air. Kaan righted himself mid-air, blocking both Bombarda that would've taken him in the chest with a Force Push which disrupted Harry's technique short of the target. He then blocked Harry's follow-on lightsaber attack with his own as Harry leaped after him. A high, overhead blow threw Kaan back to the ground, and Harry's follow up Push kept him there as Harry landed, pressing him hard, his Djem So finally beginning to batter the other man's defense down.

Kaan shouted angrily at the woman. "What are you doing?! Help me, Githany!"

"What do you mean," she asked instead, her eyes now normal rather than yellow tinged, "that you are sorry for that?"

"Well," Harry said, grunting as Kaan somehow got some momentum behind him and began to attack again. "I mean, it sounds as if your fall to the Dark Side could've been avoided if this guy, whoever it was, felt for you as much as you felt for him. I wish I could tell you the secret of how Aayla and I formed our bond, but I can't. I wasn't the one who forged it."

At that moment Aayla appeared, having finished her own fight at last. She was tired, one arm was hanging loosely at her side from a near miss from a lightsaber, and her leg was trailing. Her physical mental manifestation had taken several blows when her opponent proved to be able to use his hands and feet as weapons. But they were healing as she moved towards Harry, her eyes glimmering.

Harry quickly sent her the memory of the last few moments as the woman attacking him turned to her. At the same time Kaan lashed out with his own fireball, forcing Harry to concentrate on him again, his fingers searing from the heat of the blast behind a hasty Force Push which hit and exploded the fireball right before it would have hit him.

"And what do you think?" the now named Githany roared, moving to attack Aayla with her light-whip. "Do you think my fall to the Dark was preordained, like so many have? Or do you think it could have been avoided if Charny had loved me." She sounded almost desperate now, her tone that of a far younger woman, and Harry

realized with a jolt that while she might not have fallen utterly to the Dark Side, she was just as insane as the other spirits trapped in the Thought Bomb.

"It certainly could've been avoided," Aayla said calmly, blocking the furious attacks with her own twin lightsabers. Jar'kai seemed to work better against the incredibly chaotic movements allowed by the light whip. This let Aayla concentrate on exchanging words with the woman. "And for that alone I blame this other person, Charny? Huh. Isn't there a planet named after him? Ugh, so wrong."

This won a laugh from the mad Githany, and Aayla went on, still calmly. In fact, she was channeling the same tone that Master Fay used when dispensing justice as part of her duties as a Jedi. "If he had been up front with you, if he had admitted that he did not love you like you loved him, perhaps your dalliance would've ended and your fall would've been avoided."

"However," Aayla went on sternly, batting a light-whip attack to one side with her both her swords, then lashing out with a Force Push that pushed Githany away from her a half step. "That does not excuse your actions after falling. While you might have fallen into the Dark Side because of the actions of someone else, everything else you did was your own doing. I can't punish you for that. I won't judge you and give you another person to resent and thereby absolve you of your guilt over all that. Your deeds are between you and the Force."

"Um, Aayla, are you sure you know what you're doing?" Harry sent, wincing as some kind of wind cutting technique got through his defenses and cut into his leg. Kaan was getting better the longer this fight went on, his Force Precognition better anticipating Harry's attacks, and Harry found himself severely hampered by his inability to use transfiguration or conjuration. Kaan's experience facing Force users so often in real life or death combat was beginning to tell, only Harry's sporadic use of Force Light still throwing him off, but Harry couldn't sustain the technique for very long here for some reason. The light just faded away after flaring brightly in his hands.

"Trust me, Harry. Remember, I'm the empath here. Even wherever the hell we are I can sense Githany's emotions. There's a lot of guilt in there along with rage, fear, and jealousy. I need to acknowledge that guilt while also giving her a way to believe that she alone wasn't at fault for her becoming a Sith. Her leaving the Order and this Charny are at the center of her hate for the Order. Take those away, and she'll be more susceptible to actual discussion," Aayla replied.

"You don't judge me for falling," Githany asked, stepping back, the look of madness fading from her face. Aayla noticed that the woman had been stunningly beautiful before she had fallen to the Dark Side.

"I don't judge you for falling," said Aayla, shaking her head, her lekku twitching with the movement. She stood back too, her lightsaber at her side, utterly defenseless, while she kept one eye on the ongoing battle between Kaan and Harry. "I won't even tell you that your actions afterward were without cause. It is up to you and the Force to judge your actions. What do you think of them now, looking back on them?"

Githany stared at Aayla, then turned to look at Harry. "And if either of you were told you had to end your relationship, sever your bond, or leave the Order, what would you do?" she asked softly, not acknowledging Aayla's last words.

"We'd say, screw the Order!" Harry and Aayla said as one, while Harry continued to fight the mad Lord Kaan.

He'd just stabbed the man through the chest, but instead of dissipating like the other Sith had after taking a mortal wound, Kaan had slammed a hard Force Crush into Harry, hurling him away. Harry winced as he felt more ribs cracking, and one of them had also punctured something inside him, but his attention was on Kaan, whose image had begun to heal itself almost as quickly as Harry had hurt him.

"Harry!" Aayla exclaimed, racing towards Lord Kaan and engaging him while the woman stared at them both. She lashed out with a blast of air which caught his hasty Force Push, following up with a series of air cutters, her specialty, which nearly caught Kaan flatfooted, cutting off an ear and a hand as he met her Jar'kai style with his own feverish Juyo.

"We're nearly winning this, woman!" Lord Kaan shouted at the woman Aayla had just left behind. "Don't let up! We kill these two, we can control their bodies and live again!"

"Is this what I want...?" Githany said aloud, more to herself than anyone else. "To snuff out that which I never had; am I really that, that petty? Are the Sith truly that petty? Are we truly evil as we have always been painted as?"

"The Sith might be," she said at last as Harry rejoined the fight. "But I am not."

With that she moved forward quickly, her light whip suddenly grabbing Lord Kaan's arm from behind, searing through it instantly. This allowed both of the padawans to stab him in the chest.

Where before his sense of self had been able to deal with the damage, this was simply too much, and his body began to come apart. "NO!!!!" Kaan screamed, backing away and staring at them, the mad red and yellow tint in his eyes disappearing for a moment. "I, I don't want to die!"

The next instant Harry decapitated him with a Force Light beam. Kaan's body disappeared before it could fall to the ground. For a moment there was stillness, the

three of them staring at one another while they started to hear the thunder and lightning and booming of Lily's fight in the distance fade.

Then Githany smiled. It was an honest and warm smile which tore away years from the woman's face. "Treasure one another," she said simply, "and remember my name, the tale of Githany. That is all I ask." With that she somehow disappeared, a Sith Lord returning to the Force as a whole at the last instant.

A second later Lily floated into view, quickly moving toward the two of them, having dealt with all of the spirits who had attacked the two padawans but had not been able to form actual bodies. "Well, that was interesting."

"Your British understatement is beginning to annoy, Mama Lily," Aayla said with a chuckle, before all three of them found themselves back once more in the material plane.

OOOOOOO

How long the various battles had lasted in that odd, in between place, none of them knew. It had certainly been days before Master Giiett, who was the first to awake, did so. At least it was judging by how long his nails had noticeably grown, and he looked as if he was attempting to grow a beard. The others were no better after they woke up in turns, first Quinlan, then Alecto in quick succession.

It was then that they realized that some of the wounds they had taken wherever their spirits had been had also crossed over. Quinlan had a new burn scar right over his stomach and on a corresponding spot on his back. Alecto had bruises all over his arms and shoulders as if he had been struck numerous times by blunt objects rather than lightsabers, but he seemed quietly smug about it, and Micah was pleased with the changes he sensed in his padawan.

Although how much longer I will be calling him that is up for debate, he thought, while running his fingers through his beard. His nearly solid gray beard, Micah idly noticed, looking at his hands. Hands which, like his hair, pointed to the fact he had somehow aged during that battle. Micah could tell his body was at least a few years older somehow, though thankfully there was no sign to indicate they had been meditating that long.

The three of them watched over their friends for a few hours, feeling somewhat helpless, a feeling Jedi were decidedly not used to. Micah also noticed that their bodies were showing signs of the battle within, without, wherever. Even Micah wasn't certain how to describe where they had been fighting. It wasn't in the Force as

a whole, but calling it the place between life and death was both a mouthful and didn't seem quite right either.

The changes for the two youngsters were much the same as it had been for Quinlan and Alecto: wounds and the natural growth of hair and nails for Harry and nails for Aayla. Their wounds were more numerous, but Quinlan pointed out why that would be very simply. "If you were an evil Force Ghost and had to decide which of us to try and take over, who would you choose? I have to wonder if it's a battle of two sides in there or an all-out brawl with all of them trying to fight off everyone else for the so-called prize."

Alecto nodded, sighing. "Master, before this journey began I must admit that I had felt a kernel, just a kernel, mind you, of jealousy towards Harry for his good fortune, and for his power and abilities. Since then I've realized that there is a major downside to being so talented. That from those who are gifted with the Force, much too is also demanded. I wish I could help them."

Keeping a smile off his face with difficulty, Micah nodded. "I know, but I can no longer sense any of the spirits in the Force here, and believe me, their presence was rather obvious before this. The Force font is still there, and very, very powerful, but the spirits are no longer...accessible, I suppose, from out here. Whether that means the fights occurred all in our own heads, I have no idea, but..."

Shaking his head, Micah looked down at Master Fay. Unlike the two youngsters, her body was showing no wounds at all. No, the change within Fay was something else entirely. As the hours passed, her body began to look...not frailer, but somehow transparent. It was as if her body was becoming a clear glass, filled with the Power of the Force for those with the ability to see.

He was still looking down at her when Fay's eyes blinked open, her eyes filled with the power of the Force to what would have been a frightening degree in anyone else. She blinked, and the next moment she opened her eyes they were back to normal. She shook her head slowly before looking first down at her body, then up at Master Giiett. "Well, this is...interesting."

"How are you feeling?" he asked quickly, grabbing a water bottle from nearby and handing it to her. Quinlan and Alecto quickly joined them, smiling at the ageless master.

"Odd... Very odd. I...feel more one with the Force than I have ever been before, but...not as if I left some of myself out there... More like I am... Hmm... This will take me some time to get used to, I think..." Fay knew herself and her connection to the Force better than any Jedi alive save for perhaps Yoda himself. She knew

something was different now. Her physical body felt...cumbersome, enclosing. It fit poorly now for some odd reason. And her connection to the Force was... *Best to think about that later, Fay. There are some implications there that I need to think about. But first...*

Turning her attention back to the physical, she smiled at the trio of youths. (And yes, she included Micah in that assessment.) "I am well. How are Aayla and Harry?"

Just then Harry and Aayla began to groan, drawing all attention to them. An instant later Lily appeared between them as if coming out of a spit of nowhere. But Lily too was changed. Before this the Force Ghost had been a shade, almost colorless besides her eyes and hair for some reason, like an old picture left out in the sun too long and made translucent. Now she was more solid looking, more colorful. They could still see through her, but it was like looking through a waterfall rather than thin mist as it had been before.

Looking down at herself, Lily smiled grimly. "Huh, would you look at that? There seems to have been a upside to seeing off those specters."

"Specters?" Fay asked, quickly standing up. The move was awkward, like a marionette, almost, as her body fought to respond to her commands in a way she'd never felt before, even after being injured or meditating for days on end.

Lily explained what she had been doing, while below her Aayla and Harry finished waking up, wincing as they felt their wounds. They quickly began to use the Force to heal themselves. Slowly, burns and broken ribs healed as the others crowded around, trading questions.

Eventually everyone settled down, exchanging stories one after another in a more organized fashion. As they did, the two Masters became aware of the non-physical changes in the others. As they had dealt with the spirits, the power those spirits had contained had flowed into them, and, though for the most part they had rejected that power, Harry in particular having done so entirely, the others had not.

Alecto had changed in power the most. Before this he would have been termed a mid-to-low level Jedi in terms of power. He had gotten by with control, but that was now no longer the case. He would now be rated as a mid-to-high level Jedi in terms of power. Between that and the mental and emotional changes Alecto had gone through, both in this most recent challenge and throughout the journey, Micah knew Alecto was ready to be a Jedi Knight.

Harry, like the two Masters, hadn't taken in any of the power. Quinlan had taken some, but not much. Aayla had rejected most of it too, but she had been given

power by Githany after the woman had willingly rejoined the Force. And somehow, her hands weren't empty either, something which the others had noticed but not commented on until the stories were done with.

"...She seems to be have left me her plasma whip," Aayla said slowly, holding the weapon in one hand and activating it to let the light whip slowly curl down to the ground next to the chair Harry had conjured for her.

In the shadow of one of the nearby statues a small opening had somehow appeared during that battle, the lightsaber having been hidden within. Nor was it the only one: other alcoves beneath other statues had opened, though the vast majority of those statues had crumbled into dust during the battle.

"The Force works in mysterious ways," Harry mused, shuddering a little at the light whip. "Um, you're not really going to keep that, are you?"

"You already have controlling interest in my privates anyway, love. You don't need to become a full-on dominatrix," he sent via their bond.

Aayla laughed but looked at him seriously while the others moved off to investigate the heretofore hidden alcoves. *"Actually, Harry unless the crystal in this is the one you're here to get, I might scavenge it. I don't know, I feel a connection to it, somehow."*

Holding out his hand over the lightsaber, Harry once more sent his psyche out into the Force. After a moment he turned away, shaking his head absentmindedly as he stared up at the statue of Lord Hoth. Like the one across from him, a statue of another Jedi rather than Skere Kaan of course, it still stood unchanged, unlike many of the others. He stared hard and then pointed up there. "The crystal I'm here for is up there. I have no idea why."

"Well then, I suggest you go and get it," Fay said mildly, having come back just then.

Lily, however, reached down to brush her fingers through Harry's hair. The feeling was quite a bit more solid now, like a hand made of liquid touching his head, and he didn't need to try and channel some of the Force to the area to let Lily touch him for more than a brief second. "Let me go up and see if there's anything first, Harry."

With that she floated up, feeling the air around her far more than she had normally. But when she reached the statue she couldn't find anything, no sign of another hidden alcove or anything else. Returning and reporting that was a letdown, but Harry was undaunted. "I know it's up there. It's practically yelling at my Force senses now," he reported.

While the others looked on, Harry moved over to the statue and climbed up it,

still using most of his Force Senses to home in on the crystal. Eventually he was perched on one of the statue's shoulders, his hand moving around to rest on its forehead. Why it was there he still had no idea, but the crystal he was here to find, the one that practically vibrated with his Force power already, was within the statue's forehead.

He and the others all noticed that it was in precisely the same place on Lord Hoth's forehead as where Harry had had his scar. That was both bizarre and creepy in his opinion, which he voiced to several shouts of agreement. Fay alone simply shook her head, while Micah smiled. "The Force works in mysterious ways, Harry. We already knew cleansing this Force Font was your task above all of ours. Is it really so strange that the Force, or at least the Light Side of it, would also make certain you were rewarded for your efforts?"

Micah looked at Fay sharply at that. It wasn't the first time that Fay had differentiated between the Light Side and the Force in general, but he had never called her out on it before. Perhaps after this would be time to do it.

Somewhat mollified by his master's words, Harry held his hand over the forehead, slowly shifting the rock so as not to distort or harm the statue. He could have just blasted the crystal out of the rock or simply used a overpowered Force Grab to wrench it out. But that felt wrong, somehow, and not just because he didn't want to damage the statue. Harry didn't want to start his interaction with the crystal in such a violent manner.

It took him a while, but Harry eventually pulled the crystal out of the rock, the rock acting almost like water for a moment as he did, before he let it solidify once more, transfiguring a stone in his other hand into a bit of the statue to replace what was lost by the crystal being taken out. Once that was done he hung there for a moment, looking at the crystal he had come so far and spent so many years, to get.

It was a bright yellow color, almost like citrine or jasper, but not quite, and it looked the size of the gems he'd seen in pictures about lightsaber construction. It would take very little work to get it ready to be used. It was unlike any gem Harry had ever seen before. *Not that I have a lot of experience with gems*, Harry thought sardonically. Yet already he could feel his connection to the gem growing. It had taken years for the lightsaber Quinlan had given him from Sing's collection to feel like his own. The crystal already felt more like Harry's than that had.

Hopping down to land lightly on the ground in front of his master and the others, Harry held out the gem to them all. Master Giiett and Quinlan simply nodded, while Lily stared closely at it, her face hovering right above the crystal for a moment.

Aayla smiled as did Alecto, remembering how they had found their own crystals, or, in Aayla's case, one of her two.

Fay took the crystal from Harry, smiling as she felt it thrumming gently with his presence already. Handing the crystal back and wondering what the color of the blade would be, Fay smiled. "Well done, Knight Potter. I believe this mission can be considered a resounding success."

"Knight Potter?" Harry asked in shock. After all, he, Aayla, and Alecto, for all their abilities and adventures up to this point, were still only twenty-five. Padawans did not normally become Knights until they were in their early thirties.

"Indeed. I think you, Aayla, and Alecto are all ready for your ascension to Knighthood. You have long since passed the Trials of Skill, Courage, and Flesh. This easily was more onerous than any Trial of Spirit, and between this and our finding our way through the nebula easily surpasses any Trial of Perception. You are ready, more than ready for your Knighthoods, all of you," Fay said, Quinlan and Micah nodding in agreement.

"Well, then," Harry said after a moment, while Aayla's mouth began to twitch as she fought back a laugh. "At least I won't need to deal with any more Peepee jokes!"

At that Aayla lost it and began to laugh, falling to her knees and just laughing loud and long in joy as the others all broke down and laughed too.

End Chapter

The depth of the nebulae: this was an idea I expanded and made worse from canon. I do not believe that Sidious or those Sith of the Rule of Two would not have returned to Ruusan after Bane and Zannah died if they both knew of and could get to the Force Font created there by the Thought Bomb. This also allowed me to speed up time tremendously and have Harry and co. begin to build the foundations of their own power structure. Whether that power structure will include/be part of the Order, well, that is not going to be answered for a long while.