

Chapter 24: Of Assassinations, Mistakes and Rebellions

Even as reinforcements streamed in from the outer system, the crew of the *Tyrant's Bane* leaped into action. Vultures were quickly redesignated for Search and Rescue, broadcasting not only their Identify Friend or Foe codes but in the clear, directing shuttles that were even now streaming out from the undamaged defense fortresses in orbit around Thyferra to start picking up the immense number of escape pods.

Harry took a moment to note grimly that many of those escape pods had been shot up during the battle, leaving them lifeless and the people within no doubt dead. But not all of them. The Confederacy had been too busy at the time to add to their wholesale slaughter. *"That might well have become policy among the Confederacy given the number of reports we had from them doing similar before this battle. That will have large-scale consequences, just like this assault on Thyferra if true."*

"Truly, love, as we have said before," Aayla intoned through their mental bond. *"People will be much more willing to fight to the death if they know they will get no mercy from their enemies. Now it's happened in a Republic system, not just a GDL system, and on a scale that has yet to be matched in this war to my knowledge."*

Harry nodded mentally, then focused on taking in the overall star system. The number of intersystem craft slowly rising from the planet was gratifying. Several had been destroyed on the ground while hovering or hovering in the air after the planetary shield had been smashed down. Still more had died when they tried to leave the system long before the *Tyrant's Bane* arrived. But still, there was a somewhat ludicrous number of craft already rising from the planet. Nor was it like the starfighter swarm he had seen rise from Valahari but freighters of various types and yachts.

Thankfully, sixteen of the space stations were still in one piece, although they ranged from barely operable in terms of defense station #19, which was the lone survivor of a group that had come under fire from one of the dreadnaught flotillas, to two that had remained largely untouched somehow. Padme had already begun to organize a system to return people from the surface to the surviving civilian space stations. Given the turmoil in the local atmosphere that the bombardment of the planet had caused, they would certainly be safer up on the space stations. *To say nothing about the billions of Vratix who have nowhere to go...*

That was on the civilian side though, and Harry and Aayla already knew what they would need to do for Thyferra the planet. Right now, Harry and the others still needed to deal with helping those defenders who had been able to eject from starfighters or get to the various escape pods. Alas, there were few survivors from the battle stations that had been wiped out by the dreadnaughts on their approach to the planet. It was evident that the vultures and dreadnaughts had been more than willing to shoot up the escape pods.

Indeed, Harry estimated that they would probably only be picking up two or three escape pods' worth of survivors from all of the defensive stations in orbit combined. But that was still better than Fort Luna, for no survivors were reporting from the moon. That was somewhat similar to the annihilation of the civilian and military structures among the moons of

Iqobal and Ferxani. The only difference was the people on Fort Luna at least had all been military personnel, although that made no one who thought of that point feel any better.

Harry also idly noted from a few flyovers by various starfighters that the infantry droids dropped on the moon were digging in. The Republic would either need to go in and dig them out or bombard the entire site from orbit, writing off Fort Luna entirely. Whatever the case, the *Tyrant's Bane* wouldn't participate. They had no infantry complement with them at the time.

While Harry organized the SAR across the system, the *Tyrant's Bane* made for the planet and Aayla dealt with the surviving capital ships among the defenders, including Padme and Commodore Aliaba out of Tauber. Astonishingly, he had survived the destruction of his flagship and after his escape pod had landed near one of the Vratix hives, had taken control of relief efforts going on the ground. Aliaba had none of the local human's issues with the Vratix, and between him, Aayla and Padme, they started to organize a few of the hives, those that hadn't been damaged by direct orbital strikes, to open their tunnels to the humans.

The various refinery cities didn't have enough space for the displaced civilians sent down to the planet in the belief they would be safer there. A belief that had proven false in the face of the Grievous's brutality. And the few military sites, those built around the shield generators (those the Thyferran government had known about), were already packed for the most part. Or gone, along with the generators during the bombardment.

Surprisingly, two heavy cruisers had survived. One, the flagship from Tauber, had been nearly gutted, and sent instead, left adrift in space. But most of his crew was still alive. The other surviving ship had retreated, having already taken too much damage to take part in the final push or the last-ditch defense of the planet due to having no weapon systems by that point.

"Honestly, I thought that maybe we should have come out anyway. If only so that we could ram one of those Lucrehulks," the captain of that ship admitted to Aayla, his face both grim and shell-shocked, completely stunned and appalled by the level of violence he had seen in this one battle despite all his training. "I've never... I've read reports. Sat in meetings where we've gone over reports from several of the battles fought across the Republic. I knew how violent and deadly it could get. But I've never been a part of a battle like this nor seen the horror of the aftermath."

"And it is a horror only being felt on our sides of the conflict. The Confederacy knew precisely what they were doing when they decided to adopt an entirely droid-based military. It helps shield them from the horror of the losses of such a battle. To them, this battle will simply have been numbers on a spreadsheet," Aayla agreed sadly.

"At least in terms of their own losses, anyway. But I don't think that C'baath thought this attack all the way through. While cutting off medical aid to your opponent might seem a viable military strategy, wiping Thyferra clean as Padme told us Grievous said their mission was if the planet didn't surrender? That is something else entirely," she added mentally to Harry. *"After all, don't the civilians of the CIS need access to bacta? I know we've seen reports of clandestine black market deals for it. An attack on bacta like this, it hurts the entire galaxy!"*

"Maybe, but the court of public opinion can only do so much against the tyrant backed up by robots," Harry disagreed. *"That, and the bean counters who launched this war in the first place might not be so willing as to care one way or another. Not if they have their own stocks of bacta anyway, which we know the Commerce Guild does, at the very least. Shu Mai was notorious for setting aside bacta yearly to keep the price up when Thyferra's Cartels were part of the Commerce Guild. I don't doubt there will be many people who might want to protest but don't go expecting some grand insurrection. Small-scale rebellions would be my guess."*

Aayla sent a single word back in reply, "Cynic!" before turning back and addressing the man. "And that is something we will need to get used to thinking. But we cannot allow ourselves to think in the same way. Every death in war is a tragedy, no matter how many deaths there might be. And every time you stand against such horror, you show courage that must be applauded. You and yours answered Master Windu's call to defend a star system not your own. For that, the survivors of Thyferra, and we can only thank you. But to not be so quick to throw your own lives away in the future, no matter what you defend."

While Aayla was dealing with that and organizing the military side of the SAR, Harry and the other Jedi were busily using their force powers to bolster those same efforts. Through the Force, they could sense the lives of starfighter pilots or spacers who had been injected into space but still lived but did not have a transponder working. And there were still Jedi starfighter pilots out there as well piloting the Bane's Arrows along with Anakin.

The thought of Anakin drew Harry's attention from his work for a second, and he paused, sending a tendril toward Aayla. "Would it be appropriate to take a break to talk to Anakin now? I could sense the anger from him, the hatred when he told us what ship to target, the one that had Grievous on it. That is a dangerous combination."

"No. Let Anakin cool down and concentrate on what we're doing now. Maybe after we shift to Thyferra's surface, but not before," Aayla ordered before Ahsoka interrupted them. "Badger him about it now; you will only get his guard up. Anakin's an opinionated young man at the best of times.

"Master, I have a master Joshua on the line. I've met him. He stepped in for one of our meditation teachers at one point. Kind of standoffish but insightful, I guess. Bit of a cold fish, but so are most Miralukans," Ahsoka stated, almost blabbering for a moment.

Harry knew that Ahsoka's babbling was a sign of her overall shock at the raw violence of this battle. Compared to the other battles the Tyrant's Bane had fought, this one had been far more fraught and dangerous. "I thank you for the color commentary, but it isn't necessary. Breathe, my apprentice. Center yourself."

Nearer, Aayla reached over, ruffling Ahsoka's montrals for a moment.

"We will talk more about what occurred here and about how to deal with it, Ahsoka. Survivor's guilt is a thing, and even general grief can turn into hate for those who cause such pain if you're not careful. But we have lives on the line now. Reach out to the Force. Release your grief and sadness so it cannot fester within," Harry ordered. "Reach out to our padawan

bond. Let it anchor you in the now. Do not think of what ifs or the future. Only the now, only what we can do to make this day a little less of a tragedy. Every little light in the darkness helps, remember?”

Bringing Ahsoka’s mind to the time he led her out onto the outer hull of the Tyrant’s Bane helped, and Ahsoka slowly took a few moments to calm herself, running through the mental exercises he had given her. She looked much more centered but far sadder a moment later, letting the grief of what had occurred here show before it again vanished. Harry smiled in approval at her, remarking again they would talk more in the future about how to deal with events like this, and Ahsoka agreed to that before sending the communications request over to the main hologram.

A moment later, Master Jerec’s face appeared in front of Harry on the main hologram, the hologram splitting to continue to show the local area around the Tyrant’s Bane to one side and Jerec’s face in the other. Harry bowed formally from the waist to the more senior Jedi, one he had never met before. He knew Jerec by reputation, though. Jerec was a respected scholar, a Jedi often consulted by others on the past, who had routinely disappeared for years on end on archaeological expeditions but was thought of as one of very few who might take over the Praxium when Master Jocasta Nu, Jerec’s former Master, relinquished her position.

“Master Joshua. I am afraid to say that your timing was just a little bit off. But I am certain that the people of Thyferra will thank you and the Republic for arriving at such a time regardless.”

“Their thanks are unnecessary, although their understanding of why we arrived so late might be,” Jerec answered dryly, yet with a hint of regret, staring into the pickup and an almost unnerving way even though his eyes were covered as was the Miralukan custom. “Regardless, I have two troop transports. Both only contain a few companies rather than their full complement and can double as refugee housing now.”

The Miralukans were one of the very rare species whose every member had a connection to the Force. Because of this, Miralukans had evolved to the point where they had lost their eyes long before the Republic had been created. Throughout the history of the Jedi order, the Order had maintained a firm alliance with the species, even helping them transmigrate to a new homeworld when their original was made uninhabitable in some forgotten war thousands of years ago. Miralukans were thoughtful, introspective people who routinely worked with the Order or the Republic in various matters. However, other species, including humans, occasionally worried about that connection, making them respected but not trusted or overly liked by the greater Republic on the civilian side.

“I have already sent my starfighters ahead. They should reach orbit around Thyferra within forty-five minutes to help with your SAR efforts. As for the rest of my fleet, we have seven heavy cruiser divisions, fourteen light cruiser divisions, twenty-two destroyer divisions, and fifty-two fighter wings, mostly Torrents. I will send my lighter units out at the points where the two asteroid space stations Thyferra used were demolished. There could still be survivors there, as neither of them actually exploded. I will want to keep a combat-capable crew on each

of my capital ships, but other than that, my forces will be at the disposal of the local relief efforts.”

Joshua sighed to them, seeming to deflate a little. He was an older man, around forty or so, and wasn't known as being very combative, even though rumor mentioned he had been involved in Master Windu and Master Bulq's creation of Vaapad. He also seemed to exaggerate his body language, which, according to Master Fay, was a Miralukan thing. They knew that other races felt they were a little cold and far too contained, and unlike the Echani or other races, many Miralukans occasionally tried to offset that, mostly going too far with it.

“And as for my timing, I am afraid that sixth fleet had nothing to do with it. I am afraid to tell you this, but two of the six fleet admiral's staff officers had been suborned specifically to let this attack through to hit Thyferra. Both women had connections to a few local corporations and were assured those companies would become the leading owners of the bacta distribution network after Thyferra is forced to become part of the Confederacy.”

Jerec snorted then. “How the traitors expected to leave their current posts is still being investigated, but between them, the two women had been intercepting all of the communications from Thyferra long before this assault began. It was only when I was in the room with one of them and discerned that she was lying when she said there was nothing to report from Thyferra that we began to unravel everything.”

The Miralukan waved one hand in the air so it was picked up by the comms equipment. “And even then, most of the ships you see with me were actually assigned to me in my role as leading a reinforcement to the Sixth Fleet rather than any of its preexisting divisions. I've already recommended to High Command that the Sixth Fleet's Admiral be replaced, along with his entire staff. The man is too arrogant and too passive... and led around by baser desires. It is no wonder that Grievous could set up this assault on his watch.”

Master Joshua set that thought aside shaking his head once, then looked at Harry. “So, should I talk to you or Senator Padme about where exactly you want our troops to go?”

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While Aayla was dealing with the military side of things, Padme retained firm control on the civilian side. As Harry had noticed, she had already begun to repatriate the locals back to their home space stations if possible almost as soon as the battle ended, along with getting every remaining spaceship up and off the ground to help with SAR. This was made worse by the seven civilian space stations that had been destroyed, deliberately targeted by Grievous' fleet. There just wasn't any place to put so many, literally millions of civilians who had now lost their homes. Even if you set everything else aside, that alone would cause a crisis going forward. And there was a **lot** of 'everything else' going on too.

But the driving reason for the repatriation going on was simple and far more visible and worrisome from Padme's position in the local command center than aboard the *Bane*: orbital bombardments didn't just destroy their targets. That amount of superheated plasma passing through a planet's atmosphere created tremendous changes within the local weather systems.

With this, Thyferra's weather control satellite network had been torn asunder. It would take weeks to craft more, get them into position and programmed, and by then, the damage to the planet's weather would have created a humanitarian crisis that would make the recent battle pale in comparison.

Already, Padme was getting reports of several massive storms forming, the planet's atmosphere trying to bleed off the energy it had been forcibly injected with. That was to say nothing of the damage done to the surface, where earthquakes and rumblings were already occurring from the raw impact of the turbolaser strikes, or the wildfires further damaging the refinery cities, the huge refinery plants that created bacta out of the various ingredients grown elsewhere on the planet that, had been hit by the orbital assault or the dozens of Vratix hives that had been damaged in the bombardment.

The weather was just one aspect of the unfolding trouble on or around Thyferra that Padme was being forced to make decisions about. Added to it were riots on the planet and various civilian stations that hadn't been evacuated, reports of vandalism, various civilian leaders trying to demand this or that, and other things of that nature.

Even with the help she was getting from the command center's officers, she was still having trouble keeping up with everything. Thus, she missed the report from the command center's guards that Xu had returned before he walked into the command center itself.

"Excellent, the battle's over," the man said grandly. As if, Padme thought as she turned towards him, he had played a major part in that victory. "It appears as if the Republic is at least worth the exorbitant taxes we pay to it. But I think you will find that I know my system best, Padme. I will take it from here."

Padme glared at the man so hard that he took a half step back, one hand falling to his side-arm. A side arm that he was currently carrying which he hadn't had before, she noted. *Not that he would live to try and draw it. Zule would have his arm off his shoulder before he could blink, judging from the look on her face.* That thought calmed Padme down a bit, and her glare lessened.

This shift of expression let Xu rally, and he spoke up again before Padme could answer. Although, it probably would've been best if he had kept his mouth shut. "We need to get a handle on everything quickly so that we don't disrupt the bacta production any more than has already occurred thanks to this madness. We'll be months recouping our losses here, and that is sure to hurt even Xucphra's bottom line, which is unacceptable. I trust, Senator, that the Republic will make good our losses here?"

Perhaps Admiral Xu was still suffering from the shock of his own near-death experience. Perhaps because of that, he had lost his ability to tell his inner voice from his outer voice. Or perhaps he was just that certain that the communications and logistics officers stationed here in the command center loyal to Xucphra would back him regardless? Padme wasn't certain.

If he did, Xu was soon disabused of that notion as practically everyone in the command center turned and glared at him,. Even Jennifer's habitual Jedi control slipped, and she stared at

the man, one hand gently caressing the hilt of her lightsaber but not activating it just yet. "Bottom line? Bottom line?"

When the admiral spoke again, Padme became certain that the man had suffered some kind of brain damage. "Indeed. I've already been in contact with several of my fellow Xucphra members. Now that the Hypercom's no longer being jammed, we've got the ball rolling on a few local relief efforts, aid coming in on our credit, to be paid when we ascend to the position of leading Thyferra. It's going to take a lot of time and money to make Thyferra profitable again. You've already been making mistakes Padme, sending too much help to the bug aliens, no doubt promising those creatures more than you can give. You can't trust them. We saw that with those..."

"Officers!" Padme barked, pointing one finger, somewhat dramatically, she had to admit, towards two of the guards stationed at the door. They had let the man in but now looked torn on where their loyalties lay. "Take Admiral Xu to the medical wing and see that he is restrained there. I fear that he might have taken some mental trauma during the assault on his life. That is the only way I can think of that a person in his position would attempt to play favorites at this time, especially after how much help the Vratix generators were in keeping the monetary shield operational for so long."

Without them, the damage to the planet, and in particular the population centers made up of refugees from the space stations, would've been far worse. While some of her listeners were still a little leery of bug aliens in general and the fact that the Ashern had created those generators in secret, none could argue that point. Indeed, many of the people in the command center were questioning long-held beliefs about the Verpine, seeing how much aid they were willing to give to the displaced civilians even as their own nests suffered.

Padme sensed this with all of the speed of a well-trained politician, and even as the two guards moved forward to remove the general, aided in this by Zule, who added the words, "At this moment, there are no Corporate Houses of Thyferra. There are no corporations. There is only Thyferra. It's people, human and vratix, must pull together."

That won the Senator a cheer, and Zule nudged her in the side, gesturing with a chin towards one of the communications officers. Glancing that way, she saw the green of an open communication line, and suddenly, Padme knew that those words would be broadcast throughout the star system. If not the entire confrontation with the admiral. *Oh my. Well, I suppose I did want to build a more democratic government here, I didn't think that Xu would add still more fuel to that fire. We might indeed be seeing the end of the near-blind obedience to the oligarchy-like structure that ruled here. If so, I can only cheer and lament the cost it took to get people to wake up.*

Moments later, she bowed toward Master Jerec, giving the newcomer respect due his rank within the Order. "In answer to your request for information, Master Jerec, at present, I need help keeping the peace on several of the space stations. The police are completely overwhelmed in their efforts to try to control both the populace and the reintegration efforts. I can have the names of a few of the worst stations sent to you. If you could send a few

companies of close troop troopers to each of the civilian space stations and then move down to the ground?”

“Of course. And what about helping the vratix? My knowledge of them and the aid the Ashern were during the Stark Hyperspace War is why I was chosen to lead the relief force to the Sixth Fleet.”

It only took a moment for Padme to get in contact with the Ashern representative Alro and connect him to Master Jerec in turn. With the two of them on top of that area of the rebuilding efforts, Padme turned her back to organizing the overall relief effort once more, as well as rebuilding the demolished remnants of Thyferra’s governmental structure. And this time, she wasn’t interrupted.

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On his flag bridge, Jerec worked with the Ashern representative with ease, then began to help the other Jedi throughout the system on their SAR efforts, reaching through the Force to add his strength to this or that Jedi in turn as they searched through the wreckage of the various battlefield scattered throughout the star system. Closer to the action, the other Jedi could more easily feel the lives around them than he could, but his added power helped.

At the same time, unbeknownst to any other sentient aboard his ship or in orbit over Thyferra, he sent a small message to a ship inside a hanger bay of one of the numerous space stations there. There was no verbal or visual communication, simply a string of coded messages back and forth, almost but not quite like droid cant. With the local network overstressed, no one in the local command center was in a position to notice.

Soon, the three unnamed acolytes he had been warned would be here answered. They were here, he knew to continue a long-term mission to try to assassinate Master Windu and Padawan Skywalker, replied back. As he saw the lack of names within the code, Jerec smiled thinly, dark amusement flicking through him. *Dominus might be a brute and a tyrant, but I have to admit that the man does have a quite barbed sense of humor. Taking their very names until they earn them back is quite a magnificent punishment.*

His smile disappeared as he read the next segment of the young men’s reply. According to their return message, they had decided to try to take on Anakin Skywalker now. to launch an attack with a few of their own starfighters against his, believing the padawan’s guard to be down and that they could then escape into hyperspace in the confusion.

Jerec had to sneer at that, thinking that perhaps Dominus had a point. *They truly are too stupid to have names. Attempt a space-based ambush on one of the finest starfighter pilots in the galaxy? I care not if they think they have gained strength from the Dark Side energies of this battle. Skywalker would slaughter them in the space.*

He quickly sent off a new message, ordering them to wait, adding a few command codes, words that would make it clear to the fools he was not asking for a sitrep but giving them orders into the coded message. With that, they would be he spoke with the authority of the

Sith. They were to pair their attacks with his, only to attack when he wanted. No longer could they act on their own.

On their ship, the three acolytes shared glances, feeling the anger and fury in one another. "I've been hacking into the local communications network. That is Master Jerec out on that ship. He's a Jedi! How does he know these codes?! Could this be a setup?"

"Bah, I would wager he is one that heard Master Dominus and knew his cause to be the right one but didn't dare to announce it openly. But he's talking down to us! When he hasn't even dared to declare his allegiance to the Darkside openly?" the second Acolyte stated.

"You say he didn't dare to join our master, but could he instead be a deep agent of Master Dominus?" the third Acolyte worried. "You know that we have never been high in the Master's council."

The sarcasm in that line and that line was so heavy that it would've turned a piece of coal into a diamond almost instantly, and all of them understood why. Not knowing their own names galled all three Acolytes equally, even if their various personalities had begun to reform so long away from the Master. But of their names? Nary a single memory remained in their minds, not as far back as any could remember. They all knew something was missing, but not what, and that galled them all the more.

And terrified them. Their Master, the man who had killed their original Jedi Masters and who had then introduced to them the power of the Dark Side, his face was always uppermost in their mind. And the punishments he could hand out if they failed him.

"If we choose poorly here, we will be punished severely. The Master took our names just as a sign he could when he showed us the power of the Dark Side," the more cautious of the three stressed. "Who knows what he will take from us this time? The knowledge of how to eat solid foods? The ability to go to the bathroom without pain?"

Such was the mastery that Dominus had with his Dominate ability that either seemed possible to the trio.

His words convinced the other two to rein in their anger, which was all to the good in the robotic minds of the commando droids that the three of them were working with. Over the weeks they'd been assigned to work with these three, all of the droid commandos had decided that they were very stupid sentience indeed, but together, they were capable of reaching the proper conclusions.

"We have no choice. Skywalker was our initial target, it's true, but if Count Potter is here, you know the Master standing orders about him," the second acolyte, the one who had spoken up in anger, stated, frowning. "And there are things that Jerec might not know, too. Things that we can use just in case the man truly is trying to set us up. Either as a Jedi or simply as a way to remove us for some reason."

“True. We have codes that will allow us to get in contact with any of the surviving droid commando groups that were part of Greivous’ initial infiltration efforts...” The cautious one used. Both he and the first one turned to the second, who scowled but eventually agreed.

Killing Count Potter took priority over everything. And all three of them shared the thought, although none of them realized it that perhaps, if killing Master Windu and Padawan Skywalker was enough to earn us back our names, then killing Count Potter would elevate us to the position of true apprentices. For that, they were willing to pay any price.

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Anakin could feel his jaw beginning to hurt as he continued to clench it in between barking out orders to this or that starfighter pilot to hover around an escape pod or jettisoned spacer until a shuttle or freighter could tractor them in. His anger at Grievous escaping and at his Master’s death filled him, and it was all he could do to concentrate through it as darkness clouded his vision.

When the order came to break off his part of the SAR, he did so, heading towards the planet, looking over the order with a frown, confusion starting to fight its way through his anger. Harry had requested that he meet Harry and the others with him on the planet's surface itself rather than in the *Tyrant’s Bane* or aboard one of the space stations.

Scowling in rising anger at what he saw as nonsensical orders, Anakin opened a comms call to Harry, although he was unsurprised to get Aayla instead. “Why are we meeting on Thyferra’s surface? In fact, why are we meeting in person at all? The search and rescue efforts are still ongoing. Pulling you, me, and how many other Jedi you’ve gathered off that is wrong. We’ll start to lose people out there.”

“Actually, it will only be you, me, Harry and his padawan, Ahsoka Tano. Master Jerec is taking over organizing the search and rescue efforts, along with his Torrent squadrons. But there are things on the planet that only a Jedi can heal. There are billions more sentients on the planet’s surface than live in space. Despite the humans being in a position of authority, the Vratix have always outnumbered them.”

“That leads me none the wiser!” Anakin shot back, incensed at being given empty platitudes about things he hadn’t asked about.

“Calmly, Anakin,” Aayla said, holding up a hand into the pickup, patting the air placatingly. “You are in danger of losing yourself to your anger. Do not let it control you. As to what we will be doing, we will be using the Force to repair the planet’s weather system. If we can’t, the humanitarian crisis we have on hand now is going to multiply very swiftly in a few hours to a level that we won’t be able to deal with.”

He frowned at that, not understanding, not having ever researched what happened when a planet was bombarded from orbit. But Artoo pulled up the relevant information on the screen for a second, and he grunted, nodding his head to Aayla in understanding.

He was set to have some peace and quiet to himself for a few moments as his starship sped through space back towards the planet, only for his droid to warn them of an incoming call.

This one was from the newly arrived Master Jerec, and Anakin had to bite back a furious roar of anger at the man. *Where was he before this!? Where was the Sixth Fleet when it was really needed!?*

"I can sense your anger directed at me and our arrival, young padawan, which is partially why I called. The other part is that even from where I am, I can feel the hatred boiling within you alongside that anger. You must calm yourself. Your Master, Mace, was a superlative at using his opponent's anger and fury against them. The very creation of Form Seven is based on that fact. Anger and hatred targeting an enemy no longer on the field serves no purpose and can fester into a spiral that will forever reshape your control of the Force," Master Jerec said, his voice soothing, serene, reminding Anakin of practically every other Jedi Master he'd met.

Jedi who had never dealt with hardship in their lives prior to the temple, Jedi who always looked down their noses at him for having emotions. And thus, it added nothing to actually help Anakin right now.

"I knew your Master well. He came to me and Master Nu to help research lightsaber techniques in the past. I am not a master on the level of Master Windu or Master Bulq, with whom Mace created Vaapad." The self-effacing look on Jerec's face actually did more than his words to instill some measure of control in Anakin. "But, I am a good researcher. I knew Mace, and I know that he would not want to have his apprentice lose himself in his fury over his death. Grieve for him, Anakin. In fact, do whatever you must to grieve. The loss of a padawan/master bond is a horrible thing to bear. Go out into space at some point after this is over or into the depths of a forest to scream to the high heavens. Then, set aside your anger and hatred to better serve the Force. Only with control can you become as strong in the Force as we all know you to be."

Those last words did actually help, and with an effort of will, Anakin tethered his anger, dragging it back deep inside where it could not be sensed. Yet his anger and hatred were still there, ready to be called upon, ready to fuel his power as it had after Mace's death. When he was finally able to see far enough to detect in which ship the mind controlling the fleet resided.

Anakin breathed in and out several times as Master Jerec watched, then nodded his head once at the older Master. "You're right, Master. I cannot let my emotions control my actions. At the least, it would make me predictable."

"And would open yourself up to the Dark Side, padawan," Jerec warned mildly, although, by this point, Anakin had enough self-control once more to not react. "Emotions of all sorts can be powerful, can lead you to greater heights, but eventually, the emotions fade, and you come tumbling down. Only in accepting and then pushing through such can you gain true strength, true control. It is why one of the tests of becoming a Jedi Knight in the first place is to overcome the darkness within, Facing the Mirror. If you cannot pass this hurdle, it will be a long time

before you rise to the rank of a Knight, despite your magnificent connection to the Force or your combat skills.”

“I understand Master Jerec. I will be more careful of my emotions in the future,” Anakin said dully. After a few more moments of pleasantries and probing questions from Jerec that only served to make Anakin more certain than ever that he needed to control his anger around other Jedi, Jerec signed off, saying that he was looking forward to seeing Anakin in person, and perhaps taking instruction in lightsaber form from him. “I am not a proponent of form one, but neither have I ever been on so many combat missions as we have seen come our way since this war began. Any training is a good thing, I think.”

The idea that a Jedi master would take lessons in lightsaber instruction from a padawan caused Anakin to smile faintly, not realizing that the entire conversation had been an attempt to manipulate him.

Aboard his ship, Jerec smiled as he finally ended the call with Anakin. He had reached out to Anakin, knowing that as the seniormost Master within the system, it would be expected that he would act in Mace’s stead for a time, helping Anakin through the shock of the apprentice bond being broken. The other Jedi would be able to feel the difference in Anakin’s Force presence now, and that would add a bit more verisimilitude to Jerec’s continued act as a normal Jedi Master. *When I am anything but.*

Still, I can understand somewhat why Dominus wants that boy dead. Like Potter, he has a profound connection to the Force. Yet the power of the hatred and anger I can still feel, buried and controlled now in that young man is fascinating. It will perhaps make him easily manipulated. But we will see on that score. I have my orders to kill Potter, but if I can get away with it and still retain my position within the Order, I doubt Sidious will complain. Although, frankly, it would not be my first choice. I am so tired of going along with this whole Sith/Jedi farce. As if anything but power matters!

Leaning back in his command chair as his flagship sped deeper in-system, Jerec had time to contemplate that mission as well as continue to act outwardly along with the other Jedi in the system, directing or adding his Force powers to that of the other Jedi. Given their exhaustion, that was quite necessary at this point. The battle had apparently taxed all but a handful of the Jedi that made the Tyrant’s Bane their home and followed Duke Potter.

Harry Potter, Jedi Knight, young for it, but not overly much. Quite a fascinating young man. There are so many mysteries about him I could desire to find the answers, too. Why was Harry never raised within the Jedi Temple like the rest of Clan Saa? How did Master Fay come to be his teacher, and why did Fay, of all people, go to Count Dooku to help in his lightsaber training? The creation of the school there is no great mystery, at least. His connection to Clan Saa is well documented, but is he truly the source of all of the techniques they introduced into the greater order? The video of him fighting the Sith assassin Maul on Rendili has become almost assigned teaching at the Order by this point.

Even setting aside those mysteries about Harry Potter himself, there is the impact he has had on the galaxy as a whole beyond the order. He has acted almost like a giant, shaping and

shifting everything, much like Sidious, only out in the open. I wonder who would win that confrontation?

This was perhaps the biggest difference between Jerec and many of the other Sith. Much like Sidious but not like those before them, Jerec was willing to respect and even to acknowledge the strengths of his enemies, while also making every effort to counter those strengths and remove them.

Breaking off his thoughts on Harry Potter, Jerec spent a few moments helping the search and rescue operation before falling into a revelry of how he had found himself turning to the Dark Side with no one within the order the wiser. It'd actually been helping Master Bulq and Windu research past lightsaber techniques when he had first begun to be fascinated with the Dark Side. He had set it aside, ignored that fascination, until on a mission Jerec had come across some information that pointed to a hologram, but not one of the Jedi's, lost in ages past. No, this one had been a Sith. Not that it mattered at the time, and even looking back on it, Jerec did not really believe he could have acted any differently. *Knowledge is power, and I will always seek it out.*

But in so doing, he brought himself to the attention of the Brotherhood of the Sith. But instead of conflict, the Master of the Brotherhood of the Sith, Prophet Cronal, had attempted to open a dialogue with him. Jerec knew that most Jedi would have hunted the man down or reported it at least, but Jerec could sense opportunity, and the pair of them had agreed to share the knowledge on the Sith hologram. Afterward, the Dark Side had lured Jerec easily, the power that could be attained through the strength of anger and the will to direct that anger.

Through Cronal, Jerec became aware of the Sith machinations within the Republic, and with that, Jerec's course is set. *To learn that the Sith has sat there, underneath the temple, at the center of the Republic for nearly a thousand years, plotting with no Jedi the wiser, was a revelation. After that, what could I do but join the winning side?*

Already, two other Jedi associated with him had turned agents for Sidious, disappearing from the order's ranks but not joining the Confederacy as so many had. Instead, they were hiding on the secret world of the Sith, Byss, doing the Sith's bidding there. Meanwhile, Jerec waited, being very careful to not draw any attention to himself one way or another until after the Sith had crushed the Jedi Order, doing his secret master's bidding occasionally in the Core.

Or at least, I was before this.... For several long moments, Jerec probed the future rather than the now. Not to find random non-Force users scattered throughout the star system but to see what would happen if he attacked Potter. He went through a multitude of plans, occasionally breaking off to help the Jedi for a bit before going back.

This was no great trouble for a Sith. The Veil helped the effort along rather than blocking it as it did for the Jedi with their limited abilities. Yet even so, the answers he received were not pleasant. *I must be careful and soften him up and distract Secura or else I will fail. And even if I do that and can use Anakin in some way, there are only a few futures where I will be able to kill Count Potter and simply walk away with no one realizing it was me. Far too few based on far too many factors going my way to achieve.*

Yet even if I did, would staying in the Order still serve my own goals?

For as much as Sidious and even Cronal thought Jerec was their tool, Jerec served no one but himself. And he was obsessed with finding ancient knowledge. *With no need to play the Jedi any longer, I would be free from both sides and able to turn my mind to my research. The search for the Jebble Box, and for the ancient planet of Ruusan and the Force Font there.*

Accepting that changed the parameters of his mission, and eventually, he had a plan. With that in place, he fell back into meditation, both continuing to help the other Jedi scattered throughout the system and bringing himself further under control, hiding his Dark Side further, knowing that he would soon be in the presence of an empath who might be almost as hard to trick as Master Yoda.

Before I can turn my attention to my own goals, I must kill Potter and put into motion everything that will happen once he dies. Within that chaos, only then will I be free. Until then, I must be like a striking cobra, waiting, or perhaps, creating the perfect moment... After all, it is only when you have faced one secret dagger in the back that you stop looking for another.

OOOOOO

With Padme still ably organizing the chaos in orbit and on the ground (or rather, several different types of chaos across the system), Harry and the other Jedi Flew down to the planet, turning over all control of the remaining vulture fighters from the *Tyrant's Bane* to her, or rather, to the first clone troopers to arrive on Warm Welcome. Padme herself was far too busy dealing with the local corporate executives or owners who only now were realizing that Padme was the acting head of the government and had every intention of creating a real democratic government here instead of the oligarchy that had ruled.

As they entered the planet's exosphere, several of the other Jedi in their Falcons headed to different areas, mostly those that had been hit by the bombardment directly, hoping to search in the nearby areas. Very few things could survive direct impact from orbital bombardments. Two of them headed directly for one of the most damaged hives, and another headed towards one of the refinery cities, which had been partially slagged from orbit.

Harry, Aayla and Ahsoka did not. Instead, they made for the least damaged military base. Like most, it was built around one of the planet's energy generators, and in the few hours since the CIS forces had left, Padme had used it as a transition point, a place to gather civilians from other areas closer to the places bombarded by the Confederacy. It was still being used for that, and as the shuttle carrying the three Jedi set down, they saw that the landing pad had been expanded. The local military men had done this by simply blowing up two of the walls surrounding the landing pad out into the security zone beyond, an area kept empty to allow for clear lines of fire.

Now, other ships were putting down there, disgorging men and women. Mostly from the *Tyrant's Bane*, they instantly moved to help the locals, pulling repulsor-assisted cars of medical equipment, provisions and food. The *Tyrant's Bane* had long since set aside his original goal as a relief vessel. In fact, the last purely aid-related mission the ship had gone on had been well

before before the onset of the war. And they had never really stocked up on bacta. But despite all the damage it had taken during this battle, the *Tyrant's Bane* still had its massive internal hydroponics garden and a lot of interior space to devote to simple things like bandages and so forth.

Although it is highly ironic to think that here, in the heart of the bacta refinement and distribution system, such things would still be needed, Harry reflected before smiling suddenly as he felt a very familiar presence in the Force waiting for them.

Aayla had felt it, too, and it didn't surprise Harry to see her leaping out of the shuttle's ramp to land next to Zule Xiss. If the two of them had been somewhere private, Harry could sense that Aayla would have hugged their friend in welcome. It had been months since they had parted ways on Coruscant, and it felt even longer, given everything that had happened. Harry felt the urge to, although not nearly as big an urge in that direction as a desire to find Padme and whisk her away to the Bane for a few days of debauchery. *Not that we can, but it's a pleasant dream,* Harry thought, amused to feel a pulse of agreement and amusement down his and Aayla's link.

As it was, all Aayla could let herself was a wide smile and a raised hand in greeting, both of which Zule echoed. He could also sense something else from Aayla, or rather, she was feeling something from Zule, thanks to her empath skill. Something that Harry could pick up via their link. As he greeted their friend, though, he set that aside, simply focusing on a heartfelt, "It is good to see you in the flesh, Zule. I know the Force guided your steps to stay by Padme, but I still should thank you for that and for helping to defend her against all the trouble she's found herself in."

"Heh. As I said before, I think the good Senator of the Chomell Sector is a much greater trouble magnet than you, Harry. Unlike you, she sometimes goes looking for it, which pushes her skills at attracting it well past your own mark." Both Aayla and Harry groaned at that, as Ahsoka giggled, more out of having a few relief-ending moments than actual humor, but that was fine by Harry.

"But she's a friend too. I've enjoyed getting to know her," Zule continued, a fond smile appearing on her face. Again, Aayla could sense something from their friend, something that made her look at the half-Zabrax thoughtfully, her eyes beginning to sparkle for a second.

Just then, all three of the Jedi turned their attention to an Aethersprite that had just come into sight above them. "Anakin," Harry smiled faintly. "Good. We're going to need all the help we can get."

"You all look tired already. Are you sure you're up to this?" Zule asked, knowing already what they were here for.

"No. But what choice do we have? We need to get the weather under control now, as soon as possible, or else the hurricanes and tornadoes already occurring will become much, much worse." Harry shrugged philosophically. "We can sleep after."

Snorting, Zule nodded. "I suppose." She reached over and, in a very un-jedi-like move, squeezed first Aayla's hands and Harry's. "Just remember, you two, there are a lot of people who would be very annoyed if you worked yourselves to death, alright?"

"As we would if anything happened to you." Harry meant that as a simple, friendly response, but Zule blushed a bit, and Aayla looked at her again, that spike of something becoming clearer despite the half-falleen Jedi's self-control. It brought to mind the conversation they'd had with Padme and Zule months back about how he had accidentally been flirting with both Zule and Padme. And some of their interactions since. "*Aayla...I...*"

"I feel the same, Harry. Zule's interest in us has morphed into interest not just toward us but to Padme. I... I think we might need to talk about this with her later and with Padme. I don't want to ever run into the same trouble we had with taking our relationship with Padme for granted as we almost did with the whole T'aa Chume thing. But that can wait until we meet Padme in person, so I can get an impression of what she thinks of Zule in turn," Aayla replied via their bond, her impressions having firmed into knowledge now. "*But we can't talk about it now. We have other priorities here.*"

"True. But I am grateful we're on the same page without any need to discuss it. I refuse to let Padme be hurt by our actions again," Harry said. Then he looked over at Ahsoka as she finished greeting Zule in turn, before looking over at where the Aethersprite was currently landing. The two of them had met previously, though they hadn't really talked ever.

"Interesting. I met Skywalker once, you know," Ahsoka gestured to the Aethersprite. "I went to him when he was in the temple with Master Windu at one point, asking him for some tips on piloting. He was a little..." Ahsoka paused, having trouble coming up with a diplomatic word, her attitude almost back to normal but not quite to Harry's eyes.

"Overly proud?" Aayla guessed. "Perhaps just a bit too full of himself. Not enough to get on your nerves, but enough to be noticeable?"

"Be nice," Harry said mildly, but no more.

"Yeah! That kind of thing. He's good, and he knows it, and he sometimes lets that show a bit too much."

"I doubt he will be showing any arrogance today padawan," Harry said softly, as he stared up to where Anakin's starfighter was coming down towards them. "In fact, I think you all should wait here for a bit. I want to talk to him before we start trying to repair the weather. Head inside, find us a place to meditate, and I will meet you there."

The other Jedi all nodded, and as they walked off, Harry heard Aayla gently begin to instruct Ahsoka on what to be on the lookout for once they began their work. Controlling the weather wasn't a simple matter after all, particularly not over an entire planet. The more everyone knew about the process, about the things they would have to try and direct, the better.

Anakin leaped down from his cockpit, landing in front of Harry, contrasting his own sweat-stained, exhausted-looking self with Harry as he did. Harry looked a little tired but was certainly nowhere near as tired looking or sweat-stained as Anakin. "Harry," he grunted abruptly, not willing suddenly to give the other young man the title of Knight as he was due, or even Count, although that one at least he could rationalize to himself. And maybe given the fact they were somewhat friendly, the lack of address might seem acceptable, but Anakin knew he was being rude and didn't honestly care. Not after the day he'd had.

But Harry didn't seem to care about his rudeness, instead smiling wanly yet warmly at the younger man, making Anakin a bit angrier, but at himself this time. "Anakin. My Condolences about Mace's death. He will be sorely missed on many levels, but I doubt any will miss him as keenly as you or his dearest friends."

"Thank you for your condolences," Anakin answered almost robotically. "I will deal with it in time."

Harry cocked his head, and Aayla's ability with empathy came out. Even though she was now a few dozen yards away, she could still feel the anger and hatred building within Anakin behind a wall of self-control that she feared could all too easily resemble glass rather than stone. *"And even stone wouldn't help much in the long run. He needs to deal with that bedrock of anger and hatred, Harry."*

In response, Harry sent back a wordless caress of emotions, a wry twist to them indicating that he could've told her that without her empathy, but it was nice to be certain. "I do not doubt you will. But can I ask you a question? Do you think you can separate your anger from your hatred and both from your grief?"

"...That's a weird question. Why would I need to separate them? The Jedi teachings tell me to release all of my darker emotions, not just one of them," Anakin said, his eyes narrowing.

"That is a simplistic view of the Jedi Order's teachings. I am certain that someone as nuanced as your Master or Master Yoda would tell you that grief can fuel anger, and anger will fuel hatred and thus create a loop, one always feeding itself, drowning those who call into that trap. But the simple way of dealing with that trap is to accept and deal with one of those emotions."

"In this case, you hate General Grievous." It was a statement, not a question, but Anakin still found himself nodding, his self-control slowly eroding under Harry's impassive, thoughtful gaze in a way that was the direct opposite of what had happened under Master Jerec's cloth-covered visage. "General Grievous is a mass murdering psychopath, a killer without conscience, remorse, or any code of honor that I've been able to see. But... you have seen him, Anakin. Why would you hate someone like that, someone who is simply obeying their personality... or perhaps, just their programming?"

Anakin scowled, but Harry explained calmly. "He is a cyborg, created by the Sith to act as C'baoth's hatchet man, his blunt force object, well beyond any of the other CIS commanders.

I do not doubt that he enjoyed doing so, but how much of that is Grievous himself, and how much of it is his cyborg body?"

Harry waited a moment and then went on as Harry's scowl faded. "I'm not saying Grievous is a victim. He is far too intelligent and too good at what he does to be that. I am simply saying that he could no more act against his nature than a droid could disobey a direct order from its creator once it has a slave circuit on it. Well, droids that aren't created by you anyway, judging by some of the stories you've told me about Artoo."

Anakin snorted at Harry's wry tone as R2-D2 let loose a warble from above. And with that tiny bit of humor, Harry was in. He stepped forward, and after the two of them lowered Artoo to the ground, he gestured for Anakin to walk with him, heading after Aayla into the military base, waving off the offer of directions. Even through the warren of the command base, he could unerringly follow her, his own personal astrogation point.

The rush of love and affection that poetic turn of phrase won him through their bond made Harry want to grin, but he kept it off his face with ease, continuing to speak with Anakin once there were no locals around. "You called my first question weird. Are you prepared for another one?"

"I suppose," Anakin snorted for the second time in as many minutes. "You're one of those teachers who teach by posing questions rather than answers, I can tell. Master Windu he did that a bit. Not as often as you seem to, though."

"I find gently directing Ahsoka to find her own answers works waaaay better with her than just telling her the answers. That always makes her feel annoyed or as if there's more to figure out on her own. Which is true and often the point not right now," Harry joked. "But my current question for you is if you can separate your grief at your Master's demise from events here, what kind of anger do you feel towards Grievous and the actions of the Confederacy?"

"... That is a tall order and a... strange question..." Anakin stated, shaking his head. "I don't know if I can do that, not without some time anyway."

Harry paused in place, looking at the younger man, his hands folded inside his robes. "We have time, a few moments anyway. It will take Aayla that long to get Ahsoka up to speed."

Anakin frowned, thinking, leaning against the opposite wall, staring down at his feet for a moment, but before he could say anything, R2-D2 beeped again. This time more insistently. Anakin looked up at him, confused, while Harry looked on equally confused, but not for the same reason. Anakin had long since begun to be able to understand his droid's beeping noises, almost as if they were a personal language that only the two of them could understand. "What do you mean I have a message waiting for me?"

R2-D2 beeped several more times, and Anakin's face went slack. "Master Windu sent me a message before he died?"

Despite his self-control and the anger that had been riding him for the last hours, for a moment, all Anakin felt was grief, and his eyes began to fill with tears for a second before he

dashed them away quickly, glancing towards Harry, only to find him looking down the hallway. That didn't fool Anakin, but he was still grateful for the slightly older man's tact. "How is that possible?"

"Jedi Masters are often able to know when they will die. Even with the Veil of the Dark Side blocking our vision of the future, some Jedi Masters are strong enough to discern that. And Master Windu was strong. He probably knew that he would die somehow in this battle," Harry said softly. "I would recommend that you look at that message after we're done here."

Sensing that Anakin was in a frame of mind to listen more, Harry turned back to their previous conversation. "There are many types of anger, Anakin. There's righteous anger fueled by injustice. Fueled by grief. There's hateful anger, too, fueled by the hate you feel towards people who take advantage of you or random events in your life outside of your control. I have no doubt that as a former slave, you felt both several times in your life. But the anger fueled by righteousness dissipates with time. It does not have the raw controlling power of unfeeling anger. Anger brought about by hatred. Fueled by a desire for power, thinking other people have put you down or a desire to control or lord over others in some fashion... or even occasionally just a desire to change, to control more so that you cannot be hurt again."

Anakin nodded slowly, and Harry reached across, placing a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Release your hatred towards Grievous, allow yourself to solely grieve for Master Windu, and I believe that you will find the anger you are feeling changing, morphing into something that can better drive you forwards instead of goad you like a whip or push out all other emotions as the Dark Side will if you fall into that trap I mentioned earlier, a continuous loop where all you will feel any longer is hatred."

Once more, Anakin nodded slowly, and Harry squeezed his shoulder. "But that needs to be set aside too. We need you, and we need you concentrating on the here and now. A time to grieve will come in time, but we need to stave off still more grief before we can allow ourselves that luxury."

Breathing in deeply, the thought that he was still needed by the other Jedi helped to anchor Anakin just as much as Harry's words did against the storm of internal anger Anakin had been feeling. The fact that his Master had left him a message also helped tremendously. It made his death seem more... purposeful somehow. More like a proper ending rather than as if his life's thread had simply been cut through the random vagaries of war. It helped more than Anakin had ever thought it might.

Between that and Harry's earlier words, Anakin was able to meditate for a few more moments, separating out his anger from his grief, as Harry had said. His hatred for Grievous slowly disappeared as he did. After all, as a programmer and engineer, he knew that Harry had spoken the simple truth. Who knew what had been done to Grievous to turn them into a cyborg? Who knew where his hatred of all life came from?

And in the end, who cared? He was no more than a droid now, acting out in programmed hatred. *Loathe the acts he can commit, but do not let myself be blinded by unfeeling hatred for the being who does so. Look instead for the hands that guide him.*

For several moments, Harry watched as Aayla turned her own concentration through him toward Anakin. While Harry did not partake of her empathic abilities, she could still feel his progress, and after about ten minutes, she sent a wave of affectionate approval down there linked to Harry and the young man opened his eyes, nodding to Harry firmly. "I don't think I'm quite there yet Knight Potter, I still feel a little too much anger, I think. But you're right, and Master Jerec was right, too. Master Windu wouldn't want me to wallow in the Dark Side, to fall to it through grief over his passing or hatred at his killer."

"Good. Although that's not to say that we shouldn't look into ways to cut Grievous his head off his shoulders at the earliest opportunity, Anakin," Harry sent the younger man a wolfish smile, which was returned wholesale before Harry went on more seriously. "It's just that we can't let that be your priority or let our darker emotions direct us as Jedi. That way lies the Dark Side."

Anakin said the last few words with Harry, and the two young men smiled more normally at one another before Harry released Anakin's shoulder and turned down the hallway. "So, ready to change the weather back to normal?"

Moments later, the duo walked into a hydroponics garden, of all things, set deep inside the military base. It wasn't a place to grow bacta or anything large-scale like that. Rather, it seemed like a local officer's personal garden, full of both flowers and herbs, with two large trees at the far side and a third in the center, larger than the other two and of a different variety to boot.

Underneath that tree's awning, they found Aayla, Zule and Ahsoka sitting cross-legged on the ground. Aayla was leaning forward, gently running her fingers through the soil in front of her as Zule leaned back against the tree behind her. Looking at the three, Anakin saw that only Harry and Zule looked like they were combat-capable. Even the young padawan looked tired, although not physically as Anakin was, and Aayla looked the next best thing to about to keel over.

This was very much the case. The Jedi aboard *Tyrant's Bane* had been using Force Gestalt to aid them long before they had actually hit the fight, needing to do so in order to ride the various granitic waves of the Polith system to where they could actually do some good right in orbit over the main planet. Then they had fought a major battle, and then helped with the search and rescue operation for a time before now. Through all of that, several Jedi had pushed themselves to the point of falling unconscious, leaving mostly padawans and the younger, less well-trained members to take point on the SAR efforts. And while Harry still had reserves to spare, Aayla didn't.

"Master Yoda once had to lead a Force Gestalt to do something similar," Zule was saying as Anakin and Harry took their positions within the circle with Ahsoka between them, with Aayla on Harry's other side and Zule on Anakin's. "A rogue asteroid had slammed into a planet without any space defenses in the outer rim, doing untold environmental damage. Master Yoda led a force of Jedi to help do what they could for the atmosphere, although they could do very little to help calm some of the tectonic tremors that the impact caused."

“Master Fay had to do it once as well. She taught us how to do it,” Harry stated. “It will take a lot out of us, and I’m afraid to say we’ll probably be reaching out to other Jedi as we work and be relatively useless for the rest of the reconstruction and relief efforts here. But it needs to be done.”

Anakin wasn’t the only one there to nod firmly at that. His emotions were now clear, and after a moment, he reached out to the Force as the others did, each of them reaching out to one another, the Force Gestalt growing, one where they were all equal rather than with a single leader being given more power from the others.

Beyond that, Anakin and Zule could feel the difference in how Harry had Aayla were constructing this Force Gestalt in comparison to others. It was not the reaching out to the Unifying Force, not trying to empower their Force or Battle Precognition, trying to discern the nature of the future via the Force. Rather, they were reaching out to the Living Force of the planet. They were feeling out the now, the then, the past, almost the soul of the planet. As if the planet itself would tell them what it should be like. The Jedi listened, hoping, and then felt the reply. As one, the Jedi in the hydroponics garden raised their hands.

And around the planet, the weather began to change. The harsh, biting winds directly around the military base began to die down, and elsewhere on the planet, lightning and thunder started to fade. Storms of tremendous wind pressure and power, so large they made the term hurricane seem blasé, started to peter out, as the Jedi used the template for what the planet had been before to repair the damage done.

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On his flagship in orbit over the moon, where he was almost done helping the SAR efforts, Jerec felt it, the Living Force of Thyferra responding to the demands of the Jedi. He could feel the shift in the weather already, building up into greater changes with every passing second. *Impressive. Most impressive! And probably most draining as well.*

For a moment, Jerec entertained the idea of going down there immediately, attacking Harry now as he was busy trying to repair the weather patterns of the planet. Then he shook his head. *No. It is doubtful that I could get there in time, even if I took a starfighter. And I would undoubtedly have to kill far more than just Harry Potter in order to escape. Honestly, it would just be too chancy. I do not like the idea of acting so spontaneously.*

However, the acolytes, the acolytes were in place on the planet already. And Jerec knew that they would not miss this chance. *They chaff under my orders and undoubtedly have made their own plans.*

But that was all right by him. The Jedi would see this attack as a last gasp, the only dagger in the dark waiting for their back. *And that feeling will only open them up for my own attack later. And who knows, perhaps the acolytes will actually be able to kill a few of Potter’s companions. Or even himself. I am not picky, so long as the good Count dies.*

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The Acolytes had used Force Cloak and their limited ability to cloud men's minds to transfer themselves and their accompanying droids down to the ground before the Tyrant's Bane limped into orbit. All three felt they would have better luck assassinating Potter on the ground, as none were certain where else he might be beyond the system's command center, which would have a lot of defenses and might be ready for an attack even now, considering the news flashes that had gone out about commando droids before the CIS fleet arrived.

When they felt the Jedi's attempts to control the weather, the three barely had to talk about it between themselves before deciding to take this chance. Whatever their orders from Jerec, all three almost desperately craved the accolades that they would be rewarded for killing Potter or even just Skywalker, their original target. So, they acted just as Jerec predicted, but they didn't do so mindlessly.

First, the one who was most computer-inclined among them worked with the commando droids. Commando droids had specialized slicing software that they had used multiple times up to this point. But there was no way the Thyferrans would have been able to upgrade their computers or coms security to stop them, and once more, they were able to hack into the local data network, putting their freighter in as a known flight from where they had put down to the military base where the various shuttles from the Tyrant's Bane had put down. Where they could sense their quarry.

After that was done, the commando droids were able to remotely access the base's security computers. With that, they rerouted warnings, shut down interior alarm systems, and paved the way electronically for their attack.

Moving into position took some time, especially with how many other freighters and shuttles were moving through the air space above the base. Then even longer, as none of the Acolytes were willing to use mental disciplines on the Vratix, unsure of how it would work on the bug-like aliens. Better to try to sneak in using Force Cloak and hope the commando droids could keep up.

Ironically, it was not one of the Vratix who finally spotted them, though. One of the local humans who was busily helping unload a transport from one of the vratix hives looked to the side at just the wrong moment and saw a dark-painted droid of some kind he had never seen before flicking between two large crates. "What the... That didn't look like any kind of heavy lifting droid I've ever seen..."

The vratix he was working with blinked, turning its many eyes in that direction. "Query, we do not use droids at all in our hives, so this could be a case of the eyes always lying. After all, where could a new droid have come..."

That was as far as it got before both of them fell from the precise blaster fire from the commando droid they had spotted.

The jig was up at that point and within seconds, further blaster fire quickly erupted from four other commando droids, while the sixth member raced towards the heavily reinforced doors leading deeper into the military base. That fire killed two of the local soldiers along with several of the vratrix, while a squad of clone troopers waiting to be sent to one of the refinery cities nearby was sent scrambling. “What the fuck? Where did they come from?”

“Shut up and return fire!” His fellow trooper shouted, pulling out a holdout blaster and doing just that but hitting nothing. The commando droids were too fast, already switching to another hiding place, even as one of their fellows began to toss thermal detonators everywhere.

Explosions and screams followed, one of which engulfed a position where two of the clone troopers had taken cover. Yet even as their fellows died, one of the clone troopers in hiding with the one who had pulled out a holdout blaster quipped, “I thought we weren’t supposed to bring blasters along on this operation, just stun sticks and gas bangs.” Gas bangs were knockout gas grenades.

“And you actually listened?” Two out of his three fellows said, turning their visors to stare at him incredulously as both pulled out their own holdout blasters. “Our kul’jars (trainers) would be so disappointed.”

Unfortunately, that was the last thing any of the four would ever say or do. From behind the clones, there was the telltale noise of a lightsaber flicking on, and then one of the acolytes stood behind the quartet of clone troopers as his Force Cloak faded. Before any of them could even turn, his red lightsaber cut them down, and then the Acolyte was racing on after the droids along with his fellows. Behind him, he left two of the commando droids with orders to create havoc.

This would hopefully, draw as much of the attention onto them once the bases’ ECCW team understood what was going on and could get through the various cutouts that the slicers had put in place on the local system.

Because of that ECW assault, the locals only slowly became aware of the assault even as survivors out on the landing zone tried to call it in. By that time, the three acolytes and the four droids with them were deep inside the base.

The only defense that the group ran into was a team of hastily put-together local military troopers who had already been heading out to the landing area. But that only served to slow them down for a moment.

This eruption of violence did not go unnoticed by the Jedi. How could it? All of the Jedi currently involved in trying to repair the planet's weather were so deep into the Force and their Gestalt that they couldn't have missed it even if they had tried.

In the hydroponics garden, Harry and the others all grimaced, feeling their Gestalt, the work they had been doing waiver. Ahsoka would liken it to being part of a spider web that was suddenly being shaken by someone nearby clapping his hands. The creation that they were working on was that delicate, that balanced and for a moment, as the violence erupted, it almost came apart.

But it didn't. Thanks to Harry's abilities with air and Zule and Anakin's strength they held it together, just enough for that initial pulse of sound to not disrupt the web.

Yet they couldn't leave the web. If they tried, the work they had been doing would not only just not do what the Jedi wanted to, but the changes they had begun to make to the weather would simply make what was going on with Thyferra's biosphere even worse. They had to hold it, had to continue to work.

There was only one thing they could do. They had to work faster. This they began to do, all four of them draining away their concentration and mental strength, a certain grimness overtaking all four of their minds as they continued to work desperately.

The distance that the would-be assassins had to cover now fought against the shock that they had created. By the time they had gone another half mile into the defense base, the locals were aware of what was going on, the original hacks in their system flushed by a forced restart. Groups of locals were quickly pulled in from elsewhere in the base to try and set up defensive points around the command center and the shield generator which was the original reason why this military base had been created.

Only the locals who had been assigned to watch the local weather and who now were much more important than normal knew what the Jedi were doing. Harry hadn't wanted to get their hopes up until they had some actual progress. Watching the changes occur in the weather patterns of the planet real-time had been a horror for the weatherman prior to this moment, but seeing the weather patterns almost repair themselves had been beyond startling, and he had watched avidly, staring at his screen until the shouting around him got too much to ignore.

"Er, sir, we should also try to um, to protect the hydroponics garden where the Jedi are."

The base commander frowned over at the meteorologist. "Why? Surely, you don't think they're going to go after the Jedi? The generator or here make much more..."

"Sir, unless the CIS is going to launch another attack on the planet, neither of those targets makes much sense," the weatherman argued back quickly, staring at the pickups as they

watched the first of the local defenders react to the total attack be slaughtered by the three crimson blade using Sith. Their accompanying commando droids hadn't even had to do anything there. The fire team had simply been sliced apart, the four Acolytes somehow speeding forward, crossing the distance between the defense post and where they had first appeared around the corner so fast that only one of the defenders even got off a shot. "That doesn't make sense, not with the Republic having sent in such a strong force to reinforce us. But Count Potter..."

It then occurred to the base commander that Jedi Knight Potter wasn't just a Jedi Knight who had suddenly appeared to help save their planet with his amazing battleship. For some reason, the idea that the self-effacing young man who had seemed almost apologetic to come so late to their defense in the recording the man had seen of his first communique to Senator Amidala and the command center was also the head of the Galactic Defense League hadn't really occurred to the man until just then. Now, he nodded firmly, shouting out orders.

But some of the damage was already done. It would take time to reroute the defenders who were already in position outside of or within the shield generator or near the comms center to where they could actually defend the Jedi.

Thankfully, the defenders did still have space to work with, regardless of how fast the acolytes and the commando droids could move. And, by this point, word had gotten out as well as to what was happening.

High up in Warm Welcome at the command center there, Padme turned wildly to Chewbacca. "Do you think you could get down there in time to help?" she asked almost desperately, a frisson of true worry and fear for her two lovers going through her, desperate to do something, anything.

Chewbacca simply snarled in response, the noise not translated by his belt translator. He seemed to be dithering for a moment before he turned and made a gesture to his wife. Mala nodded, and without another word, Chewie raced out of the command center, and she turned back, trying to push through her fear and concern to resume her job, knowing that she really couldn't do anything to mitigate what was going on down there.

Except there was one thing, which she did now, quickly opening a communication to the Republic flagship, whose name she hadn't heard just yet. As the communication opened, Padme began quickly. "Master Jerec, Count Potter and the others who are working on the weather down on the planet are..."

"I know, I could sense it from even over the moon. My ship is already going as fast as possible, and once we are in orbit, I will be taking a shuttle down," Master Jerec intoned

soothingly. "If the defenders can hold, I can arrive in time. I do not know how well I will do against three Darkside users, but I will do what I can."

And if their attack has worked to the point where I have an opening, I will be in a position to take it one way or the other, the Dark Side user thought. While I might not like to act spontaneously, I do want to be able to take advantage of the plans of others.

Padme nodded, and with an effort of will and hands clenched on her lap, Padme went back to her work. While love called her away to help Chewie try to defend her loves, duty kept her pinned where she was. And not for the first time, Padme cursed that duty.

Down on the planet, while this was all going on, the acolytes made a mistake. Up to this point, they had done nearly everything right. But now, instead of racing ahead, they stayed with the commando droids. If they had cloaked themselves and raced ahead, then perhaps they could have attacked the Jedi without further locals getting in their way. But they didn't. All three of them were too keyed up to think like that. The months of enforced waiting or hiding away had gotten to all three of them, fraying what little self-control the trio of acolytes had in the first place.

Now, the trio reveled in the violence and the fear of their enemies, the chance to release their inner anger on someone too tempting to ignore. They started to slow down, letting the locals prepare their defenses so they could have the enjoyment of cutting them down. In this manner, they fought their way through five more hastily created defensive positions, killing more than two company's worth of local soldiers before they neared the hydroponics garden.

Meanwhile, Harry and the others continued their work. Slowly, ever so slowly (at least to the Jedi) the weather of the planet returned to normal. Several storms that were battering against refinery cities the world over, a few hurricanes, and even one tornado that had been basically tearing apart a hive dissipated, the planet's weather no longer trying to compound the disaster that had already occurred.

The work continued as the four commando droids and three acolytes attacked the last hastily created defense position outside of the small hydroponics garden. The defenders had dug in here better than they had elsewhere. Composed of eight vratix and four fire teams from the base's defenders, they had set up several ferrocrete blocks scattered throughout the hallway leading into the hydroponics garden, as well as dozens of trip wires and explosives set along the route, one directly in the hatch that served as the gardens single entrance.

Two heavy repeating blasters opened up the instant any movement could be seen down the corridor, destroying two small sensor drones that the commando droids had tossed down the hallway towards the defenders around the corner. Then, the acolytes burst out into the open. A group Force Push flashed down the hallway, setting off the explosives along the hallway

and snapping the trip wires before they ducked back into covers as the repeating blasters opened up, firing through the smoke and fire.

A second only was enough for the trio to recover, and then they moved once more around the curve of the corridor as one, lightsabers flashing as they battered aside all of the blaster bolts coming towards them, returning most of them directly back into the defenders. Behind them, the droids also opened fire, firing around the trio of Dark Side users.

The defenders hunkered down behind the ferrocrete blocks quickly, pushing their blasters up over the edge of the ferrocrete stanchions around the sides of them, desperate to try and slow the attackers down.

On the landing pad, Chewie arrived, having basically broken several of the local traffic rules set in place during the emergency to get down as fast as possible. The engines of the shuttle he'd taken down would probably never recover, but he couldn't care less as he raced forward, shouting out for any of the locals who could wield the blaster to follow him, the volume on his translator dialed up to the highest level it could be, and only barely being heard over his bellow. A dozen vratix, who had been trying to deal with the wounded or the damage done by the two commando droids who had stayed in the landing area to cause chaos, quickly joined the Wookiee, and together, they raced through the core doors of the military base as fast as possible, picking up a squad of local soldiers.

One of the acolytes reached the first of the defender's positions around the hydroponics garden, his lightsaber slicing down and through the ferrocrete, cutting the vratix who had been stationed behind it in half before it could retreat. The next one, however, did retreat under fire, only to die moments later from fire from the commando droids out in the open before they could get to safety.

The other two acolytes moved forward to join their fellow, pressing forward. Within moments, the last of the defenders were dead, and the hatch to the hydroponics garden was sliced in half. The three acolytes charged in...

Just as Ahsoka dropped out of the Force gestalt. As the youngest, he was the least necessary for the work, although the others all grimaced as they were forced to take the strain.

As her senses returned to her body, Ahsoka had a moment of vertigo, of confusion. But then, she was up and charging, her twin lightsabers activating, Force Precognition singing in her mind. The first two acolytes to reach her found their own lightsabers blocked as she whirled in, her Jar'Kai style allowing her some flexibility that the two acolytes lacked. She followed this with a wide-angle Force Push, blasting all three back randomly, though they moved with the momentum, bouncing off walls and ceiling.

As she pushed them back, Ahsoka observed her opponents, gritting her teeth, knowing without a doubt that these three Sith were here for her Master. They were young, perhaps somewhere between herself and Anakin in age, she couldn't tell any specifics. All three were human, male, with faces that could easily disappear in a crowd, thick, full (and unkempt in her opinion) beards, and the yellow eyes of someone who had given himself to the anger and hatred that all Dark Siders thought gave them such power.

The next second, Ahsoka was forced to block a lightsaber strike that would've cut her in half, redirecting the blow up and over her head as she ducked, her second lightsaber striking out in a thrust taken from Makashi for a second before it too was diverted by another one of the acolytes. A Force Push caught her, but she diverted its energy into the ground easily, then jumped up and over another strike from the third Acolyte, bringing her lightsabers down towards the first in a double-handed smash, even as she used a trick she had learned from Harry, directing a force power without using any movement from her hands.

Fire blossomed in the face of one of the acolytes, who hastily backed away, blinded and with his beard on fire, desperately trying to stamp it out with his hand. "Gaahhhh, you kriffing bitch!!"

The third moved past Ahsoka to attack the Jedi who were still locked in the Force gestalt, their faces dripping with sweat, locked in grimaces of exertion.

Breaking out of her attack on the other two acolytes, Ahsoka sent a Force Stun the third Dark Sider's way, forcing him to turn and block the attack with his lightsaber, the red tint of the technique visible in the air as a pulse of energy crashing into the red of the lightsaber. Ahsoka twisted around, blocking another strike from one of the other acolytes, while out in the Corridor, the commando droids were being held up by several of the defenders of the base who had arrived on the scene at that point, cutting them down in withering hails of blaster bolts.

A Force Push caught one of the acolytes in the chest, hurling him back out into the core door, allowing blocking a lightsaber strike towards Aayla, so close that Aayla began to sweat even more from the heat of the two plasma blades almost pressed into her forehead. "You will not touch them!" Ahsoka howled.

"One apprentice against the three of us! You will not stop us from completing our--" was as far as the other Acolyte got even as he tried to attack Ahsoka before she stamped on the ground, using another technique she learned from Harry to send a pulse of Force through the earth itself, cracking and sending bits of earth up at him. The dirt and mud did nothing but distract him, which was what she wanted. The next second, one of her lightsabers was hurled through the air, almost like a boomerang coming in at his back, even as she continued to duel with the other one.

Only a hasty Force Push from the Acolyte she had previously thrown out into the corridor saved that one's life. Then, even as she was locked in battle with one of them, she was forced to try to use the Force to retrieve her throne weapon.

But she had held long enough for more defenders to arrive on the scene. One of the commando droids fell, its entire body shattered by the amount of fire that hit it, even as the others retreated, taking up positions where the defenders had been originally around the garden.

Even through their anger, the three acolytes knew that time was running out. They could feel even more defenders arriving on the scene, could feel the work being done with the weather slowly pushing towards its conclusion. And deciding suddenly that success was more worth more than ego, they shifted tactics. Two of their number held Ahsoka in play, while the third raced back out into the hallway, leaping up into the air, his lightsaber flashing as he battered aside and back towards the defenders their own blaster fire. "One commando droid stay here with me, the other two to join my fellows in the garden. Gun down the Jedi!"

A hasty force shield from Ahsoka sprang up then as two of the commando droids opened fire even as they entered the garden. Their blasters went to full auto, working through their gas canisters quickly, as well as the magazines of solid shell projectiles that the commando droid guns were also equipped with.

This move cost Ahsoka, and although she was able to block a strike from one of the acolytes with his lightsaber with her own, her second lightsaber was destroyed, the top of her lightsaber cut through just above her hand by a sweep from the other. The next moment, she was flung away from her Master and the others to crash into the far wall of the hydroponics garden. One of the acolytes kept her there, A Force Choke around her neck, lifting her up off the ground, crushing her throat as the other turned back and brought his down into her shield.

Behind them the Dark Side user out in the hallway was overwhelmed by the amount of fire coming his way. That Acolyte fell, never getting the chance to earn his name again, his body riddled by blaster bolts. The commando droid tried to hold them up by lobbing, but a precise shot from Chewbacca toward the hand about to toss the grenade off its body. The grenade exploded in midair, and through the fire and flame, Chewbacca charged towards the hydroponics garden at the head of a large group of humans and vratix.

There, Ahsoka's shield had held just long enough. Even as it failed and the commando droids opened fire for a second time, even as Chewbacca and his troops pushed their way into the hydroponics garden, the Gestalt ended, and all four of the Jedi woke.

The Force singing in warning to him, Anakin, who had merely been providing power like Zule, rolled backward, avoiding the lightsaber that would've cut him in half from the Acolyte

who had foolishly decided to attack him, prioritizing the original mission over Harry Potter. His lightsaber flipped out and up, blocking a second strike, then he was on his feet, whirling into the attack, forcing the man desperately away, his eyes wide and panicking now.

Meanwhile, Zule, thrust a hand out, a shield forming around her and racing to cover Aayla before covering herself before one of the Dark Side users could cut Aayla in half with his lightsaber. This cost Zule, who was shot in the side several times, shoulder, side, thigh and lower leg. "ARGHHH!"

Harry's lightsaber flipped up, blocking several blaster bolts that would've impacted him in turn. His mind too drained by what they had been doing a moment before, he simply couldn't concentrate enough to call upon any Force Powers beyond Force Precognition, and even that was draining.

But these were not normal blaster goals. The E-5 blaster rifle the commando droids used could be outfitted to also fire solid slug projectiles, as they had previously shown when Zule first fought them during their attempt on Padme's life. And this was something that Harry had not dealt with before. His attempts to redirect the blaster bolts worked, but the solid slug projectiles hidden within those blaster strikes came down and into his thigh, into his side, and into his shoulder, all along one side, causing him to collapse.

The Acolyte who had been dealing with Ahsoka couldn't stop himself. He twisted to the side, his Force Choke ending, his lightsaber down and striking, only for his blow to be diverted away from a headshot and into Harry's leg, cutting it off just below the waist by a desperate Aayla. Then Ahsoka was free, and the man found himself cut in half just as he had hoped to do to Harry as her lightsaber flew threw the air, cutting him in half as it flew into Anakin's hand.

At the same time, Anakin's own lightsaber cut the final Acolyte down while Chewie and the locals blew apart the last three commando droids.

As the noise started to quiet, Aayla raced to Harry's side, desperately trying to stop the flow of blood from the bullet wounds he had taken. As they worked, two vratix raced forward, kneeling down beside Harry and Aayla and lifting them in their arms, staying close together at a barked order from the Rutian Twi'lek.

"Where are you taking them?" Ahsoka asked, looking distraught at the near death of her Master, staring aghast at the wounds, while Aayla switched to Zule, the solid slugs falling to the ground beneath the vratix carrying her. Harry's missing leg would take all of Aayla's efforts to repair the damage done to the limb. In comparison, Zule was much easier.

“We stand on the planet that is the creation of the bacta,” one of them said easily. “The hives will help. For the ones who very literally put their lives on the line here to help our planet heal itself, the Ashern... the Collected Hives, can do no less.”

Ahsoka, and Aayla left with Harry and Zule, and in a matter of moments, they and the vratrix were gone, racing away in a local shuttle. This left Anakin and Chewbacca to deal with the clean-up until Jerec arrived. When he did, the Master Jedi shook his head faintly. “I seem to be developing a very bad habit of coming too late to be of much help.”

“A few of the commando droids might still be around the area. If you feel as if you have something to make up for Master Jedi, dealing with them might be a help,” the base commander stated.

“A good point, major. That might not be a bad idea for both young Anakin and myself,” Jerec said. He looked over at the younger Jedi, nodding his head in approval of something.

Actually, it was shock. The youth’s anger and hatred were nearly gone now, his grief controlled. How such a change had occurred Jerec didn’t know, but he knew now that there was no way to use Skywalker against Potter. *Best to get him out of the way, then.*

“I read the reports about the sabotage efforts that the Confederacy had launched prior to their assault, and I’ve taken a tally of the number of commando droids dealt with here,” Jerec went on. “Besides the two that went missing within the base, the two that were making trouble on the landing pad, there are at least three, maybe as many as five fire teams of commando droids still out there. Given what those three Dark Side users tried here, I don’t believe they would simply cut and run. Anakin, I realize that you must be tired, but...”

“I’m not that tired. Using the Force doesn’t really take it out on me as it does most,” Anakin protested, pride ringing in his voice for a moment before he shook himself. “a nap, a shower and some food will do me. If you’re thinking I can hunt down these commando droids, though, that’s going to take more computer work than the Force.”

“But you are also known as a computer expert. And have a droid that I believe is also loaded with the Order’s latest cracking software, correct? I think I read a report on the fact that you sometimes use Artoo as a one-droid electronic warfare team,” Jerec answered. “I will set you up with the command of a company of our clone troopers. Scour the local data network, hunt these commando droids down. Hopefully before they can cause more trouble.”

Anakin answered with a wide grin, although a large part of him really wanted to return to Padme, to take up Zule’s post as her defender. Still, he set that aside. There were more important things to think about than his crush on the senator. Time enough to act on that crush

again later. “Of course, Master Jerec. I will call it in, but if the senator agrees, I’m not going to argue.”

That took but a second, and moments later, Artoo and Anakin were hip-deep in a data search while Jerec threw himself into helping the senator, doing what he could to aid her in her various duties. *All the better to lure the locals into a false sense of security. Let them relax, let Amidala and Anakin and the other Jedi turn their attention away, believing that Potter and his Twi’lek paramour are safe. And then I will strike. I missed my chance to capitalize on those buffoon’s plans here by mere moments. My own plan will not fail.*

OOOOOOO

For the rest of the day, the only type of violence that occurred anywhere within the star system was on the very, very local level. Groups of vandals attempting to try and use the chaos, several freighters attempting to jump out of the system without permission loaded with hoarded bacta for the black market. Those were stopped and impounded on the spot by the Republic forces on Padme’s orders. There were also a few protests by the corporations and, worse, violent clashes between their private security forces and Republic or Thyerran Military Defense personnel to Padme’s unilateral takeover of the local government now that the real violence was over. But Padme had been prepared for that.

Meanwhile, the two vratrix who retrieved Zule and Harry were as good as their word. The two of them, Aayla and Ahsoka were swiftly ensconced in one of their hives, in a private medical room. The bacta tanks were of unusual design in that they were almost more like rectangular fish tanks, wide and deep to allow vratrix or other non-humanoid features to use them. The pair of wounded had been quickly placed in one each, fitted with breathing masks connected to a large rebreather system in the ceiling, while Aayla, utterly exhausted, collapsed into a series of low beds set between the two large bacta tanks.

This left Ahsoka and Chewie to their own devices. Chewie, full of energy and angry at what had happened, began a long discussion with the vratrix about the hive, the bacta they used – which was far redder in color than any he had ever seen before – and other things. He also was called by Anakin to occasionally help his search for the commando droids.

For Zule, her time in the tank barely lasted five hours or so. She had been hurt, yes, but the solid slug in her side, like the ones in Harry’s wounds, had been removed. And she had been in far better shape when the battle began than any of the others, having been watching Padme’s back during the invasion. That, and the Force Healing that Aayla had done to her and Harry both.

But now, as she toweled off her hair and promised herself a real shower, Zule set aside any thoughts of how much the gunk stuck to her skin. Zule did not like the listless, almost

concussed look on Aayla's face or the fact that, though she was awake now, she didn't seem aware of anything going on around her. "Are you all right? Or is it Harry? Is there something wrong with him we didn't catch?"

If it was physical, the bacta tank would heal it regardless, but if it was something to do with Harry's brain, there was a limit to what the 'miracle elixir,' as many pundits called it, could do.

"There is nothing wrong with him that you can't see, but... this is the first time since we united on Tatooine, able to sense him," Aayla said, falling to the side, not because her legs could not support her, but rather to just lean against the tank still holding her lover before turning around, her back against the tank instead of one of the softer chair backs. Somehow, the soothing cold of the glass felt better right now. "I...I can feel his mind, but there is only silence there. It is almost like I can feel a room ahead of me. I know the shape of it is there, but there should be something inside of it, lights, sound, feeling. This is... it feels wrong!"

It was worse than that, really, but Aayla couldn't describe it very well at the moment. The bond between her and Harry was always there, always on. They were two separate people, yes, but their minds were intimately connected, still separate but like a planet and moon, always interacting with one another. But the lightless side of Ryloth was dark and cold now without Harry's conscious presence there to breathe life into it. Even while they were both asleep there was always something there, some warmth going between them. But now, with him utterly unconscious due to pain, there wasn't. That lack, that hollowness, was pulling at Aayla's attention, and she could barely concentrate on the physical world around her. "It isn't as if he is dead or like I have been cut off from him entirely. I do not think either of us would be able to survive that. But this is still hard."

Zule nodded, then reached forward, running her fingers over Aayla's head and down one of her lekku, pushing the edge of what was allowed between friends but not quite into lover's territory.

Aayla leaned into it, thinking now about something entirely different than the void that filled her mind without Harry being conscious. *We really do need to talk to you and Padme, don't we, my old friend?*

"Listen, I need to check in with Padme and the rest," Zule said, shaking her head. "I also want to make kriffing certain that the vratix are not getting any kind of pushback... and that the planet's weather system is back to normal. I'll be back soon. I don't think you should be alone here, and that wayward padawan of yours is nowhere to be found."

"Ahsoka's not my padwan. And Padme~, is it?" Aayla looked at Zule with very direct eyes for a moment, giving her lover's name a special connotation.

But Zule gazed back, letting the hand still resting at the top of Aayla's lekku to drop again in a caress downward before stopping again. "Legume, Legame, and yes, Padme. Is it a surprise?"

"Not really... just something we need to talk about if..."

"Very much if," Zule interrupted. "And yes, we need to talk about this. You, me, Padme, Harry..." The two Jedi women stared at one another and then smiled as one.

"So long as, if that conversation doesn't go the way you want you remain a friend," Aayla warned. "There is more than me to consider here."

"Of course," Zule shrugged. "I am willing to let the majority speak. Just like Padme's trying to make certain happens here in Thyfferra." Aayla rolled her eyes at that, yet even as she did, she was feeling out her oldest friend's emotions, able to discern far more of those than even she would normally, thanks to the physical connection of Zule's hand on Aayla's head. She could detect a lot of concern, longing and other emotions there, but also a certain willingness to accept what may come as if it was the will of the Force.

"That takes a load off my mind. Now, if you could, while you're out and about, send Ahsoka here? With Harry indisposed it does actually fall on me to give her some instruction for the day." She then thought for a moment and shook her head. "And a datapad and a way to communicate with the Tyrant's Bane. Given the damage we took, we need to ask the locals to help us with our external repairs. But we also still have secrets there we need to be careful with."

Zule answered in the affirmative, and with a final smile, she turned around and headed out the door, swinging her hips just a bit more than normal, leaving Aayla smiling wryly behind her.

Well, it looks as if the months spent spending so much time with one another has had a marked effect on Zule. But has it done the same to Padme? I have no idea, but if it hasn't, at least I know Zule will accept whatever her decision is. Heh... on the other hand, well, Chume is another matter. Given her attitude, I do not see that meeting going as well, especially since Padme has put her foot down on it so hard, as has Harry. We made mistakes there and will not be making the same mistakes again with Zule, but dealing with Chume when we meet in person is still going to be an issue down the line. But I can't do anything about that right now. Best to live for the moment, as it were.

With one of the lines the proponents of the Living Force belief in her head, Aayla sighed, leaning back against the bacta tank once more. *Wake up soon, my love. I do not think I can keep feeling this blackness, this lack of response and remain sane for long.*

She was still sitting there leaning back against the tank when Padme arrived. The SAR efforts were done by this point, and while confusion and reconstruction would continue throughout the system on the governmental level, Padme had made some extreme inroads into solving the various issues therein. The vratix now had numerous representatives working with Republic representatives contacted through the Hypercom along with mayors or other municipal leaders from the local human population to put together a new system of government. That would take a long while, years probably, but the power of the Corporations to control the message and the creation of bacta was broken now.

Padme would still have some oversight of what was going on there as the senior Republic representative on the spot. Yet despite the horrific job that Republic intelligence had done to prepare her for what was going on here in turn, Padme felt she could at least trust the bureaucrats back on Coruscant to be able to start to put together a governmental template.

At least, that was what she told herself as for the first time since the attempt on her life back before the battle, Padme decided to be a little selfish and step away from her duties in order to check on the well-being of a friend.

She didn't care that Zule was there or even Ahsoka. The moment she was through the door into the small medical room Padme raced forward, picking Aayla up off of her chair and kissing her hard, hugging the woman as if she thought she would disappear. "This was too close! You both nearly died, and after, we all thought ourselves safe from that kind of thing."

Aayla hugged her back, even as she tried to calm the other woman down, her words soothing while her hands went up and down Padme's back. "But we didn't. We survived, and we did what we had to to help the planet as well. Even Harry would count that a win, although he'll probably have to spend a few days working on that leg of his."

Normally, reattaching a limb cut off by a lightsaber would've been impossible. A lightsaber was a plasma blade and didn't just cut through something. It seared through, the process killing all the nerve endings along the edge of the wound. There would simply be no living flesh that you could reattach the limb to. But Jedi healers could do so, using the Force to essentially repair and rebuild the area on either side of the wound while bacta worked to regrow the seared-away flesh. Aayla had been able to do this before succumbing to unconsciousness from her own wounds, although the limb would still need a lot of rigorous healing and therapy to be of any use and would leave a scar there.

Only slowly did Aayla pull away, looking toward Zule and Ahsoka to see their reaction to the lover's reunion. The two of them had come back together moments before, and Zule was walking Ahsoka through several stances. With one of her shoto-style lightsabers destroyed, Ahsoka would need to rely on her single remaining one for a time, and since she used dual

shots, that meant her reach was going to be much shorter than a normal lightsaber. It also meant she would need to worry about protecting her lower legs much more, as a single shot wasn't enough to protect her entire body from blaster fire.

For her part, Ahsoka just looked and felt embarrassed to Aayla's senses. She had been informed of the connection between the senator and her Master and Aayla before this, although she hadn't seen much of their interactions over the Hypercom and really wasn't certain how well it worked. After all, Padme wasn't a Jedi and couldn't join the bond between Harry and Aayla, right? So she had wondered how well the senator dealt with being basically second fiddle to Aayla whatever she did on top of dealing with the whole distance thing.

But apparently, it doesn't really matter to the senator much, does it? The younger girl thought, looking away with embarrassment. And so much for my thinking she was just into Master Harry, too. Definitely not with the way Padme kissed Master Aayla, woo...I thought I was used to the fact the two of them were so open about their emotions and everything, but seeing Aayla kiss someone else is different.

Embarrassment was not the emotion that Aayla felt from Zule. Arousal, a smattering of desire and longing, tightly controlled and tinged with trepidation and acceptance alike, was what Aayla felt from her oldest friend. No jealousy even now, though, Aayla thought, as she reached through the Force to her friend, feeling out her emotions. After a moment, Aayla knew that Zule's feelings weren't just towards her or to Padme. Rather, those emotions were directed at both. Both of them and the practically naked Harry in the tank above them. *Yep, definitely going to need to talk to Padme and Harry about this in the future.*

Shaking that thought off, Aayla pulled Padme with her over to the chair she had been sitting in so haphazardly. "Come on. Tell me about what's been going on. Not just here, but on Coruscant. And for the love of the Force, don't let us all just talk politics or the war. I would very much like to have a conversation that's centered around something else, please."

Padme laughed and agreed wryly. And did not react a moment later as Zule joined them, almost snuggling into the senator as the three women began to talk, trying to forget for a time the war going on beyond the walls of that small hospital room.

OOOOOOO

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As Padme and her local aides continued to organize and, in many areas, start to rebuild from the assault on Thyferra, reactions to that attack began throughout the galaxy as news of that attack, and the raw barbarism of it, spread. As the two Sith Masters had anticipated, that attack caused a lot of shock, horror, rage and fear throughout the galaxy. Bacta was far and

away the most important medical resource in the galaxy, its utility causing it to grow to the point where it had basically pushed out a significant number of other medications. The idea that anyone would try to simply destroy the sole source of bacta was a horrible thought to many, and one that stirred up hatred and fear in equal measure.

Feeding on such dark emotions, the Veil of the Dark Side grew in strength to the point where it began to cut into many a Jedi's ability to use even Force Precognition in battle, causing more than a hundred deaths among the Jedi across the galaxy. That wouldn't last long. The initial hot rage and hatred would eventually settle down. This was a magnificent prize for Dominus, as were the number of victories for the CIS this led to. So too was the general chaos this caused within the Republic.

Throughout the Republic, protests began on hundreds of planets. These protests were against the Confederacy, against the war in general, and against the Republic High Command, who had not anticipated an attack like this from occurring. Thanks to a swift and careful construction of the narrative, most of that blame was placed on the sixth Fleet's Admiral and the Jedi order, not on the Republic Senate or the Chancellor. Indeed, when news of the reinforcements that arrived after the battle also started to spread, the Chancellor, who had urged for such a large addition to the Sixth Fleet, was applauded.

The response on the Confederacy side of things was far worse, obviously. And here, the speed of that response took both Dominus and Sidious by surprise. Despite the communications blackout, all three sides in this war kept on military matters, everyone used the Hypercom. Thus, very good little could be done about back alley coms traffic, and the vast majority of news agencies, whatever their political bent, were well-connected to that side of thing.

Thus, news of the attacks spread like wildfire, rumor to rumor, individual to individual, both within the Republic and without. Following on rumor's heels, actual newsfeeds began quickly, giving them still more credence.

Some of the protests within the CIS were peaceful in nature, protests outside Confederacy of Independent Systems governmental buildings on various planets, sit-ins at various factories or, and far more of these, outside hospitals. Others were not. Riots, shouts for reform, for change began, too, only to be put down by unfeeling droid infantry units. But those were simple enough. Local populations simply reacting in shock and outrage without minds to drive their energy.

On a few planets, things were more organized. For example, the response on the planet called New Plympto to the assault on Thyferra. This planet had joined the Confederacy because its economy had been crushed due to exorbitant tariffs placed on them by the Republic. The planet, a Core World, had been refused a seat on the Senate, instead being forced to rely on

their sector governor, something few Core Worlds, especially worlds with large human populations, many pointed out, did not have to do. But here, it was worse. The Nausarian's economy had begun to specialize on the export of a specific substance, Rikknit eggs. But that substance could be human or inherent human species act as a drug, and eventually, the Republic had decided to no longer allow its free trade.

Soon, the planet had been so badly hammered by specific tariffs designed to limit that drug's ability to spread throughout the Republic that the entire economy had collapsed. It hadn't been fair. It hadn't been right. Indeed, it had barely been understandable on an economic level, and because of that, the planet had decided to secede, to join the Confederacy, something that very few Core Worlds had done.

And yet, that planet had also been the source of a plague long before the Republic turned its back on them. The plague that was defeated by the Jedi and the Republic in the past, who had opened their reserves of bacta to do it. With some of the news of the attack on Thyferra being confirmed via intergalactic news networks, an emergency session on New Plympto was called, and the various representatives of the planet agreed. Once more, they would secede, this time from the Confederacy.

This act of rebellion would not go unnoticed... or unpunished. The Garrison forces of Confederacy troopers responded instantly, putting down that rebellion. But elsewhere, similar events were occurring.

Cathar, for example. A planet that had rebelled against the Republic twice in the past and had been ravaged during the New Sith Wars did so again now.

And New Plympto and Cathar were not alone. Across more than a hundred planets, Confederacy-backed governments fell only to be propped up again by the boots of the droid armies, pulling still more resources away from the front.

Of course, that was all to the good for Sidious' plans. The Confederacy had already done too much damage for this early in the war, and this would draw upon the Confederacy reserves in such a way that the Republic would have time to get their own military industry running at peak efficiency in order to take the fight to the Confederacy. This would create the seesaw type of war that Sidious needed in order to slowly reallocate power to himself as Chancellor. It would also help him grind the Jedi Order under. Even with the younglings gone and final victory impossible, the destruction of the Jedi Order was still his primary goal.

Dominus was also ready for this response. First, 'C'baoth' publicly castigated Grievous in front of the separatist council in a interview that was then broadcast throughout the CIS for going too far. This allowed him to play the diplomat and peacemaker, while also giving a reason to remove Grievous from the public eye. He was thus available to be put in charge of a new,

building fleet that would be able to act as a hammer in the future. One that Dominus could use to hit any target within the Republic he wished, including ones Sidious might not like him to.

He was helped in this by Shu Mai and the leader of the Trade Federation. Both of them were ecstatic at how much prices would jump for bacta for the next few years. Entire economic systems might well collapse, letting them move in and take over, growing still richer.

At the same time, the Dark Sister Ventress had proven herself. She in turn was put in contact with a being named Boc. Between them, they would create an anti-jedi army. So, in Dominus' mind, the attack on Thyferra had few real downsides.

Elsewhere, however, more thoughtful reactions were occurring. And it was those thoughtful reactions that were truly dangerous and could not be predicted. Let alone defended against.

OOOOOOO

On the surface of Junkfort Station, a massive space station in a star system that served as the crossroads of two hyperspace trade routes,, human men were having a working lunch. These two men were named Jorj Car'das and Talon Jarrde. Jonathan was known as a businessman, a small-time owner of dozens of freighters. Talon Karrde was making a name for himself in some circles as a networker of some repute, able to get people in touch with other individuals who could supply whatever they needed.

For those in the know, both of these backgrounds pointed to one thing. The pair of them were smugglers. Jorj was, ostensibly, trying to go legit. Whereas the younger man, Talon, was very much not.

For a time, they had both been silent, watching a newsreel. Now, Jorj looked over the table at his companion, the meal set out in front of them by his own personal chef having long been disposed of appropriately. "Well... now that this attack on Thyferra has been confirmed, I think it changes how I am viewing this war."

Jorj was a just-past middle-aged man, his formerly body-builder-like frame now sloughing into obesity. His hair was still full, but his attempts to grow a beard did him no favors, although thankfully, he had yet to develop a double chin. His eyes, deep brown, were sharp still, and he had amassed a quite nice little fortune for a single citizen even if you only counted the money he had made since trying to go legitimate.

"And does that mean that you are going to get back in the saddle, my friend?" Talon asked. He was a younger man than Jorj, in far better shape, with light blue eyes, black hair and just the beginnings of a goatee. His eyes were narrowed and thoughtful, not condemning, simply introspective, giving no hint as to whether or not he would approve of an affirmative

response to his question or not despite the fact that most of Jorj's illegal businesses had been slowly transferring to Talon's own command over the past year.

"... No, I don't think I will. There are things, however, things... ways we can certainly impact the war effort." Jorj fell silent for a second, then nodded in sudden decisiveness. "I need to disappear for a time. Not just from my life here on Junkfort Station, but I think from the Confederacy entirely. I wish it could be otherwise, but I think... I think it's time to come clean with a secret I've kept in my back pocket for a few years now."

Talon's eyes narrowed in sudden contemplation, but he said nothing for a few moments, finishing off his glass of wine. "Are you sure about that? I agree that the Confederacy's willingness to bombard Thyferra of all planets shows a level of barbarity that I personally cannot stand, but I think I know the secret you are speaking of."

Jorj's eyes widened and then narrowed dangerously, but Talon held up a calming hand. "I know **of** the secret, not **what** it actually entails." At that, Jorj paused, and the tension left his body, nodding understanding to the other man. "But I do know enough to know that in so doing, you will toss your lot in with the Republic in such a way that you will never be able to back out again. If the CIS ends up winning..."

"Then it will be up to us to make certain that that doesn't happen. There are some things that a man simply cannot stand, and this is one of them. If Grievous's assault had succeeded..." Jorj shuddered. "Trillions might have died eventually due to a lack of bacta. I am a scoundrel, a rogue, a cheat, a swindler. But I am no mass murderer. I came out here because I thought that Iolo Stark had a point, that the Confederacy was indeed the best way forward, despite my misgivings about C'baoth taking command of the movement, despite the fact that the Trade Federation had suddenly begun to move in lockstep with the rest of the conglomerations, edging out those with real grievances against the Republic. I could close my eyes to the sophistry of that, to Stark no longer having an issue with the Trade Federation. But I cannot ignore this. Nor do I think you can."

"... No." Talon shook his head. "I will not put my people or myself in danger for the Republic. But that doesn't mean that I'm willing to ignore the lengths the Confederacy will go to in order to win this war."

The two men fell silent, and then Karrde asked, "What are your plans going forward? Where will you go?"

"The GDL. I still have contacts within Corellia, and I am sure that they can give me an introduction to someone in their high command. Someone who will have the means to act on the information I will give them."

Talon nodded as that made sense, and he trusted the other man to be discreet enough to get away. *Say what you will about his general health, but Jorj has always been the best when it comes to having escape plans in place.*

“In that case, would you be willing to act as an intermediary? I do not think so highly of myself that my coming forward to join the GDL would make any appreciable difference and their military strength. Nor is my network so advanced that even what few acts of sabotage we could pull off without painting targets on our backs would be an acceptable trade-off. But there is always the realm of information. And I have some nuggets that will be well worth the price I will ask in turn.”

Jorj chuckled at that, shaking his head. “You are always more interested in ferreting out secrets and using them than any other part of the game, Talon. Fine. Set up a line of communication to Corellia. Use that one cipher we created when we tried to get into the Kessel spice game. I will be gone from here within a week. Within nine days, I’m going to be on Corellia, come hell or high water.” *And with me will come some information that, while it may not to the balance of power in this war, will at least help to give the Galactic defense league some more firepower. An entire fleet’s worth, to be exact,* Jorj thought grimly before grabbing a carafe of wine.

OOOOOOO

Nor were these two ‘honest businessmen’ the only ones to respond poorly to the barbarism of the attack on Thyferra. One more individual’s response followed similar lines to that of New Plympto, although he wasn’t actually in what the Republic would accept as a governmental position. Rather, he was the local general of the pro-CIS forces that had overthrown the local government soon after the war began.

Alto Stratus was a man who knew suffering, who knew mistakes, and who had long railed against the Republic. He had railed against it for its lack of care, for its lack of concern to the Outer Rim, to planets who ostensibly were supposed to look to it for help and guidance. That lack of care, that lack of concern had killed his parents, slain by pirates the Republic should have protected them from. It had killed his sister, taken away by Trandoshaan slavers, who the Republic refused to prosecute, so long as they only raided planets in the Outer Rim. The only living family member he still had was his cousin.

Such planets like his, Jabiiim were all too often left high and dry when such defense or aide was needed. Even the Brainrot Plague had not drawn in the eyes of the Republic to actually help his planet. Nothing had, until the monstrous mudball of Jabiiim had been found to have a heart of metal. Raw metal and ores that were incredibly rare, and thus expensive.

This sudden desire to control their planet had had made the Republic's previous disinterest even worse in Alto's mind. His Nationalist Party had eagerly signed up with the CIS, for their independence for their desire to get some of their own back from the Republic that had never been willing to actually act as a government should to its constituents.

And yet, for all his hatred of the Republic, for all of his desire to lash out against them, against the vaunted Jedi who had proven to be nothing more than tools of the Senate, tools of their oppressor, alto believed himself to be a moral individual. And as Jorj said to Talon, so Alto said to his people.

"But there are some things that I cannot agree with! In this assault on Thyferra, the CIS has proven to be no better than the Republic!"

"That's well and good, Alto, but what can we do?" one of his officers said, shrugging his shoulders. "The CIS has troops on the ground now, not just their massive factories and mining systems. True, those infantry droids might not be worth much on our planet, but there are still a lot of them! And you know the intercepts we've seen from the Confederacy Intelligence Service. How the Republic was preparing an attack on us."

I know. And I know about the droids. But you also know that our forces are mostly locals. And I know how to shut them down..." Alto began, a grim smile on his face. "And we can still use their space-based systems if we are careful. I have a plan, my friends. And I think we will not have to fight this battle alone. If the Republic cannot be trusted and the CIS are so ruthless, then that leaves just one player in this game we can call on, doesn't it?"

The argument this statement caused went on for some time. After all, whatever else could be said about the man, Count Potter was still a Jedi. And the Jedi had long been the tools of the Senate and the powers that controlled the Republic. But it could not be denied that, during the leadup to the war, the GDL, and Potter and his ship, had become the source of aid for planets that would otherwise have had none. If Stratus hadn't already made an agreement with the Techno Union, they might have reached out to the GDL then. Eventually, Alto knew his people would go for it. And rebellion would, for the second time, come to Jabiim.

OOOOOOO

In other places, treason against the Confederacy would have far-reaching consequences, even if the individuals doing it were just... simple spacers in a way. People who normally didn't care about anything but getting rich or looking after themselves.

One such was Bera Kazan, a human mercenary with extensive knowledge of the underground and the Outer Rim. She had been sent out with a small group of Chistori under Cydon Pax to investigate evidence of an ancient ruin on a planet called Raxus Prime.

Raxus Prime was a major industrial hub controlled by the Corporate Alliance, but it was also known as a junk world. The surface of the planet was uninhabitable. Its natural environment, which had, at one point, been very beautiful, had been destroyed millennia ago by over-industrialization. So much so that the industrial complexes that sprawled across large portions of its surface had residential areas connected directly to the factories where the workers plied their trades. The atmosphere was so deadly only a very few species could go outside without dying within minutes without special equipment.

Because of that, and the fact that there was no way to bring Raxus Prime's ecology back that was at all cost-efficient over the last several thousand years, going well back before the New Sith Wars, the planet had been used as a dumping ground by both the locals and their neighbors as a place to get rid of junk that would otherwise have been too expensive to somehow recycle. Industrial waste made up a large portion of that junk, but ship parts, various tons of slag, unusable metal, junk from old battles and lots of other things also had made their way to the planet over time. Whenever someone wanted to cut a few corners by getting rid of junk instead of paying people or droids to recycle it, it would eventually turn up on a planet like Raxus Prime.

Bera was here working with Cydon Pax and his group of Chistori following up a rumor that underneath all of that junk was something dangerous. Something ancient and dark, which had made a segment of the planet even more deadly to the locals than the rest of it was, in a very strange way: Whatever was hidden below the mire seemed to almost drain the life out of any who came within a few kilometers of it.

Currently, Bera was waiting in the cockpit of her ship, which had touched down near where rumors said the strange deaths had been occurring. As a human, she couldn't go out on the surface except in a full bio-atmospheric suit, and she was a former smuggler. Mercenary she might be now, she didn't have enough money to spare on that kind of thing. Hence why she had agreed to work with Cydon on this. She had the ship, and he and his people had the durability necessary to go outside without special equipment.

She was watching the news feed from a few Confederacy planets where the news about Thyferra spread when her freighter's outer security cameras spotted movement. Looking through it, she frowned, thinking. With a sigh, she hit the button that would turn on her ship's exterior speakers. "Cydon, is that you? Did you find what we were looking for?"

The lizardlike alien, resplendent in bright yellow, blues and greens that stuck out against the background of junk and the putrid yellow sky, waved back. He then held up a coms unit, which apparently wasn't working for some reason. Given that there were a few various metal-eating acids in the air around here, that made sense to Bera. To even set down here, Bera had

to get a special coating of paint to ward off the damn thing. And even that paint had to be renewed several times over the past day.

Soon, he reached the side of the ship, and with the touch of another console, Bera opened the hatch for him. Then, she looked back at the video recording for several seconds. Then, seemingly coming to a decision, Bera stopped over in her quarters before heading down to meet her partner.

The large reptiloid was still in the airlock as she arrived at the inner doorway. This airlock was a special one, created specifically to be used on Raxus Prime by the locals. Instead of just needing to wait for inner and outer pressure to even out, several dozen medical scanners worked over Cydon as he stood there while the entire airlock was subjected to sprays from a kind of foam that would kill all the residual radiation or aerial viruses on him. In fact, there were several different kinds of foams, and between them would do away with everything else he might've picked up out there. The process took several moments, but he was able to speak through it and answer Bera's original question.

"Yes, I found it. It's large, though. We're going to need a much larger freighter to move it."

"What about your team?" Bera asked, frowning. "Are they still back there with the... item?"

"No. They are dead. My fellow Chistori proved to be weak. All of them succumbed to the influence of the object, their lives draining out. I was strong enough to get close and then out of the area to return here." Cydon answered laconically. The fact that he was speaking about other members of his own race didn't seem to occur to them or to matter at all.

Bera held back a shiver at that, knowing that was actually quite typical for his race. Like many other lizard like species, although not all of them, the Chistori believed in independence and abhorred weakness of any kind. The fact they were larger and more powerfully built than even the better-known Trandoshans probably had something to do with that.

"So it really is some kind of.. bio-energy sucker? Or the Force or whatever," Bera asked, shaking her head. "I still don't understand all that mumbo-jumbo."

"Yes. Our employer will be very pleased. With the plans he has seemingly already found, the Harvester should be easy to put back together." Krydon seemed to snort. "Horrible name for something so deadly, but I suppose even the Sith have moments of idiocy."

Bera frowned a little, looking away as another type of foam was sprayed directly into Cydon's face for a moment. "Yeah, I bet C'baoth will be."

Moments later, the deep decontamination efforts faded, and Bera waved her hand toward the hallway leading to the cockpit. “Well, you and yours found the thing. I figure you should be the one to tell the big boss. I was basically a glorified taxi service.” The grumble she added to her voice caused the creature to laugh, and he stepped past her.

“True. Still, your contacts were why we were here in the first place, thus showing that even weaklings like humans have their uses. You will get some measure of reward from the Master C’baath.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Bera said before pulling out her blaster, lining up a shot at the back of the man’s head, and pulling the trigger.

As fast as she was, Cydon had heard the sound and had turned his head, but not fast enough to do anything before the disruptor bolt took him to the side of his temple. The overpowered plasma bolt seared straight through his head, showing the toughness of the Chistori bounty hunter, as most species would have simply lost their entire heads to the disintegrator bolt. A second later, his lifeless corpse fell to the deck at Bera’s feet.

Bera shook her head, grateful that she had thought of buying the more powerful type of blaster ages ago. “Sorry, Cydon, but I can’t let this thing fall into the same hands who were willing to destroy the only kriffing source of bacta in the galaxy. No way.”

It took her a bit to drag the creature back into the airlock, and by the time she had Cydon’s body over the lip of the inner hatch, Bera’s back was killing her. “Kriffing bastard, why the hell do you weigh so much!?”

Locking the inner hatch, Bera then hurried up to the cockpit. There, she powered up the ship systems and lifted off within seconds, twisting just enough to dump the body out of the still-open outer airlock to the ground below before closing it.

Then, hovering over the site where the device, wherever it was, was supposed to be, Bera unloaded every weapon she had on the ship into the site. Concussion missiles and turbo lasers crashed down into the ground, further ruining the area and disrupting piles upon piles of junk into the crater her fire created, further burying whatever it was, hopefully for all time. Then, she boosted for space while contacting her local contacts and reporting that they hadn’t found anything usable. “Some things are best left buried. Now, I wonder if the Hutts are hiring...”

OOOOOOO

While Padme took a few hours off of her various duties as interim governor of the system, Anakin hunted down the commando droids that had infiltrated Thyferra prior to the battle. He and the company of troopers assigned to help him by Master Jerec had been able to

hunt down three of them in the past day, finding out where they were hiding and rooting them out in battles that were quite difficult despite having overwhelming numbers on their own side. A company of clone troopers was around two hundred and forty men and should've been enough to wipe out a fire team of droids, but bringing those numbers to bear was tough, given where the commando droids tended to hide. Commando droids who knew they were being hunted and had a large bag of tricks.

Luckily, Anakin was more than up to the task of dealing with most of those tricks... and did most of the deconstruction. Quite gleefully, it had to be said.

This left but two fireteams of commando droids, which Master Jerec had contacted. These twelve commando droids had found a hiding place on the planet itself, and this put them in a better position to do what he needed to be done for his attack on Potter and those with him. The fact Padme had joined them and was now running everything from there rather than the command center was annoying, as was the fact three other Jedi remained with Harry, but frankly, Jerec felt that, with a bit of planning and the Force, those could be overcome. It was time for Potter to die.

OOOOOOO

Zule and the others looked up, frowning as the lighting in the room went out for a second before being replaced by the purple of emergency lights. Somewhat offputting to them, all of their species used red for emergency lighting and for just a moment, Padme wondered why there was emergency lighting at all. "Then again, even though the vratic believe hearing and eyesight to be less effective than touch, they still use them obviously. So perhaps I shouldn't be that surprised."

"I really don't know what you were just saying just then, but I think right now, we should prepare for the worst. This feels like another attack directly against Harry and myself," Aayla said as she slowly pushed herself to her feet. Even half a day later, she was still weak from the efforts to save Harry's life and everything that happened before that, but she was still combat-capable.

Zule was also tired but in much better shape than Aayla, and she and Ahsoka activated the lightsabers, moving toward the door. "I think you should stay here, Aayla. As a final line of defense."

The worry in Zule's voice had Aayla smile, even as she railed against that idea. But she couldn't argue with it. So she nodded.

Ahsoka looked over at Padme, about to comment that she should leave, only to find Padme had pulled out a blaster rifle that Ahsoka hadn't noticed before. She now took position

on the other side of the small sitting area between the bacta tanks. There, she pressed into the shoulder as she trained the rifle's muzzle on the doorway. "Okay, since when did Senators..."

"You really need to learn about our dear Senator's past," Zule said, her tone just a bit too affectionate, causing Padme to blush and look at her even as Zule went on. "She's something of a combative-type heroine like in those vids that are always the rage these days."

"Hey! At least I don't go around in barely there bras and boy shorts and expect the Force to save me," Padme shot back.

All three Jedi there snorted at that, even as Ahsoka stripped off her robes, leaving her in a short skirt and wide chest band. Zule didn't but she did make for the door, ordering Ahsoka to join her. The last thing Padme heard as the pair raced off was, "Wait, what are a few of the adventures you and Padme have had then? You called her a vid heroine, so---"

Padme blushed again, shaking her head. "Ugh."

"Hehe, don't knock it, love. You've got a pretty interesting public persona, you know? A firm believer in peace and probity, but also more than capable of wielding a blaster. And sexy, there's that too," Aayla joked, her lekku twitching in amusement.

"I can do without that last point being pointed out to me. As if you or Zule or Harry have any room to talk there anyway," Padme mumbled that last bit as she sighted on the door. She didn't notice Aayla looking at her thoughtfully.

Racing down the corridor, Zule pulled up her datapad, looking into it only to scowl. "Damn it! We haven't had the time to revamp the local's cybersecurity. The commando droids have got in again!"

Ahsoka leaned over, staring at the map, then shook her head. "Two attacks on the generator, another on this... what is this area?"

"The verachen dwelling hall. The Hive's verachen, their master bacta mixers, all live there. No idea why-KRIFF!" Both Jedi frowned as they looked at the image, knowing without doubt that the attack, the ones on the generator and the last, centered on what looked like a nursery, were all fake. "The droid commandos are messing with the local data net again!"

"Could they have somehow found out which area of the hive master Harry is in?" Ahsoka asked. "Surely the bug aliens wouldn't have put that all on their internal system source, whatever."

"Maybe not. But..." For a moment, Zule closed her eyes, reaching out into the Force, trying to discover where she could feel an irruption of violence was imminent or any negative intent was coming from. This was extremely hard to do when your opponents were droids, but

after a few seconds, she shook her head. “However they are doing it, they are coming straight here.”

Ahsoka looked around, frowning a little. “This corridor is big but isn’t big enough for both of us to fight side-by-side. Push forward to one of the intersections, maybe? I know that the nearest one to us is already guarded by Chewbacca and a few of the clone troopers.”

The older Jedi nodded, and the two of them hurried forward. They would be able to use their light sabers to defend the locals, almost as well as their own reinforced position would be able to. “Where is Master Jerec?” Ahsoka muttered as they raced on. “Surely, he should be able to feel what is going on here, right?”

“Maybe, but sensing what is going on here and being able to arrive in time, as has been proven twice already by the good master, is not the same thing.” Zule shot back. “And really, would you want another Jedi to run to your rescue or see to it yourself?”

“Considering my master is still in the bacta tank back there, I think I am on the side of wanting as much help as kriffing possible,” the younger girl retorted.

Barking a laugh at that, Zule continued to race along the hallway until the two of them heard a shout from ahead of them. Chewbacca had turned from where he had been talking to one of the clone troopers, waving his hands at them as he growled and roared at them, both Jedi automatically using the Force to translate his words. “Good to see you. We’ve got other defensive positions set up elsewhere through the Hive, but the commando droids seem to have bypassed most of them. We’re still working out how beyond their computer tricks.”

“Our best guess is liberal use of miniaturized spy drones,” the clone trooper said, saluting the two Jedi as if they were officers, something that made both of them a little uncomfortable. Ahsoka’s training in strategy and tactics had only really begun under her Master, who she hadn’t yet even had a full year with. Zule was far better trained in those areas but had never really led people in battle before, except in the case of starfighter combat. Being treated as if they were in the clone trooper’s chain of command was a little offputting. “Those things are fast, extremely hard to hit without simply putting down a law of suppressive fire, and hope you wing them. Worse, they can be used to either explode, lead people off, or just tell the droids precisely where to aim their shots. Unlike us mere squishy folk, they don’t need to use their eyes to aim.”

Both Jedi took up positions facing down different hallways, with Ahsoka also reaching out into the Force now to try and determine from which direction danger would come. It took them a bit, as there were no living minds out there, but intent was enough to give them a vague feeling.

“The first attack is going to come from this direction,” Zule said as she stepped forward between two of the barriers the clone troopers had dragged into position. “The second along the hallway to my left. I do not sense any danger coming at us from the third direction, but keep at least two troopers assigned there.” There were eight troopers in total in the defensive position, as well as Chewbacca and the two Jedi.

A moment later, gas canisters were hurled down toward them. Zule caught one with a Force Grab, hurling it back the way it came, but Ahsoka missed hers, and it slipped to the ground, filling the hallway and the intersection with smoke.

Instantly, Fire retardant foam began to spray down, the fire suppression system going off due to the smoke, causing one of the troopers to stumble as a spray hit his visor, blinding him. Another slipped, losing his footing as he went to help his fellow, and Chewbacca snarled in fury. “Blast it! Do you have any idea how hard this stuff is going to be to get out of my fur?”

“I think we have bigger issues on hand, Chewie!” Zule retorted just as the first blaster bolts came towards them. Like before, these droids were armed with anti-Jedi weaponry. Each plasma bolt contained inside them and already melting a bit of metal. But Zule had seen this trick before, and knew she had to smash the blaster bolts wider, redirect them just that little bit further in order to avoid the melted remnants of metal.

With five commando droids shooting at her from down the hallway, Zule was pinned in position there while the additional attack began from the second hallway she had pointed out. The troopers instantly began to open fire the moment more smoke grenades were hurled in their direction, trying to keep the droids from coming around the corner. This didn’t work, as the fire went wide, but it did pin the two droids attacking from that direction in place.

Similarly, the clones on the side where Zule was still deflecting blaster bolts coming their way opened fire, and soon, the fire coming toward them petered off. The smoke didn’t clear just yet, but Zule didn’t sense any more danger from that direction.

She turned, heading in the direction of the still-firing clone troopers, taking a position there in turn with Chewbacca following her, aiding his own fire to those of the troopers on that side. More smoke grenades were hurled in their direction as the droids fell back into cover, firing potshots the defender’s way.

That caused Zule some confusion. The commando droids had proven themselves to be incredibly well-programmed up to this point and aggressive as all get out. Why, then, were they pulling back? *Is there some other danger here?*

On the heels of that thought, Zule suddenly felt a bit more danger coming their way from the original direction she’d been facing. But she was already locked in fighting on this

front. All she could do was shout for Ahsoka to get over there. The sudden eruption of violence on that front had caught two of the clone troopers who had been making their way forward to try and investigate how many of the droids they'd killed, trusting the smoke to give them cover and the fact that they had downed the droids attacking them from down that hallway. But the commando droids who had simply stopped firing and dropped to the floor had far better vision than the merely human clones, and both men went down.

Behind them, Ahsoka defended one of the other troopers from a bolt that would've taken him in the chest, the metal slug hidden within the plasma deflecting down into the barrier right in front of his visor.

Grimacing, Ahsoka realized that she needed to get better at that and stepped out into the open before crouching down there. A Force Shield coalesced beside her to defend one of the clone troopers while Ahsoka used her lightsaber to protect her own body, redirecting the solid slugs into the floor and sides of the hallway, although she was trying to just return them on her enemies. Unfortunately, the metal slugs were making that impossible.

"Kriff, I can't get that to work. Well, shield it is," She muttered before beginning to enlarge the Force Shield she had cast over the trooper to her side.

Even as she did so, though, Ahsoka felt something moving through the mist. It was more felt than any specific signal from the Force, a feeling as if something had just passed through the smoke there. But for a Jedi, that was enough. On instinct, she lashed out to the side with her lightsaber. "Something's here!"

But before she could complete the swing, Ahsoka found her blade held in place by a Force Grip on her hand and shoulders, revealing the presence of a Dark Side user, a beacon of anger, roiling hate and fury, but one far more controlled and directed than the three Dark Side users she'd fought earlier that day. Those had barely felt trained at all, even though their force precognition had been pretty good. This man was far stronger, his features hidden below a thick, black hood.

Sith!" She shouted, trying to get Zule's attention while also trying to break free of the Force Grip before a Force Push lifted her up and off her feet, hurling her back down the corridor towards the droids, who opened fire on her midair. Ahsoka twisted around, bringing her legs up tight against her chest as she used her short lightsaber again to deflect their bolts, but couldn't do it all the way. One of them clipped her foot, causing her to cry out, her form faltering just as she landed. Then she was forced to toss up another Force Shield, the number of bolts coming towards her doubling. *Almost as if they were waiting for the Sith kriffer to get out of the way!* "I hate fighting droids! Particularly droids who are smart enough to be sneaky!"

While Zule was too busy dealing with the attack directed her way, Ahsoka's initial shout did cause several of the troopers to turn in her direction from where they had remained in position facing the last hallway. Although they couldn't see what was going on through the smoke and presumably through the Dark Side user's Force Stealth. The four opened fire, causing a hiss of anger even as a dull red lightsaber flared, deflecting the bolts back the way they came. All four troopers fell, but then Chewbacca was in the creature's face, swinging a fist that would have laid out most sentients in the Republic.

The Dark Side user simply swatted him aside with a Force Push, hurling him towards Zule just as she was about to turn. Both of them went down, and then, the Dark Side user was gone. His Force presence disappeared, and his Stealth, which had only begun to waver, snapped back into place, hiding even the sound of his racing feet.

By this time, Ahsoka had cut down the two droids that had attacked to cover the Dark Side user and was now racing back into the defensive point, her shoulder a bloody ruin from the solid state slug that had hit, but the pain almost nonexistent. "Where did he go?"

"Officer, Chewbacca, I think I'm going to leave you," Zule said, pushing the Wookiee off her and flashing her hand out down the hallway. A deluge of water appeared in the air of the hallway, filling it from ceiling to floor, as before rushing on. It slammed into the droids, causing them to stumble backward, and also dissipated a large part portion of the smoke. Chewbacca and the clone troopers took advantage of this, gunning the droids down even as Zule turned away, racing back down the hallway she and Ahsoka had so recently come up, heading towards where Harry Padme and Ahsoka were.

But that brief glimpse of his force presence was enough to put Aayla and the others with her on edge. She activated her lightsaber, and Padme went down onto her chest, barely poking the tip of her blaster rifle over the edge of the strange couch-like seats that the bug aliens preferred. "What is it?"

"A Dark Side user got past Zule and the rest. He's on his way here." Aayla grunted, shaking her head, taking stock of her body and mental reserves. *Oh, this is not going to be good.*

She barely had time to get those words out before the door to the private medical room opened. The man might have felt that he was hiding his Force presence, but Aayla was a lot better at discerning such than most Jedi. She could see the man and lashed out with a force stun followed by a water whip, more than willing to use all of the tricks at her disposal if she needed to.

Both dissipated well before the man, who now charged forward, blue lightsaber activating in his hand as his Force presence suddenly flared again, the man letting the cloak fall

so he could call upon the Force more easily. His presence was nothing like the three Acolytes. Once their cloaks were removed, all three had felt like wild, unrestrained hurricanes of emotions. This one had his Dark Side energies under control.

The odd dichotomy of the blue blade and the bare whisper of hatred and rage the man's Force presence gave off caught Aayla by surprise, but Padme, on a hair-trigger, opened fire. The man deflected the bolts back towards her, but she pulled her head back undercover, letting the shots pass over her head or slam into the stone sofas. At the same time, he sent a subtle Force push at one of Aayla's legs just before the Rutian was going to jump into the air. This sent Aayla sprawling, but she rolled with it instead of just laying there, leaping up and throwing a Force Push at the man, which shattered quickly against his own, but that was only a feint. She lashed out then with a Force Stun and a blast of fire and water, coming at the man from every direction as Padme fired at him again.

The man whirled, ducking and dodging and then blocking, redirecting Padme's bolts back toward her, causing her to duck back for a second. Yet all this movement finally revealed his features, the hood falling away to reveal the cloth-covered form of Master Jerec. That sight caused Padme's eyes to widen and her finger to slacken on the trigger. "W... Master Jerec?!"

Thinking that this was one of the Blanked, Aayla raised a hand. She launched a light force needle up into the man, the technique sparkling invisible for a second between the two of them before it hit. The effect was instant, but not as it would have for a Blanked.

"GAA!!!" Jerec hissed, his Force Lash, a fire-based Dark Side technique he had just been about to use, fading instantly as his connection to the Force wavered. "You will die for that!"

Before Aayla could realize that the Light Side Needle had affected the man despite his being a real Dark Side user, she was hurled off her feet and into the wall, where she hit with bone-numbing force.

Sith Lightning flashed out from Jerec's other hand, and Aayla's hasty Force Shield shattered, but then he was forced to twitch away as Padme fired at him again.

"y, you traitor!" Aayla shouted, charging forward even as she suddenly remembered a Force vision she had once had. Of herself, Padme, Zule, and Ahsoka standing around a bacta tank with Harry in it, defending against a sudden shadow with a lightsaber. *This is the vision!*

"Indeed." With that single word, Jerec raised a hand, blasting out with Sith Lightning once more, causing Aayla to raise another shield, grunting with effort as the shield was struck by lightning.

The next second, Zule was there. A bolt of Stun was followed by a spear of water and then a bombarding technique, forcing Jerec on the defensive. "Why Jerec? Why did you turn to the Dark Side?"

"There is no light or dark, foolish girl," Jerec scoffed, his blue lightsaber flicking, blocking Zule's probing attacks, confident of beating both these women easily. *One is still exhausted, the other weakened and alone.* "There is only knowledge and the power that can come from being strong enough to search for that knowledge that weaker minds turn from!"

"Seriously?" you are pathetic!" Zule pushed in hard, bouncing up into the air and then redirecting herself in a split second. "Only those who are truly weak think that strength can only come from the darkness? From searching for past knowledge? My clan, Aayla and Harry, they proved that new strength can be made, not just found in the past!"

"Ha!" Jerec's one blade battered and deflected, but he found his style, a mix of Makashi and Ataru, was being matched by Zule's Jar'Kai-Ataru style. She was fast, using the Force to push her body faster and harder than Jerec could, unwilling to pour his strength out like that. The two of them danced back and forth for a few moments, with both lashing out with Force powers only occasionally. While Zule was constrained by the need to concentrate on wielding two lightsabers, Jerec was probing for weaknesses in both Zule and the slowly recovering Aayla. He also needed to be aware of Padme, who was firing at him every few seconds.

"You think that you're new Force abilities represent strength? What have they changed? True, they are interesting toys, toys that Jedi and Sith alike can use for the most part. But they cannot change the galaxy, cannot give you true strength over others! And in that, the Dark Side is supreme! Just the Veil alone can show you that!"

"Then you are truly blind, Miralukan. The Light is just as strong as the Dark. The Dark Side can only achieve power through destruction, not creation! Tell me, Jerec, which is stronger then? The one that can stand alone, or the one that can only define itself by destroying what others have made?" Zule taunted.

Jerec was about to reply, but then Aayla was there, charging forward. Hissing, Jerec lashed out with a fire whip towards Zule, causing her to dodge backward before Jerec went blade to blade with Aayla. But as game as Aayla was, her Force powers had been badly drained. The rest she had after being decanted out of the bacta tank hadn't been enough to regain her full strength, not with her concerns about Harry. The two of them danced backward for two steps, and then Jerec leaped up, lashing out with a kick that got past her defenses. A Force Stun nearly knocked her out even as he flipped away, bringing his lightsaber down on Zule.

The pain that Aayla felt was enough to push through Harry's unconsciousness, acting like someone had just taken a defibrillator to his chest. As he floated in the tank, Harry's eyes opened, groggy but determined.

At first, what he was seeing didn't really register, then it did, and even though he wasn't in any mental condition to really do anything, Aayla was. *"Here, my love!"*

The Force flowed into Aayla and the effects of the Force Stun faded, and she lunged to her feet, faster and stronger than she had been mere seconds before. *"Jerec!"*

Zule ducked under a blow from Jerec, then kicked up off the ground, twin lightsabers flashing in an intricate pattern of stabs and cuts, forcing Jerec to defend his head and upper body. The Dark Side user was fast enough to try to bring his lightsaber down, battering Aayla's next attack aside, only to nearly lose his head to her second blade. Instead, it seared away the cloth covering the vestigial indents where most humanoids would have had eyes.

"ENOUGH!" Fire and Force Push roared out from Jerec, hurling both women away, overcoming their own attempts to block it and filling the place with enough fire to cause Padme to cry out and duck down.

"Padme!" Zule shouted, bouncing up off the wall and then off the ceiling, placing herself in front of Padme and the wall of fire just in time for her Force Shield to defend them both.

Ducking down behind the half-falleen Jedi Knight who had become one of her best friends, Padme looked at the power bar on the side of her blaster. *Fuck, only enough gas for two shots. Better make it count...* *"I, I have two shots left!"*

Zule grunted, biting her lip. *"I, I can't keep this up for long..."*

"I don't think you'll need to," Padme began, pointing to where steam erupted was now erupting from where Aayla was.

Instead of using a regular shield like Zule, Aayla, who was far better at elemental manipulation than Zule despite her earlier showing out in the hallway, had created a water shield and was now continually feeding more water into it. The heat of the steam caused Aayla to grimace, but the fire Jerec had created slackened as she pushed the shield forward, as Harry watched on, still unable to concentrate enough to use the Force himself, but awake, acting as a conduit for his first lady love.

Grimacing, Jerec snarled. While the padawan was still down with a slug through her foot, he could sense some of the defenders coming towards them. *Damn it, the commando droids can't do anything right, can they? They were supposed to hold them in place. Blast it! I*

need to finish... Potter, he's awake! And feeding Force strength into Secura, blast him to the depths of a black hole!

It hadn't occurred to Jerec to look at the bacta tank, thinking Potter would need several days in it to heal from his wounds. Nor did it occur to him that his own plans actually hadn't been any better than those of the Acolytes. He had relied too much on the locals no longer looking out for further daggers in the dark. But Chewie took his duties seriously, and so did Zule. The droid commandos had chewed up the clone troopers, but Chewie and a few others, along with a veritable horde of vratix, were now charging toward this room. Even if he won, there was no way out for Jerec now, not from so deep into the hive.

Still pushing out a flame wall towards Aayla, he smiled thinly as he heard Zule cry out in pain as her own shield failed. The fire licked at her, but she ducked under the stone sofas there. He then instantly lashed out with a Force Lightning towards Harry, only to have to stop, bringing his lightsaber up to block a blaster bolt that would have taken him in the head.

"KRIFFF!" Padme shrieked before grinning suddenly as the water overcame the flame.

Jerec turned, only to stop and bounce away as Zule leaped up from behind the sofa's Force Pushes, lashing down. Once again, he was faced with the two women in close-quarters combat. The two Jedi instantly fell into an easy rhythm, their Force Precognition molding together the two fighting as one. Not as good as a master/padawan pair might have, let alone Harry and Aayla, but better than most.

Jerec tried. He tried to create a flame burst as he had before, only for a sphere of after to appear around him. He tried a Force Push, only for it to shatter. His attacks were deflected, and his attempt to launch an attack Padme's way or towards the bacta tank was redirected.

And as his one blade had to hold off four, his Force Precognition began to lose its potency. A shot cracked out right under Aayla's arm, making Jerec dodge. Off-balance, he tried to block a blow toward his neck from Zule that didn't appear, opening him up for a strike from Aayla.

"GAAHHHHHHhhhhh!!!" Jerec shrieked as he lost his hand at the elbow, Aayla performing a perfect disarming technique. His lightsaber arm fell to the floor, and Zule's lightsaber flashed in, beheading the traitorous and arrogant former Jedi Master.

Jerec's body collapsed to the ground, and for just a moment, Aayla and Zule stared at one another tiredly. Then Padme reached them, grabbing up and deactivating Jerec's lightsaber as she came before flinging her arms around both girls. "That is very much enough excitement for the day! Kriff me, what's next, Grievous showing up again with a second fleet?"

“If I was just a Jedi, I’d say something about you tempting fate there, then I’d have to pinch you, probably somewhere painful,” Zule muttered, hugging the other girl back, while Aayla laughed quietly and did the same. Then, as one, the trio slowly parted, their arms still around one another as they looked over at Harry.

Harry looked back, but the demands on his body were still too much for him to deal with. Force Healing took from the body’s natural resources to heal the patient. The bacta could only do so much. He slowly raised a hand, waving at them and sending a pulse of love and affection down their link to Aayla before his eyes slid closed.

For a moment, the trio watched him, then looking at her blue-skinned friend, Zule cocked an eyebrow. “So, about that conversation...”

“Well, if part of the prerequisites was a willingness to sacrifice for one another, you would surely be in...” Aayla groaned.

At that, Padme’s eyes widened, and she pulled back a bit to stare from one woman to the other. Somehow, she was able to read both of their faces despite their Jedi training, and a blush began to suffuse her features. Not of anger, though. Aayla could tell that right away. No, this was surprise, arousal and concern all in one, along with a rush of interest. All that was subsumed by worry for a moment.

Aayla watched as Padme very deliberately pulled away as a furious Chewbacca charged into the room at the head of a group of clones and vraxix. “I am far too tired to deal with this right now.”

Aayla chuckled at that, although her chuckles broke off into a groan of pain as Padme elbowed her none too gently before very deliberately, once more, pulling Zule into a hug. “Come on. We’ll have to deal with the fallout of this, and I suppose it’s high time I get back to my regularly scheduled disaster anyway. And you’re not hurt, Zule, which means you get to help me.”

“A number of quips come to mind, but I suppose I will refrain,” Zule muttered, leaning against the other woman as the two of them helped one another towards the door. There, Chewbacca made a fuss over them even as they tried to wave him off and head through the door.

Behind him came a limping Ahsoka, who instantly moved to Aayla, but Aayla just waved her off, moving back to the stone sofas. There, she lay out closing her eyes as she concentrated on the connection between herself and Harry.

That bond wasn’t to the point where Harry was fully conscious yet, but she could feel that his mind wasn’t quite shutting down just yet. And when it did, it would be asleep, not

simple unconsciousness. That was a massive improvement, and Aayla felt a bubble of elation and delight filling her as she felt the touch of Harry's mind once more filled with his presence, even as his actual consciousness began to slip into his id, his dreams.

But before he could drift off into that comfortable land, Aayla had a simple question to ask. A pulse of emotion, confusion, desire, and long-buried interest, along with the gestalt of what she had felt from Padme a second ago. "Yes?"

The response she got, even as Harry finally succumbed to slumber, was a drowsy affirmative. *Yep, that conversation is going to be very interesting*, Aayla thought before she followed her lover into sleep.

OOOOOOO

In contrast to the response from the Confederacy or the Republic, the response from the GDL's public and government to everything that happened in the attack on the Polith System and everything that happened afterward was pretty uniform and also easy to understand. The GDL was very open about the entire event, about the fact that Count Potter and the Tyrant's Bane broke the back of the assault. Recruitment centers across the League saw a huge influx of new recruits. There was a lot of anger, but in the main determination was more the name of the game in the GDL. The news and the government had been open from the beginning about the horror of this war, and while this was on a level that none had ever been hinted at, the civilians and soldiers of the GDL were prepared for such.

In certain places, Corellia and Dac, for example, many took more notice of the fact that it was a single refitted battleship that stopped this massive assault. Hundreds of Mon Calamari, men and women who took pride in not only the art but the effectiveness of their designs wondered, pondered, and began work on their own designs, working out the defenses of the ship somewhat conclusively within days. They still didn't know how it was being done, but that mattered little. Dac's engineers were looking for solutions, and for ways to break that defense too, just in case.

In Corellia, the various shipwrights and dock workers came at the problem in a different manner but came up with the same answer: the Lucrehulk was somehow flying through space with a planetary shield generator and powering it too. Many in the Corellian system noted the two large hulks being worked out at secret space stations, wondering. But in the main they kept it to themselves, hoping. Two more vessels like that could break the ongoing campaign into the Corellia sector and reverse the war entirely perhaps.

On a personal level, for their part in the battle, respect for Aayla and Harry reached near idol status. These were the two young leaders of the GDL, and the Force, a quasi-mystical thing few really understood beyond the Jedi, had warned them of the danger to Thyferra, when none of

the Jedi working in the actual Republic had been able to. This earned them even more devotion and also won the cause at the heart of the GDL more supporters.

Less so but still felt was a sense of renewed respect for the Republic, the Republic Navy, the Jedi, and Senator Amidala. Her speech about Grievous had been recorded and was now spreading throughout the galaxy, even the Confederacy.

That was somewhat true in the Republic as well in the days after the attack as real news replaced rumor. Anger, fear and the need to point fingers abounded within the Republic, with many pointing the finger squarely at the Sixth Fleet and their admiral. This actually caused the first of many riots, one that attempted to drag said admiral out of his C&C to string him up. The Senate and the government as a whole were only splashed by this massive wall of shit peripherally, shielded by Padme's actions and the sheer courage the Republic Navy and the Thyferran Defense Fleet showed. But that shield was centered directly around Skywalker and Amidala.

Although none but Sidious and his tools knew it, nearly every news outlet in the Republic and most in the GDL had been primed by his agents to run with anything that could show Skywalker in a positive light. Only those in the GDL couldn't run with that aspect, instead emphasizing the *Titan's Bane*'s part in saving Thyferra, as everyone in those agencies knew that aspect would sell better.

Similarly, the story of the peace-loving Senator with a spine of durasteel was just too good for anyone to pass up. Sidious was unsurprised by that, although the level of veneration, even love, as much as Sidious loathed even thinking the term, that Amidala's courage and words earned her astonished him. Worse in a way for him was that response was also seen in the Senate, something he only became aware of after reports about Jerec began to filter back to the Republic High Command and the Jedi Order.

Sidious watched a meeting between Senator Mon Mothma, one of his strongest proponents that he didn't directly control or influence, meeting with the second-in-command of the Peace Party, Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan. The two were talking about some of the Centrist Senators wanting to talk to Padme about some of the points of the Peace Party's point of view. That was worrisome, but Sidious felt he could control that.

I had somewhat anticipated that the senator would either be seen as something of a scapegoat or would become martyred in the assault. Her survival annoys me, as this will give her even more political and social power, which this discussion is a microcosm of, Sidious thought as he turned that recording off, pleased that the newest audio and video recorders added by the cleaning bots used throughout the Senate District were working so well. They needed replacing practically every day in some of the Senator's rooms, but Bail Organa had yet to

become that paranoid. *Although his latest head of security might be. I need to push the law to remove such in the future, but there needs to be at least a dozen more small-scale clashes between them and Senate Security. It needs to seem like a security feature and not just a fiscal one.*

Setting that idle thought aside, Sidious focused back on Amidala. *She will gain in public veneration and real power in the Senate, yet as her old ally and acquaintance, I can use that. If this attack also has turned her entirely against any type of peace with the Confederacy, I would be extremely pleased as well. But in the main, I will need to work on her more in the future than I have in the past, leery as I have been because of her Jedi Guardian. If I can make her secondary puppet within the Senate somehow... well, without use of the Dark Side that might be wishful thinking perhaps, but it is something to think of. There are also rumors and scandals, although I will need to be careful of using such.*

Normally, Sidious would use such with impunity, believing in the hundreds of cutouts between himself and the news shells that would run with such. But since one such organization here on Coruscant had been literally ransacked by a riot earlier that day when they attempted to run with the whole 'Potter/Amidala/alien whore' love triangle story, trying to hint that was the real reason why Potter and Secura had arrived to save Thyferra. It was clearly going to be more difficult to sway the love the public had for Amidala at this point. *While I am amused as that story seems quite close to the truth, I will have to be leery in the future and make certain she will not try to move against me in the Senate.*

Setting that issue aside with some annoyance, Sidious turned his attention to another recording, this one from the High Command, a meeting he had not taken part in due to wanting to remove all political aspects from the meeting, separating the political ramifications from the military ones. It was a move that had won Sidious a lot of respect from Yularen and the others, and let him dominate the political and public response to the assault on Thyferra, but of course, no one realized with the various recorders he could have his cake and eat it too. *And the fact that even Yoda cannot detect recording devices that simply record their words and have to be collected later is always amusing. I need to use a number of droids to further remove a living being from placing such, but even that is but a small hiccup in the issue. As if the fact they all assume the daily sweeps, made by other droids, is enough to be certain there are no bugs in the Republic High Command Center.*

For a time, the words of the recording didn't register, as Sidious simply examined the faces and body language of Rancisis and Yoda. As two of the oldest Jedi it was hard to get a read on them, but it was clear that Windu's death had struck them hard. Yoda looked almost shrunken, almost drooping in his chair, while Rancisis' tail was twitching behind him, as if wanting to strike at something unseen, a clear sign of irritation in old Thisspiasians.

“Yes!” Sidious hissed, and if the recording was live, no amount of distance would have stopped Yoda at least from feeling the vindictive hatred and interest being paid him at present. “Feel despair, feel loss, you old fool!” His own delight in Mace Windu, one of the few Jedi he truly feared, was made all the more delicious by seeing how his death effected the Jedi. *Jerec’s turning will have also hurt that old bitch Jocasta, but I doubt I’ll be able to see it. Getting any spy devices into the Temple is impossible these days.*

“I think we need to assume that any system or planet that had been involved with any of the guilds or what have you that make up the CIS needed to look at their defenses now, before the CIS try to pull off this c=kind of large-scale infiltration again.” Yularen was saying as Sidious finally pushed past his delight at the Jedi’s discomfiture. “That is going to be a major drain on Republic Intelligence, but it needs to happen.”

“Numerous terrorist attacks, a new eye to them we will also need. Backdoor corporate or industrial contacts, used they might have been to set up such,” Yoda agreed. “Also, readiness reports, vetted they must be by more people. Sixth Fleet’s Admiral, ready he was not. Polith Defense Fleet, ready they were not.”

“Those are two different things, or rather were caused by two different things, Master Yoda,” a commodore serving on Yularen’s analysis team stated. “The PDF were still gearing up to acceptable levels, but while the Republic was hlepign that effort, we didn’t know about the incredibly foolish positioning of the two asteroid defense bases. IF those bases had been above Fort Luna, they would have withstood the full weight of this assault easily... if they were armed with enough anti-ship weapons, anyway. Even without them, the planetary-sized turbolasers on Fort Luna would have been enough if the moon could be protected from troop assault.”

“Whereas the Sixth Fleet’s forces were ready, it was simply a command issue. Fleet Admiral Kuzno lost his spine after Grievous handed him two bloody losses. We should have recognized that, but his officers were covering for him. Being well liked by your command team is a good thing, but here that, and the fact two of them were working for the CIS worked together to created a near-disaster. One that we could not have stopped,” another admiral muttered, shaking his head.

The commodore leaned forward eagerly. “Speaking of, Masters Jedi, is there anything you want to tell us about the Tyrant’s Bane? How it is so well-defended or armed, say? Even its hull took far more of a punishment than should be possible.”

“Our secret, that is not,” Yoda stated firmly, with Rancisis going on a bit more openly. “The ship has been retreated from the keel up by engineers who could use the Force. It is not something that can be replicated by the Republic as a whole.”

Which implies it can be, Sidious thought with sudden worry as the same thought was given voice by the commodore. But whereas he sounded satisfied and was willing to let the Jedi keep their secrets, Sidious was not. *Blast it all, I am no closer to understanding how the Jedi are doing what they are with the interior space of ships than I was when I first learned of the possibility.*

“Setting aside the mysteries of the *Tyrant’s Bane*, who should we put in place of Kuzno? Sixth Fleet is largely a defensive force, but it needs to be a competent man. And I would like to present the Senate Oversight Committee and the Chancellor with a list of names rather than have them choose someone. We need to start removing political appointees, no matter how competent they might seem to be on the surface,” Yularen grumbled. “We’ve begun that work several times, but have always had too much pushback to really finish it across the Republic.”

This conversation went on for some time, until, with a cough the commodore representing Yularen’s analysis team asked, “Um, Speaking of audits, have the Jedi Order figured out how C’baoth turned Master Jerec? You explained to us where the three former padawans came from, and their downfall is understandable enough. But isn’t Master Jerec one of the Order’s best historians? How did he enter C’baoth’s sphere of influence? And he wasn’t a Blanked either, going by the report Senator Amidala and Knight Ziss submitted. The Hollows don’t plan so well, nor do they talk while attacking.”

Neither Padme nor Zule had seen the point of keeping Jerec’s turn to the Dark Side under wraps. The vratix and the clone troopers had seen it after all, and both had decided to just get ahead of the rumor mill and admit what had happened.

The Two Jedi Masters stared at one another, and Sidious leaned forward, something in the Dark Side warning him he should listen to what the two would say. After a moment’s silent conversation, Rancisis began. “We too were blindsided by having a true traitor within our midst. As you know we quickly discovered ways to discover and neutralize the Blanked. But Jerec was indeed not a Blanked. He was simply a Jedi who had turned to the Dark Side. And had never come into contact with C’baoth.”

That made Yularen and a few of the others sit up quickly, understanding the implications of that. “Never?”

“Never. Not once did C’baoth and Jerec meet, nor did Jerec meet any of the others who have decided to follow C’baoth.”

“Then... how? Why did he turn to the Dark Side? Why did he attack Count potter?”

“Why indeed. But a better question would be rather, who turned him if not C’baoth.” Rancisis answered.

“Belief, there has been for a long time, C’baoth, a public face he is. A greater danger, a true Master, there might be,” Yoda stated bluntly.

“We think this hidden master has been pulling the strings of this war, setting up both sides. That is why we think C’baoth is so willing to use a scorched earth campaign. The Sith don’t care who wins, they simply want to weaken the whole Galaxy, cause as much death and destruction as possible for some future goal. A future goal that includes the destruction of the Jedi Order, but is not limited to that.”

“... Could they be in the Senate?” Yularen asked, causing Sidious’ to grit his teeth in anger.

NO! The Jedi were not supposed to look at the Senate until near the end of the battle! Sidious snarled.

Thankfully, after a moment Rancisis shook his head. “We do not believe that a Sith could hide from us in such a manner. The Blanked are one thing, but the Dark Jedi under C’baoth have all been absent from the Order for years. Even Jerec had not returned to the Temple, been in the presence of one of the members of the Council, for years. We believe that the Force Cloak, a Force user’s ability to hide his presence in the Force, is too limited to let a Sith hide on Coruscant.”

“Believe, we do, the Sith, a whole power structure, they have. Announce their presence they will, when weakened the Order and the Republic are.”

“Is that why Count Potter was able to act so much against Republic interests? You wanted to create a third party that you could vet for Sith influence even as you created it?” For once when speaking about the creation of the GDL – not the military of it, he had a lot of respect for Bel Iblis and what the GDL was doing in the war – Yularen’s voice was more intrigued than annoyed.

“Partly, yes. We still have no idea where the Sith are hiding, or how many tendrils they have in the Republic or the CIS, but the GDL is thought to be clean of such to a significant degree.”

“And you have no idea of where the Sith might be building up this power base?” the commodore asked, while Sidious allowed a bit of relief to flood through him. Whatever the Jedi thought, his real power structure was here on Coruscant, and as long as the Jedi Order remained blind to that idea, he was safe. *The Plan, such as it is, tattered and limited now that the younglings have escaped me, can still go forward. And I will find them, oh yesssss!!!!*

Fighting through a rising rage and anger at the memory of the fact the younglings had disappeared so entirely from his spy network, Sidious concentrated, listening for a few moments before the meeting turned to other matters. The disaster at Thyferra and Jerec’s betrayal were only two things on the High Command’s plate, after all. In general the opinion of the High Command was that yes, keeping the idea of another Sith being out there a secret was a good

idea. And second, that the Sith were the Jedi problem. The war was theirs. That was good in Sidious's opinion, as was the earlier moment of sheer blindness. *Although I have to wonder if Potter and those with him believe the same thing. I will need to be still more circumspect in the future, including my plans for Amidala, Dark Side eat their souls!*

Breathing deeply, Sidious finally turned off the recording. *I hadn't anticipated that the Jedi would know that there was another Sith out there. Thankfully, the Republic High Command seems to consider discovering this Sith power base they think is out there a Jedi issue entirely. Still, it is worrisome. Eventually, the Jedi might start to look within the Republic itself, at the Republic governmental structure, for me. I cannot allow that. I will need to do something to direct their attention elsewhere. Perhaps within the CIS? Someone pulling C'baoth's strings from closeby but out of the range of being blamed for any of their actions could work...*

But right now, there was nothing he could do about that. It would take careful planning, some interesting plot weaving in order to direct the Jedi in a direction of his choice if they were truly aware of, as they put it, a second Sith.

I had also not anticipated the near idolatrous feelings the public would feel towards Potter, or indeed the fact he was able to fly to the rescue as he did. The name of Potter and the GDL is on everyone's lips, Dark Side take his eyes. Amidala's popularity I can work with, but not his. He has no connection to me whatsoever, and the GDL is far too independent even so. I will have to take the first opportunity to turn that adoration around in the eyes of the public. Perhaps push the future of the universe angle, make it clear the GDL could become just as much a problem in the future as the CIS?

That rankled, that rankled a lot, giving Sidious still more reason to hate Potter, made worse by how close Jerec came to killing him. Judging by the report that Skywalker submitted, Jerec was close, so close! *Yet Potter is still alive. It is almost enough to make me think the Light Side of the Force actually exists at all, instead of simply the Force and the Dark Side. Wounded badly, but on Thyferra, what did that matter?*

The loss of Jerec is small consideration, Sidious' thoughts continued. The fool thought his ambitions were hidden from me, but they were not. His mind is a loss I will grant you. There were some interesting items in his research I could have made use of. Indeed, one of them, the Jebble Box, I may send a few Prophets out after. But there can only be one true Master of the Sith, and as Dominus might find out if he ever tries to strike out against me again, so Jerec would have as well. No, it is his failure that grates the most!

The fact the anger, hatred and fear caused by the assault on Thyferra is working to empower the Veil to a great degree that I had only thought to see after years of war is scant consolation, for missing such a magnificent chance to slay Potter. Sidious felt the anger roiling within him and

stood from his hidden throne quickly, his lightsaber flicking alight as he strode out. He had a few hours before he would have to once more don his mask and interact with the wider world again. Right now, he needed to give his emotions an outlet.

Seen break

For all of his power over the Veil of the Dark Side, for all of his knowledge of the Force, there were still some things that Sidious could not catch, in his need to concentrate on other things that he overlooked, that the Veil could not turn to the Dark Side's advantage in his stead. And as he began to plot ways to use the events on Thyferra as best he could, so too did he miss something. The sense of something, rather, because there were no reports or anything else that would have pointed Sidious to what was going on in the Core Worlds, where a pair of enemies that he previously identified and had thought sidelined were currently meeting up with a galaxy-renowned hedonist and quasi-celebrity. Although... terms could be quite deceiving.

Alya Aldrete was a Alderaanian woman in her very early thirties, with long blonde hair, a face that could only be achieved through excellent genetics and exercise or a good surgeon. Alya had a body that, on many occasions, had caused literal fistfights to break out in the balls of the high and mighty, or at least the rich, throughout the Core. She was the only heir of the Aldrete family, one of the original colonist families of Alderaan which made her extremely rich in comparison to normal people even in the Core. Alya had made a life for herself since her parents died by seemingly wasting their money by going to high-end parties, patronizing the arts, and generally speaking being a rich party girl.

But for all that she was supposedly a debutante, the young woman was actually incredibly intelligent. Under the guise of frittering away her money she had actually created what amounted to a small, exceedingly competent smuggling and information network. An information network that was completely separate from anything in Republic Intelligence, the Jedi Order, or the regular underground criminal elements that the Sith might have infiltrated. Only the Jedi Shadows and the rulers of Alderaan knew of her group's existence, and of that esoteric sect only Quinlan Vos still lived.

"If you hadn't brought all of this data to me to back up your words, even the words of a pair of Jedi wouldn't have been able to convince me that such a thing as this could be created. A pair of programmed S-Thread Booster that no one in the Greater Republic even knows about? To create a new hyperspace tunnel to who knows where? Even conspiracy theorists wouldn't believe that" The young woman mumbled, for once her normal poise completely disappearing as she slumped in her seat, running both her hands through her hair as she stared at the information scattered in front of her on numerous holographic screens. "How long have the Sith infiltrated the Republic to be able to pay for and build two S-Thread Boosters let alone

convince numerous people from House Andrim and Knylenn to go along with things? I can see you going to the Houses of Kuat if you needed to build up a local industry, but getting them to agree to work with you?”

“We don’t think the tunnel is operational just yet,” Kathy cautioned, leaning back in her own chair as she also looked at the information, feeling a bit exposed but dealing with it easily. It had been six years since she and her partner had gone around using their own names. It’d been a long time out in the cold for both of them, and being open about being Jedi, about their identities was startling and quite fun, even though it probably would not last very long. “Given what we’ve discovered, the second S-Thread Booster hasn’t been used yet. But the rest, the missing ships, the missing Kuat engineers and designers, the missing mobile shipyard and the two fully automated colony ship, that’s all accurate. And we know that they plan to use the Empress Teta System as the entry point.”

“Which is probably why they haven’t turned it on. They can’t be certain they can keep it a secret just yet. And you think that this all means their base of operations is on the other side,” Alya stated, nodding. “That they’re moving to create this corridor so that they will be able to act more openly.”

“Either that or it’s a fallback point,” Quinlan said, shaking his head in denial. “We’ve argued that point amongst ourselves. Regardless, whatever is on the other side of that court or its importance cannot be overstated. And we need to take it. Fallback or base of operations, such a place will be a major source of information that we need to capture and resources whose destruction will hurt the Sith.”

“...” Alya thought for several seconds, then nodded, even as her fingers began a rhythm on the table that would normally have bothered any listener but which the Jedi could easily ignore. “It will take at least three weeks, maybe as long as four **months**, to bring together the ships necessary to hit a target that big without alerting anyone. Speed will be in direct proportion to keeping moves like that clandestine. And you are sure you don’t want the Republic Navy to know about it? We will be lacking in real combat-capable vessels.”

“We’re hoping that some of the information we’ll be able to get from this place is how deep into the Republic the Sith’s tendrils are. We already know the Sith have agents in the Galactic News Networks despite our best efforts to either find such or out them. In the industrial sector, the story is much the same. The Sith even had agents in the Republic intelligence directorate. We cut off a few of those tendrils, but who knows how many others still exist? It isn’t paranoia if you can conclusively prove that everyone is out to get you,” Komari said dryly.

“At this point, we are assuming that at least a few senators are also on the Sith’s payroll, although they probably don’t know precisely who they are serving,” Quinlan stated bluntly. “If

you have contacts in the Republic Navy that are willing to cover up large-scale ship and troop movements to their higher-ups and do things completely off the books...”

“That would be a no then,” Alya snickered.

“You forget though, there is a war on. And of the two of us are Jedi,” Komari added. “We both think this calls for taking a risk. Master Plo Koon and his Jedi starfighter wing are due to be in Weerdeen System for rest and refit. Mostly to be given a new type of starfighter, I believe. We can contact him, and that wing will give us enough of a space-based punch. And enough Jedi to lead any kind of invasion force, too.”

After a moment, Alya nodded thoughtfully. It would take time, but whatever was behind that artificial hyperspace corridor would fall. And the data there would fall into the Jedi’s hands one way or another...

End Chapter