

I am not Disney, nor Rowling. That says it all, really.

This was the winner of the second medium story poll for December. It has not been edited by anyone but me and my Grammarly, unfortunately. I also know that it has been a loooooong time since the last chapter. I am, alas, debating formally putting this story on hold until *ATP* is finished. That story has two arcs and an epilogue left, call it six, seven chapters. *FILFy Teacher* has at least seven, eight chapters or so left in three arcs. This story? I think we're only about halfway through it if that. That debate will be on my patty-on page by the time this chapter is up on fanfic.

And worse, due to timing issues, I haven't even been able to look it over with Grammarly yet, nor have any of my editors seen it, though I am going to send it off to one now. If small mistakes bother you, wait until you see this line disappear.

Chapter 19: Hidden Light

As the *Tyrant's Bane* neared the system that held the space station that served as the entryway into Ruusan, Harry, Ahsoka, and Aayla were all on the bridge once more, with Harry walking his padawan through some hyperspace mathematics and their force equivalent. The two were not entirely analogous but using the Force to make hyperspace jumps was one of a Jedi's most important strategic abilities in space warfare.

While a droid or dedicated hyperspace jump computer could get you to a star system from another star system, if you wanted to come out into that specific star system, say directly above the planet, or at a specific point elsewhere in the star system, the Jedi and the Force were your only recourse. Even Astromech droids that had been to that system before couldn't jump as accurately as a Jedi could. Harry had even heard of Jedi being able to calculate a hyperspace jump to pass **through** a planet's gravity well somehow.

"Mind you, that isn't a trick I would want to try, but it's a good example of what is possible. And feeling out such things in the forest is different than using the Force in the physical world. It has more in common with feeling out where you could find a clue to a crime you are investigating. Add in a dash of Force Precognition, and you come close to what it is like to feel out your way in hyperspace," Harry explained.

"I would've thought that kind of thing could only be done by people really strong in the Force, Master," Ahsoka said, frowning in thought as she typed in her answer to the hyperspace calculation on the screen in front of her. "Why isn't it?"

"There are several theories on that one, although there is no direct correlation to the power of the Jedi and his ability to jump through hyperspace accurately. Master Tiin, for example, isn't as strong in the Force as, say, Master Yoda, but..."

Ahsoka giggled, shaking her head as Aayla snorted, reaching over to poke Harry in the shoulder. "That isn't a fair comparison, Harry. Everyone knows about Yoda's difficulties with technology."

"Honestly, I think he plays that kind of thing up to combat the mystique of his position and age within the Order," Harry answered, humming thoughtfully before shaking his head. "The point is that it seems to have more to do with your ability to think terms of spatial distances and calculate them in your head then letting the Force use that knowledge to play with the numbers, so to speak, than anything else."

"Can you do it, Master? Not the trick with passing through a planet, but getting as close as possible," Ahsoka questioned.

"I can. It isn't easy. I'm not as naturally mathematically inclined as some. Aayla can do it much easier than I can, and much better too."

"I have a better head for engineering and pure numbers than Harry does," Aayla acknowledged, looking over the work Aayla was doing, humming thoughtfully in unconscious imitation of Harry, something that caused Ahsoka to bite back a case of the snickers. "This looks pretty good. When we get a chance to do some starfighter exercises, we'll test your ability to calculate hyperspace jumps in a single system."

As the ship transited back into real space, Ahsoka's looked up from her screen, looking at the main holo-sphere as it powered up, showing the readings from the star system as their sensors updated. "A white dwarf, no habitable planets, very few planets all, and a small asteroid cluster. And one large space station. Huh... is it just me or..."

"Yes, that asteroid cluster is artificial. Master Gallia has had the defense ships towing them into position around the space station. I imagine that they are for camouflage or weapons stations," Harry answered his padawan's unvoiced question.

"I'm also wondering if they have chosen a name for it yet," Aayla's lekku twitched as she shook her head drolly. "When we were here last, they were still debating..."

Aayla was interrupted by the Jedi who was currently manning the communications station, a wry twist to the other human's lips. "Knight Potter, we are being hailed by the station. They have accepted our IFF but request to speak to you directly. I think Master Gallia is rather bemused by our prize."

"Put her up on the main holo-field." A moment later, the hologram of the star system that Ahsoka had been looking at disappeared to be replaced by the upper body of Master Gallia. "Master Gallia, greetings. I realize that the cargo we're hauling is rather unusual, but it is indeed us."

Aayla smiled at the Corellian Jedi as she quipped, "We come bearing gifts."

“So I see.” Master Gallia nodded and then cocked her head to one side, her eyes narrowing as she got over her surprise at the second Lucre Hulk following the Bane. “I also hope you come bearing news.”

With their concerns about the Sith, it had been decided that the space station, which now served as the waypoint into the Ruusan Sector, would not have a Hypercom system. The sources of hyperspace communications could be discovered far more easily than the nature of those communications could, given all of the scrambling and coding available to the Jedi. Even piggybacking an existing nearby Hypercom signal would only get them so far if someone in the Hypernet was feeding information of that sort to the Sith, as Harry and the others all assumed at this point.

In the Core Worlds that wouldn't be an issue. But out here, where there was no normal traffic and no known population cent a single uplink signal would stick out.

The Sith had shown previously they had a major leg up on the Jedi in terms of the information war, and before the outbreak of war, there had been little the Jedi could do about it. That was changing slowly with the advent of open war and the need to make certain the Confederacy wasn't tapping into military transmissions, but with Padme's push to keep the Hypernet in public hands rather than the government's, there was still a limit on what could be done. And the longer they were able to keep this space station secret and the secret of the Ruusan Sector and its resources, the better.

But this meant that they were largely cut off from news except for the crews of the various space-expanded freighters as they came and went. And while those crews would know quite a bit about the war as the public saw it, none of them would be privy to the political goings-on or the strategic picture viewed from on high.

“Which no doubt somewhat annoys Master Gallia, who has been one of the Jedi assigned to the Senate for years before coming with Master Yoda and the others to Serenno,” Aayla mused with some amusement.

Harry answered in the affirmative to both Gallia and Aayla's mental point, and Master Gallia informed them to bring in that the Tyrant's Bane and the other Lucrehulk it was currently slaved to. As they came closer, Ahsoka watched the sensors before whistling. As they had come closer, they were able to see the signals of four frigates, their systems powered down to a bare minimum, hiding in among a few of the larger chunks of asteroid.

But that wasn't all. As the Bane came closer, dozens, then hundreds of sensors splashed over the Lucrehulk, IFF transponders going off, as weapons began to target them, then went silent as they realized ships were friendly. “What in the world?”

Looking at the screen himself, Harry nodded thoughtfully. “One-shot proton torpedo launchers and shielded turbolaser batteries. All on remote control, I'm presuming. It wouldn't

stop an invading fleet, but it certainly would give them a nasty shock. Especially considering that the asteroid station has been given the *Tyrant's Bane's* touch.”

“Enlarged on the inside, and with all the things that implies, I suppose?” Ahsoka assumed, shaking her head. The *Tyrant's Bane* had demolished a fleet that would have been equal to a third of an Ord System Fleet in the number of hulls and out-massed an OSF in terms of tonnage before the start of this war and done so without having taken any damage. The idea of a space station, which could devote even more space to weapons, was kind of worrying.

“Yes, although I don't think they have been able to devote all that much time to upgrade their weaponry,” Harry answered with a sigh. “Most of what they do here is to refit freighters coming in, enlarging our logistics pool. That's part of why I'm so happy. So many of the Agri-corps workers are willing to stay on here to join the rune scribes.”

Ahsoka nodded thoughtfully, understanding the point. Before she had become Master Harry's padawan, she wouldn't, but being able to have single ships that could drop off all the war material a system needed for months on end in one trip was a major boon. *So how long has that work been going on? The Bane's lifting capacity can be fudged, but not where the ship has been, right?*

When she voiced that question, it was Aayla who answered. “We've been slowly enlarging our thrown enhanced merchant fleet since well before hostilities began. Well done for noticing.”

“Actually, Master, I'm wondering if anyone else has noticed? I mean, planetary defense shields are not exactly the most subtle of systems to emplace and move around. And there's no way that the *Tyrant's Bane* alone could have been ferrying all of the shields around,” Ahsoka warned. “You've mentioned several times the fact the Sith have a really good spy network feeding them information, so...”

“We've done our best to leave paper trails and obfuscate the truth at every level except which planet building the planetary shields in the first place,” Aayla answered. While Corellia wasn't the only GDL system that could build planetary shield generators any longer, it was the only one that could do so on the scale the rest of the GDL needed without harming their Gross System Product. Even Serenno couldn't do that, although Serenno was still building more frigates and would soon build the resized archer class destroyers faster than Corellia could.

“For now, anyway. I wonder how Serenno is going to deal with being surpassed in that area when Corellia is done bringing its mothballed fleets online and turns its full industrial capacity to building new warships,” Aayla mused. *“At that point, Corellia will be by far the most important and influential system in the GDL.”*

Harry sent the mental equivalent of a nod, indicating he understood the problem and might be a touchy one socially speaking. Politically though, it wouldn't be. *“I think you underestimate how much sheer delight the common men and women of Serenno is getting from*

being part of the GDL at all, having that large a voice in things. They won't argue the point that Corellia will be the most important planet industrial speaking in the GDL, so long as the importance of Serenno as a distribution point and political hub is acknowledged. And the GDL's headquarters remains where it is."

Shrugging her shoulders mentally, Aayla acknowledged the point before asking aloud about Ahsoka's training as a starfighter pilot. They knew the girl was good, but they had not asked Ahsoka specific questions about the kind of exercises she had been run through before. Around them, the large industrial-sized shuttles followed the smaller personal shuttle Aayla was currently piloting out the Bane's hangar bay towards the space station. And two equally small shuttles had already raced from the space station toward the captured Lucrehulk, no doubt loaded with Jedi, Verpine engineers and computer technicians.

Harry spared them a brief thought, then thought about the other Lucrehulk they had sent to Corellia to be repaired before being sent back here to be refitted. *Bringing that Lucrehulk here will need to be a delicate operation, but hopefully, by the time it's been repaired, we'll be able to assign that task to another ship.* Once the Confederacy got over the fears Yoda's trick had created, Harry was certain that the Tyrant's Bane would have far too much to do as it was without adding that kind of mission to their priority list.

Master Gallia greeted Harry and the other Jedi Masters from the Agri-corps as they exited the various shuttles, and for a few moments, Harry and Aayla were busy introducing the Agri-corps leaders to Gallia and her aides. One such aide was a smiling, easy-going Duros wearing the green robe of a green Jedi who Harry had briefly met before but whose name escaped Harry for the moment. The other wasn't a Jedi, but instead was one of the human military officers from Jaderin. He wore the bars of a captain and held a large datapad in one hand. He also had a look of almost feral delight on his face as he very obviously thought of the ongoing impact to their rune-carving operations the several thousand Agri-corps workers represented.

Once introductions were made and the group of ten were getting organized, Harry and Aayla turned away to speak to Master Gallia. She was already looking at young Ahsoka, understanding there was only one reason such a youngling would be following the two older Jedi. She had also met Ahsoka before in the temple on Coruscant. "Hello, young Tano, and my condolences. Whichever of these two is your Master, I predict that you will find out exactly why the phrase 'may you live in interesting times' is a curse on many a world across the Republic."

"Ouch, and yet so accurate too," Harry mock-moaned, shaking his head as Master Gallia indicated they should follow her, leaving behind the noisy hangar bay.

"Ah, so it is you, Harry, interesting. I honestly would have thought that Aayla would be the better choice considering she sometimes can disappear into your shadow in terms of your public persona," Adi mused.

“Nope, Master Harry is my Master, and as for my time with him being interesting, I kinda like it,” Ahsoka said simply. “I’ve learned a lot from Master Harry, more than I have in the past few weeks than I have in the last half-year at the temple. And at least I’ll never be bored following him around.”

“We were a little bemused when Master Yoda decided to assign us as a padawan, and, yes, we think of it as a group operation,” Aayla chuckled, running one hand over the soft horns on Ahsoka’s head. As she grew, her montrals would slowly solidify from the top of her head down to her shoulders, but that was a very slow process, directly linked to how old a Togrutan was. “However, I think it has worked out well enough.”

“Judging by the padawan bond that formed almost as soon as we saw one another, I think we can safely assume Yoda knew something we didn’t,” Harry added with a wink to Ahsoka, causing her to smile at him.

Gallia chuckled quietly, shaking her head. “It almost always does when Master Yoda takes a hand in assigning a padawan like that. It is almost as if he can see the potentialities of the padawan bond even before the two individuals meet. He even told me I would find my padawan on this mission somehow, although I have yet to do so. “

With that, the Corellian-born Jedi gestured the others into a smaller room set near the interior entrance of the hangar bay, leading them up to an office that had overlooked the hangar bay. Since the Jedi had claimed the space station it had been turned into a sitting room, although looking around, Ahsoka could still see signs even in this small room that the space station had once been owned by the Trade Federation: the size of the furniture, the fact that there was room for several hover chairs (Ahsoka always thought those were ridiculous), and the color scheme being that of very light green and white for the most part, which she knew the Neimoidians preferred.

Gallia gestured them in seats and began to move over to a small refresher station, but Ahsoka beat her to it and began preparing small mugs of coffee and tea. With a slight smile, Gallia moved to sit down, leaning back in her chair, folding her hands into her Jedi robes as she looked at the two younger Jedi in front of her and now allowing her desire for information to appear on her face. “So, what news do you bring? And should we drop all our priorities to get that ship out there refitted?”

“Yes/no,” Harry and Aayla said as one, before looking at one another as Ahsoka snickered.

The two lovers communed mentally for a moment as they argued about priorities going forward. Aayla wanted to pass on the runic arrays that they had developed for the stealth ships and start to create an entire spy ship service so that they could eventually start hitting the Confederacy where it hurt.

But Harry had internalized the strategic limitations that the GDL had to operate under better than Aayla did after meeting with Garm. *“Even with the number of core worlds systems and even Core sectors joining us, we are still relying on too few true pillars of strength among the rest. We **need** to secure the defense of Corellia and Serenno above all other considerations.”*

Aayla tried to argue back that the best defense was a good offense, but Harry won the argument, reminding Aayla of the strategic implications of how large the Confederacy fleet was. Spread over the entire Republic, it didn't seem that way, but compared to the fleets of the GDL, it certainly was massive. *“And remember, it is the Sith who control the strings of the Confederacy. to them, both Corellia and Serenno could just as well have neon signs above them going ‘attack here’ once hostilities ramp up once more.”*

With a sigh, Aayla came back to the real world, looking over at Gallia, who had been watching them with some amusement as Ahsoka set down their drinks in front of them and hopped into a nearby chair with her own. “I withdraw my objections. Yes, work on that should take priority. However, even with the influx of new workers, you will need to order more Astromech droids from Jaderin. Because we are going to have another task for you going forward as soon as work on the Dauntless is completed.”

“Dauntless? You’ve already named it then?” Gallia asked first before cocking an eyebrow. “And what kind of new task would that be, exactly?”

“We decided on the way here to preempt any long debate on the manner,” Aayla answered with a laugh.

As she finished, Harry waved off Gallia’s second question. “We’re getting ahead of ourselves a bit. First, you need to learn about why we have that ship in the first place, and then, we have a few lists to provide you in terms of names.”

“As do I. Many of the Green Jedi who remained here with me wish to join the war effort, although only a few tell me it is the Force that compels them to do so.” Gallia allowed a faint smile to appear on her face. “I rather expect more has to do with the somewhat monotonous manner of our task here.”

By the end of the lists being exchanged, Gallia knew she was getting the better of the bargain by a wide margin. A little over two thousand Agri-corps workers had been left behind on Serenno. They would have their memories modified by Master Yaddle and Yoda before he returned to Coruscant. That left two thousand, nine hundred and seven Force Sensitives of all Ages from the Agri-corps aboard the Tyrant’s Bane. Of them, only eight hundred had decided to go on to Ruusan and take on the challenge of restarting their training as full Jedi. The rest would remain here and join the rune scribes, although several hundred had indicated they would continue their training at the same time.

Honestly speaking, Aayla had met with the sentients who would be coming with them into Ruusan and felt that at least seventy-three of them would become bored, annoyed, or

arrogant again when they restarted their training under Fay and the other teachers. What would happen at that point with any of them was something Fay would, undoubtedly, be able to deal with, but it might cause some friction. Still, Aayla had made a note of their names, and would pass it on to Fay when they arrived. That was all they were willing to do at this point. After all, she could be wrong.

Few of those staying to join the rune scribes were at the level they could be trusted to actually work on permanent runes. Most were still a few months away from being able to use them. Empower, yes, but working on writing the runes was difficult detail-oriented work. Even astromech droids sometimes got it wrong. Only occasionally, but when they did, it was often in a disastrous manner. But the biggest problem with astromech droids was that their sale, especially in large lots, was monitored within the Republic, and that limited the number they could bring. They had also reached the limit to the number Jaderin could supply them for a time.

“Jaderin needs every astromech droid they can get in order to continue growing their trade fleets, so they can only sell us a few droids with every convoy coming out. We’ve tried several other types of droids to get around that bottleneck, but none of them are as detail-oriented or have the necessary dexterity. And assigning trainers to bring up that many Agri-corps workers will remove them from my existing workforce at the same time others are joining you on the Tyrant’s Bane.”

“We know that. Unfortunately, everything takes time, even for Jedi. And that is a problem that isn’t going to go away anytime soon,” Harry commiserated while shaking his head at the same time. “You’re not the only one that is working with too few resources and needs time to build up.”

He looked over at Aayla while Ahsoka began to snort, and Gallia looked between them all before sighing theatrically. “You’re going to dump still more work on me, aren’t you?”

“Not you personally,” Harry hedged, but under Gallia’s glare, added more truthfully, “but yes. We are going to add more work to you. Because once that Lucrehulk is refitted, hopefully by that point, **another** will be arriving. That one needed repairs to its outer hull, but it will be carrying the material needed to revamp its weapons and the Dauntless’ to the same standards as the Tyrant’s Bane.”

Gallia slowly nodded, understanding that would take quite a bit of effort, but hopefully, by that point, she and the other teachers would have trained the Agri-corps members to the point where they could help. Then Harry explained how they had taken the two Lucrehulks and several other prizes in a battle where C’bauth had very obviously set Confederacy forces against the Tyrant’s Bane purposefully.

Gallia asked some shrewd questions at that point about how the Bane had been tracked before almost demanding a play-by-play description of the events in the Senate leading up to

the declaration of war. This she interrupted far more often, frowning pensively at each answer given.

For several minutes after that explanation passed, she stayed silent, and Harry asked silently, *"Should we mention Ta'a Chume and the possibilities there?"*

"I... don't think so. I think Master Gallia has enough to think about already, and since no Jedi beyond Master Fay has had any dealings, even peripherally, with the Hapans, I don't see how she would have much insight to offer. If we are going to ask anyone about her subtle come-ons, I'd rather ask Mum and Master Fay their opinions first. And remember, Master Gallia was one of the High Council who was against allowing physical affection, let alone actual relationships," Aayla warned, having been in the temple while that was being debated. She also remembered Gallia's reaction to the implications of the mission which had brought Harry back to her, and knew the woman's stance had softened over time, but that she still looked at emotional connections in Jedi somewhat askance.

"Well, all that was very interesting. There seems to have been a subtle shift in positions since the last time I stood within the Senate's halls. I... I need to think about this more in the future," Gallia intoned, talking over Harry's mental affirmation of Aayla's point. And I presume that you wish to assign each of these Force-reinforced Lucrehulks to be stationed in Serenno and Corellia. Is there any kind of order we should follow for that kind of work? And do you want us to stop work on any freighters coming in? Splitting my workforce three ways would be annoying and slow all three projects down, but it could be the most efficient method if we aren't giving any of those three points greater weight than the others."

"You'll only see four more freighters coming in, those ships that were already on their way here for refit and to pick up a cargo of Tibanna gas or other resources," Aayla answered. "We sent out orders to stop ships being sent here to be refitted back on Serenno. You have already finished a hundred and seventy, correct?"

"a hundred and seventy-three, which makes me very happy to have so many new Force Sensitives, here, since assigning Jedi to those ships has cut down my numbers to less than a third," Gallia corrected, smiling faintly. "On top of the work on the station, and the defenses, both the frigates and the remote-controlled proton torpedo launchers. My existing crew is getting quite good at that particular work. But I am thankful to hear that, nonetheless. Splitting up my workers into half is much more logical and will let me do so by putting the best teachers I can together for the Agri-corps people. They also happen to be among my best rune scribes, which would be a wrench to reassign to the classroom."

"You know your people best. I'm not going to rock that particular boat," Harry answered with a faint smile, sensing that Gallia also wanted to pass that particular buck just a bit. By the right twist of her mouth, that observation was certainly accurate. "As for the priorities of what to do to the Lucrehulk and in what order, Aayla and I have thought about that and..."

Gallia took notes on a datapad through the following conversation and then took more notes as it shifted back to a basic overview of the war effort so far. She smiled at the knowledge that Padme and several like-minded Senators were still attempting to keep communications open with all sides, making a note on that, as well as which planets were a part of it while shaking her head slowly at the knowledge of how many Jedi had already begun to die in this war. *An issue that will no doubt get worse as this war goes on.*

As Harry and Aayla finished updating Gallia once more, she frowned faintly, musing on the one question that no one had an answer to yet. "Where is the hidden Sith hiding?" Gallia mused, frowning pensively.

"We're all thinking about it right now. Perhaps he's within the Confederacy right now, using C'baoth as a front man, but something about that idea feels off, despite how much the Confederacy would fit with the Sith methodology of leadership. But if not, well, the last thing we want is to have the Sith somehow disappear once the tide has turned against the Confederacy and try again sometime in the future. We assume that the true Sith Lord is gathering power through the Veil of the Dark Side and that they are gathering fiscal and social power somehow, but honestly, where who he or she could be, we have no idea." Harry sighed.

"We have Padme and the Jedi assigned to the Senate looking into things there, although if you want us to pass on any insights or concerns, as you said earlier you had, we can do that," Aayla added. "Personally, I'm of the opinion any such position would be too much in the limelight for this Sith Lord. Being able to hide his Force presence for so long on Coruscant, fine, even with Master Yoda and the others there I could accept that. But inside the Senate?" Aayla shook her head.

Since she was one of those who would have had to miss the presence of the Sith, Adi nodded, although she had to hide a small frown at the way both Aayla and Harry smiled when Aayla mentioned Padme. *Something is going on there...* But after a moment's reflection, Gallia decided not to pry. *I was wrong about their bond being a subtle lure to the Dark Side. I will not jump to conclusions now.*

As she thought that, Harry went on. "We also recently received a communication that could perhaps lead us to some information about the Sith, or at least their hidden web of agents." With that, he explained how Master Vos and Master Vosa had apparently been infiltrating the galactic underworld since Aayla and Harry had become Jedi Knights and had become known as information brokers. "So, all we need to do is get away from the limelight for a bit to meet with them on Ord Dalet."

Throwing her head back, Gallia laughed at that idea shaking her head. "Do you truly believe with the position the two of you have in the GDL that disappearing like that is at all possible? Getting away for a few days like this is one thing given the special nature of Ruusan and the lack of communication with the outside universe. But even if you left behind the *Tyrant's Bane*, and I am in no way saying you should, your faces are far too well known

throughout the Republic Run into any kind of recording software, and soon the entire world you're on will know you're there."

"If we attempt to meet with Master Vos and Master Vosa we will have to assume that they can take care of the electronic side of things," Harry admitted ruefully, while Aayla also snorted with amusement.

For several more moments, Gallia asked questions about the clandestine side of things, which Aayla fielded while Harry asked Ahsoka to get Harrington and Rafael. Not that this conversation went on for very long. In terms of ferreting out secrets, neither the Jedi nor the GDL had much luck so far. They were far better at keeping their own secrets, thankfully.

As the door opened to admit the two frigate captains and Ahsoka, Aayla finished with a smirk, gesturing to the two newcomers. "There hasn't been any big break one way or another on that score, although what else we're going to be dropping in your lap might. We've created a runic stealth device. Which we have tested on Captain Harrington and Rafael's ships."

The words didn't register for a moment, and then Gallia looked at first the two newcomers, then back to Aayla and Harry. "That statement demands some unpacking."

"What Count Potter means, Master Jedi is that our ships, have been fitted with a prototype runic array that makes them undetectable by any known sensor system," Rafael answered for the two officers, who stood at attention in the doorway, Ahsoka moving around them to reclaim her earlier seat, leaning forward eagerly. This, unlike the earlier discussion about politics and such, interested her quite a bit.

Gallia's brows furrowed. "How does that work?"

"Any kind of signal that is leaving your ship which can be used to point out where the ship is blocked by the runic array. It causes a major issue with heat buildup, but it works," Harry said enthusiastically.

"He's not underselling it, Master Jedi. In the course of one fight, we lost several crewmen to heatstroke and were in danger of losing more before the battle ended. But we were completely invisible, even when we fired our torpedo broadsides," Harrington added, as she and Rafael sat down when Aayla pointed them into chairs to one side of the main table. "The heat is a major issue, but beyond that, we did a lot of damage we would have never been able to otherwise."

"We can't use the stealth array in hyperspace, though," Rafael added. "Hyperspace creates heat. Who knew? And way too much of it. Even a short jump would have us all dying from heatstroke if we weren't turned into crispy corpses."

"Your humor is... somewhat grisly, but I understand the concept, thank you," Gallia answered primly, rolling her eyes. Rafael wasn't the first soldier she'd met with a morbid sense of humor.

When urged by Harry and Aayla, the two captains expanded on their experiences in combat under the stealth array, as well as how it worked. It wasn't pleasant, but it was bearable, as long as people had adequate water. "Givin, Gand and other races who are used to heat could handle it better, but we were forced to enlarge the onboard water system as much as our magazines," Harrington admitted ruefully.

"Right. You can't spend days on end under the stealth, but for a few hours, it's bearable," Rafael added.

"At least on frigates," Aayla interjected. "We worked out that the bigger the ship, the faster heat builds up under the stealth."

"If the heat is the main issue, why not create some kind of cooling array?" Gallia asked. "That way, you might be able to get around the size limitation."

Harry winced, as did both officers. "We tried that. The problem is that the cooling array wouldn't actually keep the ship from overheating in the first place. It would simply fight the heat after a certain point. That, in turn, makes the inside of the ship become a sauna. Not only could that much moisture in the air possibly short out the ship's systems, at hotter temperatures it would probably lightly boil the crew instead of charring them alive."

"Trandosians and Barabels could perhaps deal with it, but I'm loath to create entire crews of single species like that, and even now, the GDL doesn't have as many reptilian species among our number to do so," Harrington interjected.

"Beyond the heat though, we might want to make a few modifications to the overall ship's design, add better sensors for certain, but I think the battle against the Confederacy proved the arrays work," Rafael said with a grin.

"Which is why both Sniper and Longshot and the two of you will be staying here when we leave. When we come back through, we'll take two of the defense frigates you have here, Master Gallia. That way, we can work on them, teach their crews the ropes of fighting under stealth, while Captain Harrington and Rafael teach the other two."

Adi glanced at the pair of officers and saw no surprise there. Evidently, this was an idea they had heard before and had no problems with. "Let me guess, these ships will be used to find the Confederacy's hidden shipyards?"

"Exactly. We want at least thirty missile frigates to start with built with that mission in mind. Once the two Lucrehulks are ready, we will start rotating frigates out to you, frigates whose captains are up for promotion and can be moved on to other ships, and thus these ship's officers can be trained in espionage doctrine by Harrington and Rafael."

"After all, their entire training would be to do their best to not engage in combat. Instead, your mission will be entirely to not be discovered. Get in, get the information, and get back out quickly."

“Which would take an entirely different mindset,” Harrington mused. “I’m actually not certain I would have the proper mindset for that, but between us Rafael and I can at least start figuring out a doctrine for such. But do we have permission to promote officers as we see fit?”

“You do,” Harry announced and held out a small box that he had in his expanded pouch. “This will make certain of it.”

Harrington frowned and took the box, opening it with a gasp. Inside were the rank tabs of the Commodore, and she balked. “Sir, neither of us have even captained a capital ship yet. There’s no way I’m senior enough to become a commodore.”

Harry chuckled. “Half the people around the headquarters back on Serenno don’t have any seniority, but they have flag rank. You, on the other hand, have seen combat. You know how the stealth array works, what your ships are capable of. You know the overall mission.”

“And you are a proven factor,” Aayla added bluntly. “For something like this, that is a very big deal. Take the rank tabs Commodore, and just do your best. That’s all anyone can ask.”

“And don’t think you’re getting out of being promoted,” Harry went on, looking over at Rafael. “While Harrington’s going to eventually be in charge of the defense fleet here eventually, I’m putting you in charge of the spy ships that are going to be refitted here on...” Harry blinked, looking over at Gallia. “It slipped my mind, but have you all decided on a name for the space station yet?”

“*Freedom’s Fence*,” Adi answered, with a faint sigh. “I preferred the much simpler name *Entryway*, but with news of the war coming in with the latest ships, the more dramatic name won the vote.”

“Take the Commodore’s tabs, Commodore Harrington. You both will no doubt be earning them shortly,” Aayla added with a smirk. “We’re not expecting miracles, but we would really like one anyway. And eventually, these espionage frigates might be the ones to perform such.”

Rafael nodded and moved over to shake Master Gallia’s hands, saying it would be a pleasure to work with the other Jedi. Having come up through the ranks as an ECM and communications specialist, he had never thought to reach flag rank at all and was eager to prove himself. Harrington too was pleased. She didn’t have the right mentality to be part of the actual spy ship mission, but being a commodore of a defense fleet, even one that wouldn’t hopefully ever see action, was a definite step up.

At that point, the two officers left then to oversee the transfer of their ships from the hull of the *Bane* to the space station’s hangar bay just as Master Gallia’s aide came in to report that the Agri-corps workers who would be staying here had all been brought over from the *Tyrant’s Bane* and settled into their quarters. Thankfully, the living quarters aboard the space station had also been enlarged along with its interior cargo capacity. Indeed, the only thing the

space station lacked, which the *Tyrant's Bane* had, was multiple agricultural areas. It had a large but otherwise normal hydroponics garden instead.

Thanking the aide, Adi sent him on his way, and when the hatch closed behind them, looked over at Harry. "Setting aside the issue of the Sith for a moment, what do you intend to do in the future? The Jedi have a responsibility to the Republic, and if the Confederacy and the separatist movement are beaten down or discredited, the GDL might be seen as a threat to galactic peace in their place."

"Perhaps. But whatever else happens, the Republic is going to change because of this war. If it changes for the better, if it becomes less of a moribund beast riddled with corruption and Core Worlds first policies, I can see the GDL willing to amalgamate back into the Republic peacefully... given certain agreements for Serenno anyway," Harry added ruefully. "If it doesn't, well, the tyranny of that of a government having a droid army willing to enforce its every order can't quite be compared to the tyranny of political corruption and monetary despotism, it is still something that can be protested and defended against."

That answer did not please Adi, and she looked at Harry closely. "The Jedi Order would probably stand aloof in such a confrontation unless it became obvious that one of the other was attempting to conquer their opponent through force. That might make your position very tenuous, Harry," she warned.

Harry shrugged. "That's a little too far in the future for me to be concerned about. But if it comes to it, this position of mine was certainly never meant to be for life. I would cheerfully, nay eagerly, step down after this war is over."

"He would, he really would, and I would be right beside him in that decision," Aayla added dryly.

Gallia cocked her head, sensing the truth in Harry's words, and seeing the look on Aayla's face, pride there at Harry being willing to back away from such power. "I believe you, I suppose, although I am still very leery about the long-term ramifications of having another galactic power-sharing space with the Republic. But you are correct in pointing out that problem is for the future. Still, you might wish to think about who would take over if you do step down now and discuss such a transfer of power when you and your Congress meet on Corellia."

Both the young Jedi in front of her nodded, and Master Gallia stood up, gesturing towards the doorway. "In that case, I think we are done here." She looked over at Ahsoka, smiling faintly but very warmly. "You, young one, and those who are entering Ruusan are in for something of a treat. And I don't think I have it in me to keep you all from it for much longer."

Eventually, the *Tyrant's Bane* was ready to leave once more, and after a final farewell with Adi, Harry and the others boarded the ship.

As they reached the bridge, Ahsoka was looking at Harry and Aayla thoughtfully. She could sense the anticipation within them, the eagerness to head into Ruusan. But they were successfully keeping **something** from her, which they hadn't shared with any of the others aboard the ship. She could somehow sense that, but not what they were hiding. "Master, I get the impression you're going to try to play a prank on me," she announced repressively as they entered the bridge. "Please don't."

Harry blinked at that, looking over at her in confusion. Then he laughed, shaking his head, while Aayla moved over to give Ahsoka a brief hug before moving over to a chair. "Ahsoka, it's nothing of the sort! We are keeping something from you and the other Jedi and the younglings, but it isn't anything bad. Nor is it some kind of joke at your expense or theirs. It's just, this is something you all should sense for yourselves rather than being told about ahead of time."

Ahsoka continued to scowl at her Master for a moment, but as she looked over at Aayla and saw the older woman nod, she decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. "All right, Master. But if you are trying to get some kind of reaction out of me for your own misplaced sense of humor, I will have my revenge."

"Revenge is not the way of the Jedi, my young padawan," Harry retorted before reaching over to gently stroke her soft horns, smirking a little as she involuntarily leaned into the touch. "But don't worry. You won't want to get revenge on me for this."

He was right. A few moments after entering hyperspace, the ship passed through the protected zone around Ruusan, the area that Master Fay had created, moving enough asteroids to create a wall around the sector that literally could not be bypassed. Before, if you were lucky and took it slowly as Harry and company had the first time, ships could have gotten through if they were tough enough to survive sudden, jarring hyperspace exits if the gravitic currents created by the Thought Bomb changed. Now, it was only with Master Fay moving some of those asteroids aside that you could use hyperspace at all within several light-years of the outer edge of the sector.

And when you passed through, the effect on the Force was obvious. Ahsoka felt it at the same exact moment that everyone else aboard the ship who hadn't been into the Ruusan Sector before. Several thousand younglings and Force-sensitives of all races and ages gasped in delight as they felt the Force without the debilitating touch of the Veil.

The Veil of the Dark Side had been in place, growing in strength for more than ten years, and since then, it had only grown in strength. Now, many younglings who had never felt anything different and many older Masters or padawan-aged Agri-corps workers who had all but forgotten what it was like to feel the Force without the Veil pressing in on their senses felt the Force without it, and indeed, instead felt the Force through the lightening effects of Master Fay's touch.

The impact was immediate. For the oldest, it was like a weight had been removed from their mind, a weight they had felt for years but been unable to get rid of. For the younglings, it was as if a cloying stink or slimy touch had been removed the Force. Some of the younglings even began to cry at the sensation of the Force responding to their touch and mind without that intervening miasma.

Ahsoka was no different. "Master, what, what is this?" She gasped, her eyes closing as she reached out for the Force. And instead of just being able to touch the Force like always, Ahsoka felt it almost welcoming her, like an invisible warm blanket's suffusing her being.

"This, my young padawan, Harry said, reaching out gently with one hand and patting her shoulder, "is the touch of Master Fay on the Force. We mentioned that she survived what we haven't yet explained is what exactly occurred that meant we had to leave her behind on Ruusan." Harry looked over at the other Jedi aboard the bridge which had yet to make this trip with them, as he began to explain what had happened to Master Fay, how she had merged with the Force font on Ruusan, becoming part of the Force for a given degree while also retaining her individuality.

The ancient Masters who had previously been leading the Agri-corps and had decided to join the new temple on Ruusan, and the teachers assigned to the younglings were confused by that. Jedi had been known to become one with the Force, to become Force Ghosts like Lily, while retaining a connection to the physical world. Becoming part of an actual Force Font was entirely new and unusual. More than one of the Masters was actually concerned about it. That kind of insane power-up was something that the Sith would strive to achieve, and that kind of power could lead to arrogance.

Yet, they could feel the reality of it all around them, the **goodness** in the Force, Master Fay's personality, hovering around them. And if there was one Jedi who had ever been born that wouldn't fall to the Dark Side whatever happened, it was Master Fay.

Soon, the concerns on that score subsided, and all of the Masters aboard the ship, and indeed many of the green Jedi Knights who had made this trip before, joined the younglings in communing with the Force, reaching out to and Master Fay eagerly, wanting to see what they could sense through this new phenomenon.

As the non-Force users aboard the ship took over the running of the ship, Harry and Aayla also took the time to reach out to Master Fay. They found her presence waiting for them, a serene smile on her image's face appeared in their Mindscape hovering outside their defenses.

"Greetings Harry, Aayla, I see by the number of minds I have felt reaching out to the Force that your idea of removing the younglings from the war was accepted? I..."

The image paused, looking off to the side towards where Harry and Aayla's mindscape ended, looking beyond its defenses and a second later, Fay's smile widened. *"One of you has a*

padawan connection. Excellent. I had hoped that Master Yoda would see that you both had potential as Masters, especially after your time teaching at the Academy on Serenno."

"I suppose when you put it that way it shouldn't have been a surprise, but it was given how much else we're doing," Harry admitted. "And I would argue it is a very different thing to be the sole teacher of one student in all things rather than teaching multiple students in a few subjects. There's a great deal more responsibility that comes along that personal connection."

"There is, but speaking from personal experience, it can be astonishingly rewarding," Fay teased, actually laughing in delight as she looked at Harry and Aayla. "I can feel the youngling's bond to you, and she and the various Masters and others reaching out to the Force even now. A few of them are actually reaching out to me in person, wishing to commune with me, although I do not know any of them personally."

At that Fay became a bit more sober as she coked her head to one side questioningly. *"Pity, I had hoped that one of the Masters that I personally knew would have accompanied you here. Still, from what I can feel from the minds of the other Jedi, I take it events beyond Ruusan have taken a negative turn? Here on Ruusan we don't get any news, not even second hand from the rare merchant ship that comes by."*

"You and Master Gallia both. We might need to see if we can set up some kind of courier system," Aayla mused. "Regardless, we will tell you more when we arrive on Russia in person, Master. But there is a reason why the Jedi Order finally caved on the idea of removing the younglings from the temple, including one reason which completely blindsided us."

Feeling the sober, even grieving nature of that thought, Fay nodded slowly. *"And it isn't so interesting you wish to say it twice, I take it?"*

When both the younger Jedi's mental images nodded, Fay deliberately changed the subject. *"Understood. Although I will warn you in turn that Ruusan has changed greatly since you were here."*

With that Fay's image began to radiate a certain emotion, impish good humor perhaps? For some reason, she felt to Aayla and Harry as if she was a young girl who had a secret she was eager to share. It was a sensation that Japan had never gotten from his Master, who for all of her somewhat ageless appearance, was almost as old as Master Yoda and just as mature.

Still, he could also sense that she wasn't going to give them any hints, and so simply stated, *"I am looking forward to it then, Master."*

"Good. In that case, will you be stopping by Jaderin?" When Harry answered they would be, after all, the younglings still needed some equipment and clothing, she went on. *"Very good. In that case, I have a shopping list for you."* Harry quipped, causing Fay and Aayla to both laugh.

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Reading the report that Kinman Doriana had finally been able submitted, Sidious was quite angry. Not at his servant, who had once more proven himself one of the most useful tools that Sidious could ever ask for. No, his anger was due to the fact that once more, he was running into evidence that the Jedi had prepared for war.

It was clear they had not been prepared for Sidious specifically. There was no evidence they had even an inkling there could be a Sith still acting within the Republic's government after the breaking of the Banking Clan and Plagueis' death at Dooku's hand. But beyond that, the moves in the dark that he and his predecessors had been planning for so long had seemingly convinced the Jedi that those moves meant that the Sith were out there somewhere without physical evidence or any hint from the Force beyond the Veil of the Dark Side.

Worse, much worse, was the fact that the younglings were not going to stay on Serenno. Serenno or Corellia would've made logical sense as fallback points if they thought that Coruscant or at least the Jedi Temple would come under direct assault. But if they were not on Serenno, then they were gone, hidden somewhere else.

Thinking about that last fact, Sidious reached out to the Force and tried to detect Potter and the thousands of barely formed Force presences of the younglings. After a moment Sidious's attempt broke off as even with the Veil helping him and hiding his own Force presence, he stopped the attempt, teeth clenching angrily. He could no longer feel any of their minds, they were gone beyond Sidious's sight somehow, literally. It was as if they had discovered a place where the Veil could not go.

That horrified Sidious. *If there are places within the Force that are thus hidden from me, how was it accomplished, and what else are the Jedi hiding!?*

His teeth grinding, Sidious let that thought continue to its logical conclusion. *The Great Plan was supposed to allow us to wipe out the Jedi entirely, bringing an end to the millennia-long internecine warfare between the Jedi and the Sith, to finally allow us to bring true, eternal order to the galaxy. But if the Jedi are out there, then even if the Great Plan can succeed to its greatest extent, which now includes killing Potter quickly, something I am very much looking forward to, then we will still have failed in the long term. A generation or three down the line, and the Jedi will resurface somewhere out there, ready to fight back once more!*

That was infuriating. That was galling. That was...

Sidious clothed himself in the Dark Side for a moment, shaking his head with a snarl as he tried to gain control of his emotions once more, his eyes flashing yellow such was the strength of his fury before he gained control of himself. *Giving myself to my fury will serve no one and even with contacts that kind of visual cue is very hard to cover. No, I must remain in control of my inner hate, control it, and prove, as always, that I am the Chosen One of the Sith, that I will be the one to make the Great Plan work, whatever the Jedi do.*

“If the younglings are gone, then they are gone and just because they are out of my reach in the Force does not mean I cannot find them in more normal ways,” he murmured aloud, his voice reverberating in the dark of his hidden throne room. “And that is a job that I can pass on to Dominus. He has the mechanical resources to do that. And I might be able to point them in the proper direction as well.”

Waving his hand through the hologram showing the report, Sidious mused that he should be grateful that Kinman was so good at what he did, and that he had escaped. There were a lot of other security issues that Sidious could toss him and in the future.

But Kinman wasn't the only one of his agents that had begun to infiltrate the GDL. There were other type two agents that had begun to slowly exfiltrate out of the league with information. And one of them had something interesting to report.

The agent in question had been deep undercover on one of the least industrially advanced planets among the GDL. He had been part of a group of industrial workers brought on to the planet to help install the planet's new planetary shield generators. And he had noticed something odd. The parts and material for the generator, as well as much of the rest of the military surplus the planet needed, being only able to provide admittedly well-trained starfighter pilot's and ground troops, had possibly been coming in carried by a single ship.

Now, that should not have been anything unusual, except for the sheer amount of material. And the fact that one ship had seemingly jumped out, then just jumped back in, without enough time between jumps to make a full trip of it to some central logistical location. It had changed its IFF code, and the name painted on its outer hull and even a bit of its outer profile. Yet at the same time, it was still a Y-200 freighter, and this agent was certain all of these ships were one and the same.

This obviously meant that it was part of a larger convoy, and only one ship would come in to drop its a time for some reason. That was odd that the man had dug further, so much so that he had nearly been caught. That he hadn't was a sign that the Dark Side was still with Sidious he felt, as he read over the report, because the man's efforts had broken a tiny bit of the local navy's computers, bringing up the name of the military supply system: Project Outgrowth. A project that seemed to be centered on Corellia. The man had even discerned when the next such mass drop-off would occur.

On the surface, that isn't so important. And yet, and yet this man's instincts for secrets have proven quite good in the past. And the Dark Side is telling me that there is something more here. Indeed, the tug of the Dark Side was extremely strong, one of the strongest he had felt in months.

Finally, as he stood up and made his way over to the wall of the darkened throne room where he had hung his Chancellor robes, Sidious decided. He had peeled a few cells of clone troopers and one of the new clone commandos off from the Republic intelligence. These were clones

who had been put through various in vitro regimes, making them larger, stronger, tougher, more mentally capable and independent than the regular clone troopers.

As far as the Republic military knew they were still in the testing phase and had been kept entirely secret from practically everyone who wasn't on Kamino, bar the Chancellor, the head of the Republic intelligence, and two of the admirals running the military. Not even the Jedi knew about them just yet.

This would prove an interesting experiment as to how effective they could be. *And if they succeed, I will know why the Dark Side is telling me that this secret merchant fleet is important.*

OOOOOOO

So busy was he in thinking about this new mystery, that Sidious did not spare any thought for the two captured Lucre Hulks. This was not a good thing, because before the Tyrant's Bane had reached Jaderin to do Master Fay's shopping, Wulo had led the second Tyrant's Bane to Corellia. And work began immediately on repairing it, preparing it for same treatment as the Courageous was already being given.

OOOOOOO

As part of their buildup to war, the GDL's civilian trade fleets, if such a word could be used for such a disparate group, had been forced to adopt a convoy system. In this system, several freighters of all sorts would be guarded by a small flotilla of defenders as they went from one stop to another. These flotillas were mostly built around the Archer frigates and the Arrow starfighter, with a larger ship occasionally serving as a flagship for particularly large convoys. Now that hostilities had commenced, this had continued, with only the size of the defending flotilla changing, as well as the routes no longer being public knowledge.

This covered the truly important shipments of military hardware: planetary shield generators, parts for the Golan space fortresses, starfighters, and so forth. These goods were also shipped in the convoys, but not to the extent the hidden fleet of Project Outgrowth. This ubiquitous name was the term used to cover the hundred plus merchant ships whose cargo holds had been runically expanded at Freedom's Fence.

These ships, all of whom were owned by their captains as part of the security surrounding the project, moved through solar systems that had no signs of sentient life. Sometimes, this added to the trip time, but it was believed that secrecy was the project's most important defense, even when the freighters in question routinely traveled with at least a squadron of Arrow starfighters. Tying up sufficient forces to defend all of the refitted freighters moving secretly beyond the convoys would have simply painted a large target on those ships instead.

Occasionally, one of the refitted ships would join one of the other convoys, their cargo manifest showing what they could normally have carried for ship their size rather than the full reality. They would also normally hyper in and out of a space system, dropping off their cargo in small

amounts. Each time the ship would use a different name to further obfuscate things. Since this was what the convoys did, it worked very well.

So far, the Confederacy hadn't made a concerted effort to assault the merchant vessels that were the lifeblood of both the Republic and the League. There were a few reasons for this. For one, they lacked the small ships, the gun boats and frigates that would normally have been placed on some kind of mission like this. Indeed, they didn't even have many destroyers in comparison to their larger ships. They were a very top-heavy military, bar the insane number of starfighters that the Confederacy could hurl into combat at the drop of a hat.

But vultures didn't have hyperspace engines. And fitting them to the design would not only have taken up a lot of space that it was already being used for their computer systems but would also impact their various weapons systems. As many the pirate had learned to their cost, slapping a hyperspace engine on a starfighter is not that easy. This made them useless for commerce raiding.

And the GDL had those smaller units. Indeed, commerce raiding was the only way that the GDL had been striking back. In doing so, they had tied up a lot of the Confederacy's older ship units and a large majority of the gunboats and small carriers, the Captor the Confederacy had for rear echelon protection.

The freighter *Merry Trails* was one of the merchant ships that were ark of Project Outgrowth. The owner and captain was a Corellian named Ras Clarkson. He was a just past middle-aged gentleman with short cropped curly hair and a tall, somewhat overweight frame. He had owned the Y-200 freighter, whose real name was *Need for Speed*, and which was one of the fastest ships in the galaxy. Not **the** fastest unfortunately, there was only so many things you could do with the original design. But Clarkson had plans, oh yes. Soon, soon. *Another three runs and I'll have enough money to not only purchase a better ship, but outfit it the way I want it to be, to be truly the fastest ship in the galaxy.*

The captain's cheerful thoughts cut off as klaxons began to ring throughout the ship and his astromech droids began to warble a warning. The sound of the hyperspace engines, a low hum heard throughout the small freighter changed in pitch, then there was a deep thumping sound and the ship's gravity cut out along with the main engines, hurling people forward in their chairs or entirely out of them.

Clarkson had been eating in the captain's chair, using a tray that stuck out of his armrest to hold his food. His food went flying as his gut slammed into the tray, but that saved him from going flying and after a moment he'd grabbed at his seatbelt, buckling himself in. His bridge crew were not so lucky. Several were hurled off their feet or out of their chairs, and Clarkson grimaced as he heard the sound of snapping bones and saw one man hit the side of the bridge at an awkward angle, his neck snapping. Another was saved only by grabbing onto the back of his chair, clinging there in zero-g.

“Emergency, Emergency, unknown gravitic anomaly, exiting hyperspace.” The ship’s computer announced while the astromech droid squealed in agony, the shorting out of so many systems effecting it too.

“Fuck! Pirates, here? Or is this something worse?” Clarkson grumbled, hitting a series of controls as the ship came out of hyperspace at an angle from their previous course, tumbling through space before the real space engines came online. They at least were shielded from any shocks to the hyperdrive system. “Tell me what’s out there, Spec!”

Spec, the communications specialist grimaced, but pushed off his handhold and slid into the chair facing the sensor console, grabbing it and pushing the comatose or dead body of the man who had been there previously. A single look confirmed Clarkson’s fears. “We have incoming! I’m counting three ships out there, one of which just launched starfighters! Our Arrows came through the crash emergence relatively unscathed.”

The ship’s computers and power runs of a starship were far more durable, able to withstand the shock of reemergence so long as the gravitic anomaly

The emergency power which had righted the ship’s pell-mell fall through space began to beep at them all, as another warning came through the main ship’s computer. “Warning, gravity will be returned in three, two, one...”

A moment later, gravity did return, but thanks to the warning this cause no more injuries among the bridge crew. The survivors looked at their wounded fellows, and two of them moved to remove the wounded and dead, while Clarkson spoke into the ship’s intercom for a moment, getting a situation report from the engine room and throughout the ship. The ship’s hull hadn’t been damaged in any way, thankfully, and the shields came up swiftly.

When he finished getting an idea as to the state of his beloved ship, Clarkson looked over at his sensor specialists. “Details, Spec!”

We have one medium-sized freighter, looks like an old Commerce Guild ship, one of those ramshackle things that is just mostly cargo space. The other two, look to be gunboats, those are Confederacy fleet, brand spanking new, Heron class gunboats.

The gunboat in question was indeed a very new design, one that had only appeared recently. IT wasn’t very good, but it had seven quad lasers and okay shielding for its size. What it lacked was speed, and once the shield went down, like the Munificent class, the small ship’s armor would not take much punishment.

“And the incoming starfighters are vultures. I’m counting twenty plus and counting as more come out of that freighter,” Spec warned.

“Hypercom?” Clarkson asked, looking over at another specialist who took over Spec’s original position.

The man shook his head as Jedi Knight Rou'ge raced onto the bridge from where he had been meditating. The human male took a glance at everything, then shook his head, and spoke into a communicator to his padawan, a young male named Akimf, a Givin who enjoyed tinkering around in the engine room.

Clarkson barely let his eyes glance in the Jedi's direction as he kept his attention on the communications specialist. But despite Clarkson's hopes, that worthy shook his head. "We're being jammed, we can punch through it at short range, but no chance of us getting a Hypercom transmission off."

"Dammit!" Clarkson grumbled. "Shields to maximum, all power to shields and engines. I'm going to plot us a course to get us out of here."

The gravity well of the massive asteroid to one side of the tactical screen had no doubt damaged their hyperspace engines horribly. Yet this was a Corellian ship, you couldn't throw a spanner without hitting an engineer, and if it could be repaired, it would be.

"What about the incoming starfighters? You don't want us to power of our weapons?"

"We're armed with two quad cannons and a tractor beam," Clarkson said slowly as if he was talking to an idiot. We can't add anything to the fight. The best thing we can do is to get out from within the gravity well of that asteroid! Of course," he shouted into his intercom as if the individual on the other end would have heard what he had just been saying, "that presupposes that we have hyperspace engines! I'd like that to be a certainty rather than a possibility people!"

"Cap'n, with all due respect, stuff it up your ass!" a female voice replied. "We're kriffing working on it."

"Work faster," Clarkson ordered, then cut the engine the communication, looking back at his readout with relief. "At least our maneuverability hasn't been impaired. We've even got full speed, hah! Let's see if those mass-produced wrecks can catch us now!"

Of course, Clarkson knew the Vultures would eventually run them to ground if they didn't get their hyperspace engines back. But he could lead them a merry chase at least.

Outside the ship, the 12 starfighters accompanying the Need for Speed had broken off into a wedge formation, heading straight towards the incoming starfighters, who were only a few moments away from where the small group had emerged. Thanks to the vagaries of fate the merchant ship had halted its tumble already pointing away from the incoming fighters. This let it start to put some space between them, as did the need for the enemy to launch their Vultures rather than have them already in space.

"Keep your eyes peeled, the instant those gunboats come into range, we peel off and away. Use our greater speeds to put some distance between us and them just like Need for Speed is," the squadron commander, Los Dalton ordered. He heard a chorus of nervous replies and had to

curse at the fact that more than half of his men were so fucking green. The Commander and two of his lieutenants, had all seen combat by this point, having fought in three battles so far in this war. The rest were fresh out of training school. *So much for runs like this being low priority!*

“The Vultures are about to enter proton torpedoes range. Do not overextend! Lieutenants, keep back one torpedo, everyone else, fire!”

He was again answered with a chorus of acknowledgments, and four seconds later, his starfighters fired off their dual proton torpedoes. This was overkill against starfighters, even Vultures, who actually had okay shielding for their size. But that was okay as sixteen of the advancing Vultures went up in flames. Two of his men had astonishingly shown they could target more than one enemy at a time, making up the numbers.

“Peel away, now!” He ordered, flipping and burning directly away from the incoming vultures after the *Need for Speed*. *With their greater speed they were able to open up a distance between them. In response, the vulture fighters went to full speed as well, leaving behind the gunboats as the commander had hoped. I haven’t ever fought those kinds of gunboats before, but from the information we have on them they have too many quad lasers for my liking.* Even as they went, he ordered two of his flights to keep one proton torpedo in the tube at all times, so that he could have them target the gunboats at range.

Over the next hour of furious retreat, the attacking vultures continued to put distance between themselves and the gunboats, while also spreading out, hoping to come at the *Need for Speed* from multiple angles. *We can’t do anything about that.* Dalton thought, before shaking his head. *We can though do something to thin the kriffing swarm!* “Now! Turn and burn in! Spread only into a cone ten degrees to a side and fifteen up and down!”

The more experienced or those who had really studied the various battles up to this point twisted their starfighters around instantly, racing back towards the vultures spreading as they did so. The others were slower on the mark, but still turned around and his squadron all held their fire until they were within range, before doing the wild dance that spelled survival in a dogfight. “All weapons free bar Flight two! You’re going to be my gunboat killers,” Dalton ordered as he lined up his first shot, hammering a Vulture’s shield for a few seconds before juking around the fire from his target’s wingman.

In the next few seconds, Dalton downed two Vultures, and saw another six disappear from the tactical screen to one side of his cockpit. One of his Arrows died, but it was followed by three more vultures. A tenth died a second later under the commander’s own guns, and Dalton’s twisted around, flipping his ship to the rest left and down, dodging incoming fire, as he attempted to lock up another vulture. As he did, his astromech droid beeped incessantly at him, warning him that the gunboats were trying to break out and away from the dogfight.

Dalton cursed at that, knowing that already, far too many of the enemy Vultures had already just bypassed the dustup around him. They had kept on disgorging Vultures as the battle began,

and now there were over sixty of them still in space and intact. "Flight two, break off and bounce those gunboats."

At his word, four of his Arrows attempted to disengage, trying to pull away again this time going downward from the normal system elliptic. As they did, Dalton saw the first of the Vultures who had attempted to cut the angle on the Need for Speed do so.

Then it was all Dalton could do to survive as a Concussion missile slammed into his shields, shorting them out instantly. His astromech droid went to work on bringing them back online, but Dalton was defenseless for a few seconds and desperately dodged and jukeed this way and that, not even able to shoot back given how much fire was flying around the combat zone already.

At the same time Dalton was dodging for his life, the fire from the vultures destroyed two more of his squadron and as his shield finally came back online Dalton noticed that neither had of them had been able to eject. Nor had the first one to be shot down. "Dammit, stupid greenhorns! Don't they remember where the eject button is?! Mind you, those are made for when we think we can control the battle space and collect survivors, but still! Alive is always better than dead," he grumbled.

He watched the combat map for a moment, watched as one of the gunboats died, but taking one of flight two's starfighters with it. The second gunboat wasn't as lucky, and the reason for that became apparent instantly as flight two's Lieutenant contacted Dalton. "We're out of, proton torpedoes, I launched all of them at that second bastard."

"Overkill but fine," Dalton then returned, hissing as another one of his Arrows died, and it was with a curse that Dalton finally understood they were dying for no damn reason here. And dying indeed because both of the pilots who had been able to eject had their ejecting seats shot out of space. "Break off! Break off and head for the Need for Speed! Need for Speed, this is Dalton come in! What is your situation? Can you hyper?"

"We left the gravity well of that asteroid behind more than twenty minutes ago, so in a sense yes. But in reality, no," Clarkson attempted to make a joke of it, but the joke fell flat, as the older man knew it would. "But our hyperspace engines nearly melted when we crashed into that thing's gravitic shadow. It's a wonder it didn't affect our regular engine all that much."

As he was speaking, Clarkson ordered power shifted to his weapon systems, and the two quad lasers began to pummel the incoming vulture fighters. His crew weren't all that experienced, but to Clarkson's surprise, Spec proved to be an extremely sneaky little kriffer and twice the tractor and flicked out, grabbing onto a vulture holding it still to be pummeled by the quad lasers. Then the Arrows were there, having Lee live let the vultures they had been fighting well behind them, and catching up with the Need for Speed and the vultures who had ignored their assaults.

“We’re not going to get out of here, Dalton,” Clarkson went on, becoming serious once more. “You’ve already lost men, and I can read a tactical screen just as well as anyone. We’re boned.” He looked over at the Jedi Knight standing at the back of the bridge, who nodded. “You and yours all have your hyperspace engines still. Get out of here Dalton.”

“Damn it, Clarkson, we can’t...”

“You can’t win here Dalton. You can only die with us. Get out of here and tell the higher ups about this. That’s all you can do.”

With that, Clarkson cut the connection to the Arrow commander, before leaning back in his captain’s chair, patting the armrest companionably, noting that the tray hadn’t pulled back into its cover. *Strange how the mind works sometimes.* “It’s been a long run old girl, and we’ve seen a kriff ton of things over that time. We were so close too, so close to making you the fastest Y-200 in space. But all good things of the come to an end.”

Looking over at Rou’ge again, Clarkson asked, “Do you object to us trying to surrender?”

The Jedi Knight closed his eyes, then sighed, shaking his head. “While I cannot say the amount of knowledge they could torture out of you, it...”

“Torture?!” gulped Spec, shivering. “Do you really think...”

“The Confederacy is led by a Sith. They delight in such methods even when doing so serves no purpose. In this case, it would,” Rou’ge answered, shrugging his shoulders.

But Clarkson shook his head. “Maybe, but I doubt they will think we actually know anything much, and any chance at survival is better than none.”

To that the Jedi Knight had no reply, save for, “Regardless, a request we prepare to destroy the ship if needed.” Honestly, Rou’ge would probably have already blown the ship if he was alone, but Clarkson was right. He and his people deserved a chance to survive this, no matter how slight it might be.

Clarkson merely nodded, and the Jedi moved over to the starboard side of the bridge, whereupon he began removing a series of panels there.

Meanwhile, Clarkson looked over at the Silonian woman sitting where Spec normally would. “Cassandra, can you open up a link to that ship? I want to see if they’re accepting surrenders.” He then looked back over at the Jedi. “You realize you might have to stay aboard to blow the ship after we leave, right? Are you okay with that?”

The Jedi shrugged his shoulders. “I am a Jedi, keeping this ship and its secrets out of Confederacy hands is my mission. If I die to fill that, it is simply the way of the Force.”

Shivering slightly at the fatalism and the calm acceptance in the Jedi’s voice, Clarkson turned his attention back over at his communications officer. But that worthy was shaking his head. “Sorry

Cap'n," she said, her tail lashing out and around in a corner where it stuck out from between slats on the chair, a certain sign of anger and fear in her species. "But it looks as if they're not accepting surrenders. They're not even acknowledging my attempts to talk to them."

"Well, kriff" Clarkson muttered, as the Jedi Knight stopped his work on the floor before shaking his head, a scowl forming quickly. "Then I suggest we break out the small arms gentlemen. If they're going to make this captain go down with his ship, then by the Force we're going to send a few of them to the other side first."

OOOOOOO

Aboard the *Subtle Artifice*, Clone Commando Unit 5, or Fi to his fellow commandos, crossed his arms as he stared at the ongoing battle. "Hmm... say what you will about these Leaguers, they are quite obstinate."

"Yes," the ship's captain mused. His name was unknown to Fi, his callsign for this mission was simply 'Captain Crimson'. He had been the one to plan this mission. When he had first come to Fi and his fellows on Kamino, Fi was a bit wary about it. After all, while the League was an enemy of the Republic in the future, they were allies now, and borrowing trouble was never a good idea.

But that had faded when the ships and material arrived at the rendezvous point, and Fi had been impressed by the professionalism he had seen among the Republic Intelligence personnel. He still didn't know why this mission was so important that it had come directly from the Chancellor, but he understood it was also an audition for Fi and his brothers. How well did they work with the intelligence apparatus? How good were the Clone Commandos, really? Their genetic modifications and specialized gear meant each commando like Fi cost as much as a battalion of regular clones. Were they worth it?

Fi was determined to make it very clear they were. To his mind, Fi and his brothers were the real successors to their father Jango Fett, the next evolution of the last true Mandalorian. They would not be found wanting.

"I expected the Arrows to break off by this point," Crimson went on. "Continuing the fight is illogical and unprofessional. Live to fight another day. Yes, your charge would be captured, but you could warn your superiors or perhaps bring back help." He caught Fi's eyes and shrugged. "I know it isn't likely, but even RI doesn't know where the GDL fleets are. So, it is possible."

"I disagree. They are soldiers, sir. Protecting that ship is their mission. If I was given such a mission, it would be the height of dishonor to not try my damndest to fight..."

Fi broke off as another Arrow died. There were now only three Arrows alive, and the target freighter's shields were down, their weapons silenced. But that fourth Arrow's death seemed to finally bring the reality of the situation to the three survivors. Between one second and the next, all three jumped to hyperspace in three different directions.

“Was that the commander that just died?” Fi questioned, looking over at the ship’s ECM officer.

“The starfighter that just died? Yes sir,” The other human replied, looking up from his console.

“The comm readings we were getting were pretty clear on that.”

“Make a note of that Ensign. If the comms discipline is so poor, we can pick out their leaders, then when the League inevitably betrays the Republic like the Seps did, we could pick out their leaders in combat.”

Fi remained silent at that, knowing it wouldn’t be so simple, and more than a little concerned about the certainty in Crimson’s voice on that. Making such assumptions ahead of the facts was not the way an intelligence operative of any rank should act, let alone one as senior as Crimson seemed to be given the amount of resources this mission had entailed. *That almost worries me as much as the given reasons for this mission. Finding out where the GDL is getting their gas, fearing they are working with the Seps despite the open war between them? Who do they think they are fooling?*

Still, he had a mission to do, and really, Fi didn’t care about the politics of the thing. *The Republic is everything, my duty to the Republic, honor comes from obedience and following the lawful orders of the Republic, following the word of the Chancellor,* Fi quoted in his head the words that had been indoctrinated into him in the Spaarti cylinder that had birthed him, that had changed him into becoming more than he would have been otherwise. *All that I am, I owe to the Republic.*

With that, he turned away, looking at his second in command, a clone lieutenant who led the platoon assigned to this mission. “Let’s go. It’s time we did our part of this mission. We are on a timetable people, let’s assume that those Arrows can bring help. That way we won’t be surprised.”

Soon, Fi and the clones were aboard the shuttle, double-checking their weapons and locking down helmets as the shuttle shot off from the ship towards the distant enemy.

As they raced forward, Fi noted that the exterior of the freighter had taken quite a bit of punishment. He could see rents in its side and quickly read over the combat report of the dogfight, noting it had taken over twenty concussion missiles **after** the shields had gone down to destroy the freighter’s quad laser and knock out its engines. *How the hell? Were our concussion missiles somehow faulty? It’s possible, but...*

Shaking his head once more, Fi shouted, “Readings indicate that ship might have some areas open to space near the aft section. Lieutenant, take oxygen tanks with you. Your objective is still the engine room. Damaged as it is someone might still be able to rig it to blow.”

“Roger,” the Lieutenant answered laconically.

A second later, the shuttle connected to the freighter’s lone airlock. The shuttle’s umbilical cord connected to the airlock, creating an airtight connection as the computer specialist pushed

off his chair and to the exterior control panel, latching himself down for a moment. It took him a few minutes, but eventually the light on the hatch turned Crimson, and the airlock began to open.

Instantly the clones charged forward, with their officers shouting, "Go, go, go!" Smoke and flash grenades flew forward, giving the troopers cover as they charged in, but Fi, knowing what would happen, held back a moment, judging distances and the amount of headroom they would have aboard the freighter.

Doorways of all sorts were deadly choke points, and on an enemy ship this was doubly true. Thankfully, this ship had never been designed to repel boarders, so there were no automated defenses. The defenders though had time to set up and they started to rain small arms fire into the troopers. One man went down, then another despite the smoke and strobing flashes, before Fi had seen enough.

With a blast from his jet, a nearly pure Mandalorian designed piece of equipment, he flew over the heads of the advancing troopers, his heavy blaster firing in one way as the underslung mini grenade launcher in his right vambrace fired in the other direction. The men on the left, huddled behind a portion of the deck that had been flipped upward, died to his fire as it arced down at them from on high.

His grenades, however, ran into a Jedi. A young Givin, he held up a hand and caught the grenades as they fell, tossing them forward into the advancing clones. Good troops, those who could retreated, but the blasts caught many of them, and Fi curse even as he used his jet to move in that direction, a vibro-knife popping out of his gauntlet. *A jedi, here!?*

The Givin though rolled out of cover before Fi landed, his lightsaber slashing back, forcing Fi to halt his downward movement, landing instead on the bulwark, balancing there. His blaster fired, but the Givin retreated, his lightsaber blocking the plasma bolts, but Fi fell back over the metal deck plate under his feet, kicking it forward. The lightsaber cut through it, but Fi had already fired two more grenades, and the Givin couldn't switch his attention fast enough.

Or at least, Fi had thought so. When the smoke cleared however, the entire hallway from one end to another was covered by a shield. *So that must be the Force Shields that the Jedi have begun to use. Huh, I wasn't certain I believed they really existed, not like this before. Perhaps there really is more to this Force nonsense than I thought.*

Despite that thought, Fi didn't hesitate, nor did his men. With the Lieutenant racing down the other hallway the men who remained under Fi's command poured fire into the shield. When it started to flicker, Fi fired more of his grenades, and then once more flew up and forward. The Jedi attempted to cut at him as the shield failed but wasn't quite fast enough, and Fi's vibro-blade cut into the top of his head. The young Givin ducked the blow but could no longer block the blaster bolts coming at him even as something crashed into Fi smacking him into the hall's roof.

A second later whatever had done so failed, and the Jedi collapsed, riddled with plasma bolts. Yet at the same time, more of the crew began to appear, firing at Fi and his fellows and at the Lieutenant and his.

For the next fifteen minutes, Fi was forced to break through two more guard points, and then began to prepare to break through the hatch there, knowing he would find harsh resistance on the other side. There hadn't been another Jedi yet, which was a good thing in his opinion, but which probably meant there was one on the bridge. That one Jedi had held them up and killed more than half his men with his stunt with the grenades. *I have to make a note of that going forward. The Jedi was too damn quick to use my grenades against us. And if they are now giving their loyalty to the League over the Republic where it should be, we might run into more traitors, either in more missions like this or in the future if war comes.*

By the time the commando had prepped the hatch to explode, several of his squads had moved throughout the rest of the city the ship. The engine room had been taken, and another squad had pushed into the cargo area. Their report though, cause the commando to blink, frowning. "Trooper 9462, check your oxygen intake." he ordered crisply. That area of the ship had been the area open to space.

"Sir, I've already done so twice, although I can completely understand why you jumped to that idea," The clone's voice was almost, but not quite panicky, the voice of a man faced with something completely beyond his ken. "But I'm telling the truth, and the rest of my team will tell you the same thing if you want. This cargo area, I, I can barely see the far side of it! It's got to be at least six, maybe as much is ten times the size that it looks to be outside!"

A second later, a grainy image appeared on Fi's visor, which, like the other clone officers, could show video as well as other information when needed. It let them coordinate almost like the droids the Confederacy fielded, but now Fi shuddered as he realized 9462 had been telling the truth. What he was seeing looked more like the cargo bay of a Lucrehulk rather than the cargo hold of a small, privately owned mid-size freighter.

It was a sign of the unusual, the unreal, the impossible, the very sight of it disturbing Fi, far more than the Jedi being able to batter away blaster bolts, far more than the shield that the young Givin had used him. That was just an application of the Force, and one Fi had seen numerous reports about. Something like this? The commando had never heard of anything like it. *And why do I think that is the real reason that we were sent on this mission? If the Jedi can do something like this, it changes everything!*

OOOOOO

Inside the bridge, Rou'ge looked over at Clarkson, who looked pale and shaky. They had attempted to surrender several times, but it looked as if whatever else, the Republic wanted no witnesses to this betrayal. *That very fact must be why. After all, if any hint of this assault being*

from the Republic got out, the Senate might face an uprising on their own planets. The GDL is seen as a staunch ally after all, and one who has scored major victories over the Confederacy.

“I am sorry,” Rou’ge said to the captain, who had seen his men and women, people he’d served with for decades, die today. “I had hoped that at some point they would be willing to listen to reason, to let you all surrender as you wished. But now we have come to it and...”

“I know.” Despite his white face and fearful expression, Clarkson was firm. “Just, just let me die on my feet. That’s all I ask at this point.” He shuddered. “I, I don’t want to be killed by that er, that runic array of yours going haywire.”

Rou’ge sighed but reflected that it wasn’t as if he had not held out hope either. The retreating Arrows could have, after all, found help somehow. But it was obviously not going to happen now. *And my padawan has already paid for my assumptions and hopes. Although I doubt he or I would have survived any surrender anyway. And Clarkson has a point even now. The runic array’s implosion is not the way I would wish to die either.* “Very well, captain. I suppose we owe you that much.”

The man nodded and moved to a side of the back of the bridge. His men had already made makeshift barricades there, and the surviving bridge crew, the only members of his crew alive to this point were already there, holding weapons they barely knew how to use. But all of them too had heard their fellows dying elsewhere. Even the engineering crew, who had attempted to surrender, had been killed to a sentient.

A moment later, the hatchway leading into the bridge exploded inward. A protonic explosive had been set against it sending the shrapnel of the hatchway into the bridge. Rou’ge had already felt the danger of the explosion through his Force Precognition, and a Force Shield flared up, blocking the debris. And then, with a grunt of effort Rou’ge reached out with the Force and hurled the explosion backward into the attackers’ faces.

In the hatchway Fi saw the explosion coming towards him, and hastily used his jets to push up and backward away from the hatch. But the two clone troopers who had been ready to charge forward weren’t so quick off the mark and a second later both of them were immolated along with their rest of their fire team, who had been waiting to fire into the breach.

As the roiling explosion began to fade away, the clone commando charged forward, firing his grenade launcher into the bridge. But instead of going high once more, he bounced off the top of the hatchway and down, still using his backpack to hurl himself forward along the deck and between two stanchions.

Rou’ge grimaced at the impacts of the concussion explosions against his shield and was thus totally unprepared for the commando who came skidding on his back underneath the Force Shield.

Fi fired not at the Jedi, but at four of the bridge crew who had been huddling to one side of the hatchway. All four went down, and then, as the Jedi grabbed up his lightsaber and went to cut at the man, Fi boosted upwards, using an arm guard to block the blow.

The arm guard had been covered with cortosis, and Rou'ge's lightsaber spluttered out. And then, the commando's other hand was raising, thrusting forward with a long serrated vibroknife which stabbed into the Jedi Knights chest, the vibrating tearing out of his side, dropping the man.

Staring down at the Jedi then over at the rest of the bridge crew, Fi shook his head slightly, then opened up a communication between himself and the Subtle Artifice. "Captain Crimson, we have the ship. Send over the prize crew, and some video recorders. We're going to want to take some pictures of the cargo bay. I'm attaching some recordings from my team's findings." Unlike the clone commando's more powerful system, the clones couldn't send video data that far away by radio.

A cough drew his attention to the Jedi, and he looked over in his direction, somewhat astonished to see the man was still alive. He seemed to be mumbling something, and with a shrug, Fi went to his knees beside the man's head, holding his vibro-knife to the short beard of the man, the hair of it shifting under the vibration of the air around it. "S, should've blown the, the ship before you boarded...."

"You should have," the clone commando said, professionally. "I can understand the strength of hope, but as a Jedi you must have known your position was useless. Your bleeding-heart nature seems to have worked against you. The Republic will know the secrets that the Jedi keep on this ship and your betrayal will become known."

The man actually smiled at that, shaking his head slowly from side to side. Almost automatically, the clone commando pulled his knife away as the man did this, and then had an instant to regret it, as the Jedi said, "The Jedi will never surrender to the Dark Side. Nor are we afraid to die..."

Fi scowled, but the man didn't seem to do anything, until a loud crack noise drew his attention. Rou'ge had not been concentrating on the man in front of him, he had instead been concentrating on a single rune set within the rest of the array, accessible now that the protective panel over it had been removed. The connection there had already been loosened, and now a slight tug of the Force was enough to pull the bit of metal out and away, cutting the expansion array.

The effect was immediate, and the clone commando had only a millisecond to understand something had happened. Then he stared as his body was pulled to the side, each molecule tearing apart, pulled in the direction of the ship's cargo hold. Fi and his men screamed as their bodies were pulled into a singularity.

Space abhorred a vacuum and was never meant to be expanded in the manner the expansion array created. When the array, the net of Force power that kept the space within the cargo hold blown up like a balloon well past its normal space, failed, the effect was like a black hole had suddenly appeared there, pulling in everything from all around itself. And as Clarkson had known the effect was insanely painful, if quick.

Aboard his ship, Crimson stared in horror as the enemy ship didn't so much explode as implode. The ship was not so much torn asunder, most of it just flat-out disappearing, pulled into a tiny area of space. This included the shuttle holding the skeleton crew and the majority of the Vultures around the ship.

A moment later, as the effect stopped, there was an actual explosion of energy, which sent out a wave of heat and force, tearing apart the few surviving Vultures, leaving only seven Vultures still flying beyond its impact.

For a few minutes, Crimson just stared, stunned at the sudden turn of events and the destructive potential of whatever that thing had been. *What kind of bomb could do something like that!?* That it was something his people had tripped, some trick the turncoat Jedi had set up, he didn't doubt. It's impact though, was something no technology he knew of could create. *Can the Jedi do something like that with the Force?!*

Eventually though, Crimson recovered his equilibrium and understood that this mission was a failure. "Get on the Hypercom. I need to report this. Helm, get us out of here. I don't think we want to be here if GDL ships show up. Sensors, record everything up until we jump out. I want us to have every iota of data we can to try and figure out what the hell just happened!"

OOOOOOO

Sidious snarled with fury, staring at the readout in front of him. Everything had gone according to plan, everything. the data that had come to him so fortuitously had been accurate. One of the secretive Outgrowth ships had been right where it should have been, and his men had been in position.

Even the clone commando assigned to this mission to deal with any internal threats the freighter could pose, had done very well, proving that concept's worth in the future. But at the last, the Jedi had somehow self-detonated the ship, leaving nothing but a mystery behind. *We will not get so lucky again, and I cannot divert enough resources, material or personnel to attempt to do this again. The only upside is that nothing will have been left behind to point to the Republic being behind this attack.*

Reining in his fury with the ease of long practice, Sidious leaned back in his throne, thinking. *Not multiple ships, but one ship. and the information on that, that expanded cargo hold...* The data the clones had found had been in the process of being transferred when whatever trap had gone off. The brief few seconds of images were badly distorted, but the computer experts under Agent Crimson had been able to put it back together.

The man who would be Emperor snarled, angered beyond belief at this latest sign of Jedi secrets. *How did they do it, how?! How have the Jedi created these techniques, this new ability along with every other new trick they have come up with in the past decade, and kept it secret to boot? It is not fair!*

That thought brought Sidious up short, and he scowled. That kind of thought was far too childish for him to let it into his mind, for even a second. *The light side version of Sith alchemy perhaps? That makes some sense, I suppose.*

Regardless of the how, Sidious was faced with the fact that once more, the Jedi had prepared ahead of time. *This problem, this whole concept, is one I must use the Prophets of the Dark Side to duplicate if it is at all possible. I cannot hope for more, but perhaps taking one of these ships intact could give us more. Still, that might well prove impossible.*

And after a moment, Sidious salved his anger with the idea that perhaps this trick was incredibly difficult to do. After all, if the Jedi could produce such a change before this, then surely there would have been more signs of it before this? And why would they waste it on logistics? No, this ship was obviously something new, which could perhaps let Sidious and the Sith catch up to the Jedi if the trick could be replicated, although Sidious had no idea how even the Prophets would begin that project. *Hmm, perhaps the rest of the report about what happened when the Jedi committed suicide will be more important. Who can say?*

“Yes, even with this, the Jedi have not prepared enough, and they do not know of my presence at the heart of the Republic. I must personally remain hidden, I **must** remain so,” Sidious verbalized once more. “And the war must become as nasty as possible, to both break the Jedi more quickly, and to help me push the idea that the Jedi cannot be trusted to put the Republic first.”

Yet that too is dangerous. It would put the whip hand further into Dominus’s hands far more than Sidious was truly comfortable with given both the man’s incompetence when it came to countering Potter, and the man’s very thinly veiled ambitions. Still, Sidious knew that he couldn’t take counsel from his fears and that soon Noctis would be in place to counter Dominus. Her mission to Brentaal had already been accomplished, and the next act would be to grab Dominus’ attention as a potential recruit to his Brotherhood.

Sitting in the darkness of his throne room, Sidious allowed that darkness, the Dark Side filled his soul, soothing and empowering his anger, making him stronger as he thought of how to bring an end to Potter and the new direction the war would take soon, especially the attack on Corellia. Such an attack will also allow the Republic to attack the Confederacy somewhere in turn, score an outright offensive victory. Yes... I will try to place the Strategist in position to take advantage of that, and then use that reflected glory to bolster my own position in the Senate and the Naval High command.”

Sidious smiled at the thought. With Yoda's expected return, Sidious would need such a victory to make it clear he too had strategic instincts and should be listened to as well as any of the Jedi Masters. For now, Sidious could feel the death of Jedi throughout the Republic, the deaths of thousands even as the war only slowly began to ratchet up in intensity once more from Yoda's cursed trick, letting his anger and confusion at the Jedi's trick wash away.

The war itself will fuel me, with fuel the Dark Side. Let the Jedi continue to plan to fight Dominus, to hide their young away. I will find where they went, and they too will die. So long as I remain hidden, the Jedi will never feel the dagger at their back until it is far too late. But until then, it is now the time for them, and the universe as a whole, to bleed.

Yet even as he thought that the knowledge of those youngling being out there undermined Sidious's faith in himself and the Great Plan. And the secret of the expanded space on this, what amounted to a simple freighter, concerned him greatly, beyond any other ability the Jedi had shone this smacked of the otherworldly, of something he and the Sith would never be able to recreate. It was a sign that the Great Plan had taken a massive blow, and he could not do anything about it yet, perhaps ever.

OOOOOOO

Ahsoka wasn't certain what to expect as the shuttles began to fly through the atmosphere of Ruusan, heading towards where Harry was guiding them. She wasn't alone in that. Indeed, even her Master and Aayla admitted to not really knowing what they would find on the surface of the planet. Welcome, certainly, but in the past two days of hyperspace travel, Master Fay had hinted several times at the fact that they would find the planet changed.

Despite that, Ahsoka and the others were not prepared for what they discovered.

First, the feeling of the Force was so powerful here, taking the feeling of welcome they had been feeling through the Force to an entirely new level. And as they moved out of the shuttles, they could see the physical impact that the Force had on this planet. The area that the shuttles had sent down was a cleared zone, but the reason for it having been cleared, was because the trees which had previously been there had simply been floated away along with the ground around their roots and now were hovering nearby as if they were just waiting for the shuttles to lift off once more before returning to their previous places. Those previous places had also been flattened by another application of the Force.

And beyond them, were more floating things, although Harry wondered if, unlike the trees, these had not been set to float by Master Fay or his mother. Rocks here and there, several of them smooth and as if they were steppingstones to wider platforms of wood, where Aayla pointed out some Bouncers were laying out, looking like very odd cats taking in a sunbeam. Since the odd creatures could use the Force to make their thoughts known, it wasn't such a stretch that they would be able to learn how to make items hover in the air as they did.

To the other side if you turned your head to the east, was what looked like the beginnings of a large kitchen and commissary. The chairs looked as if they were crags of rock that had grown out of the ground and it was there that the only technological thing to be seen: an ultramodern kitchen area, complete with pots, cookers and other things whose purpose Ahsoka couldn't tell from here, but which gleamed in the sunlight above. The kitchen was separated by a low wall from the rest but had no roof but a rolled-up piece of cloth.

Animals moved around in view, looking up with unconcern at the giant shuttles coming down. Several Bouncers also nodded, who seemed to nod in welcome to the Jedi and the younglings as they came out of the shuttles in clumps, chattering excitedly. It is only that noise that finally drives the local animals away.

And waiting for them was a Force Ghost, the redheaded Lily that Harry and Aayla had told Ahsoka about, Harry's biological mother. Next to her stood Master Fay, although looking at the two women, it was somewhat difficult for Ahsoka and the others who had not met them before to choose which looked more ghostlike.

Master Fay at least still seemed to walk on the ground, but she was also nearly transparent, as if, if you tried hard enough you could see straight through her, while an inner light glowed from the woman, visible even to their physical senses. Whereas Lily looked as if she was a glass, which had been filled with a barely opaque liquid. You could see straight through her, but it was obvious that if you reached out, you would feel something when you touched her. The color of her hair was also very obvious, as were her eyes, the same emerald hue that was so striking in Ahsoka's Master.

The youngling's stared at the floating trees, the rocks and two otherworldly women waiting for them, a few of the older ones slowly falling silent, while all the Masters concentrated on the women. Everything else was secondary in their opinion, and they moved forward in a block. This left the older younglings and the former Agri-corps workers to organize the younglings. Having been working on this for a while, they tried to organize the younglings into rows, and this worked for all but the youngest but that too had been planned for and there was one Agri-corps worker for every four younglings.

The rest, more than five hundred of them, also began to unload the shuttles. They brought out the supplies they had taken from the Temple, like the many holocrons, training droids, and computers, and their own limited personal effects. This included examples of the various vegetables and fruits the Agri-corps had worked with previously. After all, while Master Fay and Lily probably didn't need to eat, the younglings couldn't live on the Force alone, hence the modern kitchen.

Master Fay walked forward from Lily, who moved off to one side, flying forward through the Force as if she was moving at a brisk pace, taking in the younglings as she circled them, smiling at them, before moving over to her son and Ahsoka and Aayla. She hugged Harry, who hugged her back happily. "Harry! It's so great to see you! You haven't stopped in to see me you know,

I've only gotten secondhand reports of you for years," she said mock-severely, leaning back and taking in her son's face before looking over at Aayla. "Master Fay told me the two of you had grown significantly since you were here, and looking at you now, I can definitely see it."

Harry just smiled, holding his mother and her his arms, delighting in the fact that she was even more solid than she had been when they had left. He could still feel that he could push his arms through her if he tried, but it would be more like pushing his arms through water than through air as previously. "It's good to see you too mom, and sorry for not being able to stop in more often. Even this little trip is a bit much in terms of how long it's taking out of our various duties as leaders of the GDL. We won't even be able to stay for long, I'm afraid, just a day here, then racing straight back to Freedom's Fence."

"I was joking Harry, and you know it," Lily retorted, moving out of his arms and moving over to Aayla, who also gleefully returned the hug. "You two have moved on with their lives, found your new purpose. You don't have to apologize for that, ever. And I was being more admiring than admonishing anyway. I would never have stepped up to the plate of leading this whole third-party of yours that Master Fay described to me, and even if I tried, I don't think that I'd do as good a job. I'm proud of you."

with that, Lily turned to look over at Ahsoka, moving away from Aayla and opening her arms. "And not least because you took on the task of teaching this young one. Welcome to the family Ahsoka Tano."

Ahsoka smiled widely at that. Even though she had been taken into the Order at a very young age by Master Koon, she was still a Togrutan, and the word family was an important one. Returning her own ghostly hug, she giggled a little at the feel of it, although never having hugged Lily when she was as a ghost, she had nothing to compare it to. "I'm happy to be a part of that Master Lily."

"Save that Master stuff for Harry, to you, I'm just Lily. And if you ever think that Harry is getting a bit too arrogant or big for his breaches, I can tell you some stories..." Lily teased, causing Harry and Aayla to both groan aloud, although Aayla's giggle kind of detracted from the possible horror she was feeling, and Harry's groan was more an acknowledgement of how much that might impact his mystique as a Master than anything else.

Saying that they would talk more later, Lily gently disengaged from Ahsoka, smiled brightly at her son and his lover, and then moved over into the gaggle of younglings, nodding politely to the older Agri-corps workers. Young and old all of them were staring at her, even as they continued to work on unloading the shuttles. She moved through them, patting heads here, tapping shoulders there, winking and smiling, in a way that the older younglings had begun to move past with their teachers. Some of them tried to frown, but simply couldn't create any annoyance or disapproval in the face of Lily's good humor or the feel of the Force in this magnificent place.

As she was doing this, the various Masters came within speaking distance of Master Fay, who nodded her head towards them, her hands in her Jedi robes as she bowed from the waist before allowing a smile to appear on her face that did not go very well with the formality of the original movement. "Welcome all to Ruusan. Welcome younglings, to where you will call home and school combined. Welcome Teachers, where you will continue to train the next generation, and in so doing reach a higher connection to the Force yourselves. Welcome those of you who were placed in the Agri-corps. It is here where you will find a second lease on your future. What you make of that, what you make of the training and knowledge you will learn here, is entirely up to you. Here you will find help, here you will find learning, here you all will find safety. And I hope, going forward, you will also find happiness and purpose."

"Master Fay," said the oldest Master from the Agri-corps, a Sullustan bent with age. "Your welcome is most gratifying and the wonders already on display here are intensely interesting. I now understand completely why Master Yoda told me that without the danger of the Sith, we may well have been opening a second Temple here on Ruusan. I speak for us all when I say that we are eager to settle in and make this place our own."

Master Fay nodded once more at that, then looked over to Harry as he moved through the crowd of youngling's and Agri-corps workers. When he and Aayla reached her, Harry made to bow politely towards her in the Jedi manner, but Master Fay surprised him and the others there by moving forward, taking her former padawan in a hug as tight as the one Lily had given him, before stepping back, and doing the same with Aayla and Ahsoka in turn.

"Welcome back," she said simply. "I am certain that we have much to talk about but let me show you around along with the others, show you what your mother and I have been doing before we get to the more serious galaxy-spanning issues."

Harry smiled at her, while Aayla said it was amazing to see her in the flesh. Beside Harry Ahsoka just stared for some reason, in awe at the woman in front of her in a way that Lily's more homely down to earth appearance hadn't evoked despite being a ghost.

Master Fay just smiled at her until Ahsoka realized she was staring and flushed a bit looking away before Fay looked around at the gaggle of thousands of younglings as they continued to pile out of the shuttles. To one side, Lily had already taken charge, instructing those Agri-corps workers who were carrying crates to follow her towards the commissary area, to start with.

Seeing this, Master Fay raised her voice slightly, using the Force to let it be heard over the sounds of hundreds of small conversations and just noises of delight from the younglings all around them. "Those of you who are carrying communications equipment, and heating equipment and so forth can please set them to one side at Lily's direction, we will be coming back for them. But could I have the youngling clans from the youngest to age ten form up on the left? We will be showing you your new homes first."

Leaving the other Masters in charge of the three older youngling clans and Lily to instruct the Agri-corps members on their own work, Master Fay led the youngsters off to one side, through the forest away from the landing area. This took them underneath several of the floating trees, and when Aayla asked about them, Fay laughed. "That would be me. I had picked out the nearby area for the commissary, and that perforce meant this zone should also be used as a landing area."

One of the tallest Masters reached up, touching one of the floating bits of ground and tree root, shaking his head in wonder. "Amazing, simply amazing."

"Indeed. And putting them back after we are done unloading things from the *Tyrant's Bane* will be among the first task of some of you all. I will put them down, but the rest of you will replace them in the ground. How you do so is up to you," Fay warned. This would also be a test of both the Jedi Knights and Masters willingness to do such work, and how they did so.

As Fay led the way she continued to talk quietly to the teachers Yoda had assigned to this new Temple, while the youngsters stared around them at the forest, seeing still more evidence of the wild force everywhere they looked: small floating stones, a few floating plants, and so forth that looked far less cultivated than the trees Fay had set to float.

But when they came to where they would live, all of the youngsters cheered in delight rushing forward and forgetting their training in Jedi decorum despite the protests of a few of the teachers. But those protests were short-lived, as even the Jedi were amazed at the beauty of the spot.

The area Master Fay had chosen as the youngling dormitories was set around a winding stream that made its way through several hills like a giant snake. Around and on top of the hills, wildflowers bloomed, mostly blue, dark violet, white and light red. Across the stream at various points stones flew, creating Force-assisted bridges that several of the youngling's instantly began to hop on, going from one stone to another as the Masters watched. Two other younglings, a Mon Calamari and another aquatic species Harry hadn't seen before, leaped into the river, robes and all, to much laughter.

Each hill had a cave carved out of it, lined with stone so seamlessly that when one teacher tried to get his nail between them, he couldn't. Peering inside, all of the younglings were a little startled at how spare they were, but the overall beauty of the area still enchanted them.

"Each youngling clans will have its own cave, and you all have already begun to notice that in terms of furniture and so forth, there is a great deal of room for improvement," Fay announced as the youngling's began to separate further, exploring over the hills and into the caves, while more younglings from aquatic races began to explore the river. "You will also notice that there are no toiletries. That kind of thing will need to be taken care of by more modern equipment and someone who knows about modern architecture and design. I do not."

"I take it you expect us to set the youngling's to creating their own furniture as force exercises Master Fay. It's an intriguing idea, and I think is both good for them, and for future sets of younglings," One of the teachers mused. "This way, they can leave an indelible mark for those that come after and could be a new and interesting way to use the Force." The woman then smiled. "Heh, although working on the toiletries should probably take precedent."

"Indeed. I would suggest that you work on lighting as well. Nighttime here will be interesting for those of you who are used to being aboard ship, or on Coruscant, the planet that never truly sleeps," Fay chuckled, and the teachers all nodded, asking questions about the local woods, what trees they could harvest for tables chairs and so forth, as well as bedding supplies: what kind of reeds or other fillings for mattresses they could find here. Soon, the youngling clans were gathered once more, and one of the teachers began to decide on which of the caves would go to which clan, and what work needed to be done to each.

Leaving the younglings there, Fay led the way back to the others. As they went, Aayla teased, "You really have been busy Master Fay. And is it just me, or has your antique green thumb gone away since we were last able to speak in the physical world?"

Master Fay's lips quirked wryly. "You might indeed say that yes. Although, for the most part I have turned over that aspect to Lily."

Lily took up the tale then, explaining, "Since our interactions with the Force font, you know that I have become more solid. But my ability to use magic has also expanded greatly. I won't say that I'm as good with it as I would be with my hands, and I still can't, say, touch something with enough physical presence to lift it off the ground. But I was able to use the Force to plant those flowers back there and do quite a lot of other things."

Something about the way his mother said that had Harry looking at her, with Aayla also doing so but at a far greater depth than Harry could. Through her empathic skills, Aayla could also detect the feelings of anticipation, pride, and the desire to help. She passed that onto Harry instantly for the other connection, and both of them smiled, Aayla reaching out to take Lily's hand in hers and squeeze it ever so briefly, feeling her fingers sink into Lily's own 'watery' ones. "I'm sure we will be happy with everything you've done, Mother Lily," she said aloud, Harry nodding firm agreement.

Lily winked at them both, and then they were back with the rest of the newcomers. Fay called out for the next youngling clans, and those among the Agri-corps workers who were padawan age and wished to restart their Jedi training from where it had been paused when they were sent to the Agri-corps in the first place. Those who were older than that but still wished to do so would be provided more instruction as well, but would be housed elsewhere, with the Knights and Masters.

Thanks to Harry's work on them prior to this, that was no longer an emotional issue for most of them. The few who still had a negative emotional response were noted by Master Fay and

indeed by a few of the Masters who would be training them further. Those who had proven lazy in the past had also been marked prior to their arrival here by first Wulo, then Aayla, as well as the ones who had shown a disturbing level of unearned arrogance, or a lack of empathy.

The Centauroid was no longer with them. Harry had put his old friend in command of the Lucrehulk sent to Corellia for refit.

This group was housed in a canyon about thirty minutes' walk away from the landing area on the opposite side from the other youngling clans. This wasn't the only difference. Instead of being housed in large communal caves, the caves here were backed up by overhangs here and there, marked by thick fabric. They were also much smaller and could house a single individual or up to four comfortably in some cases.

Being padawans or at that age, Fay assumed that "All of you are able to organize yourselves in such a manner as to not create problems for one another or your teachers. Harmony is what we seek here, ladies and gentlemen."

Once more though, toiletries would need to be designed and put in place. As would more in the way of protection from the elements. That would be much harder than creating furniture, but again, these were older students and could be trusted to create it.

Only the two youngling clans remained there this time, the rest returning to the landing zone. Many started to transfer their limited personal effects or the necessary material to create the bathrooms and so forth immediately. One of the Masters, a stocky Bothan took command there, already having ideas in that direction. Meanwhile, the unloading had been accomplished by this point. With that done, Lily took Ahsoka off, wanting to show her the Valley of the Jedi before the rest of the newcomers could see it, and to exchange stories about Harry. The Valley would be incorporated into the temple but would serve as a place for advanced instruction only, instead of a place which would see a lot of people on a daily basis.

This left Fay to lead the majority of the former Agri-corps workers, the padawans, and more than a dozen remaining Masters to see something else. This trip too took them about an hour's walk. "We decided to spread out as well as we could, both in order to make room for more clans in the future, and simply because here, there is no reason to so isolate ourselves from the world at large. Ruusan doesn't have any locals beyond groups of Bouncers and other primitive locals, after all. Who are completely immune to being impressed or have nothing we need to impress them for."

Many of the Masters winced at that rather direct assault on the reason behind the Temple on Coruscant, but instead of continuing in that vein, Fay admitted, "This next area is the one that needs the most work, predominantly because we didn't have the resources here to do anything for it beyond choose a good spot. The lightsaber workshop, and training area."

With that, Fay led the way through a narrow culvert set a little to the side of the mountain that held the Valley of the Jedi along its outer edge elsewhere. The culvert led into a wide oval-

shaped area, the edges of it lined with trees, but the center of it cleared, showing signs that it had recently had trees as well before they had been replanted. Overall, it looked like a tree lined training arena.

Gesturing to it, Master Fay explained, "I thought that this would do as a lightsaber training zone. But I have yet to figure out where to put the workshop to construct lightsabers. And we will need to think about missions to retrieve lightsaber crystals at some point, although exploring the planet, we have discovered a few places that could contain various types of crystals."

"Perhaps for that, we should put up actual modern buildings," one of the other Masters mused. "Then it can double as a place to store equipment needed for maintenance and so forth, as well as a general machinist's shop which we will need."

"The dichotomy between a modern building and the rest of this almost fantastical setting might also serve to create a subtle message we might wish to capitalize on." The others looked at Jedi Knight Arjen, Lamira, the Nautolan who Yoda had felt should join Harry's command team, although from the way her eyes were gleaming as she looked around, Harry wondered. After a moment of embarrassment at the sudden attention, she went on. "The lightsaber has, let us be blunt, become a symbol of the Jedi on far too many worlds across the Republic. But what it truly is, is a sign that a Jedi must be aware that violence is always a concern, one that we must take guard against. We want to set that concept as a stern injunction, something that we all need to think about and acknowledge, but never embrace. Too often in the past lightsaber training has been seen as just another use of the Force, without touching on the moral aspect."

Master Fay looked at her thoughtfully, and then smiled gently. "I like her," she said to Harry, causing the other Jedi to actually flush a bit at the approving tone in the far older Jedi's voice. "And I quite like that idea. I will leave that in addition to all of you. While I was trained in lightsaber as a padawan, I set it aside when I became a Knight."

"We also need to think about something going forward. This recent war and the build up to it within the temple have shown that some Jedi are not really capable of long-term combat be it sustained warfare or sudden spurts of intense violence. But we cannot allow that division, a division that has caused this trouble in the past with how many Consulars there still are in comparison to guardians were sentinels, to further divide us. We need equal voices from Guardian Sentinel and Consulars always."

That caused some scowls. But when Fay, perhaps the most 'Consular' of all Jedi, nodded firm agreement, that cut the legs out from under any idea of continuing the practice and teachings that had led that sect to dominating the Jedi Order here.

"Are you saying we should always pair them one to another? Work in teams of three instead of the normal two Master-padawan pair or even single?" Another Master, one of the ones who had retired to the Agri-corps, mused.

“Why not? The Order was moving towards teams of Jedi for years before the outbreak of violence provided everyone a reason for that move,” Arjen argued back.

“You mentioned a machinist shop, and I think that we need to make some more plans in that direction here. This area is magnificent and wonderful, but it isn’t very modern. The sentinels need to be able to train themselves on computers, on electronics, engineering, even infiltration. Although, I will admit, that last one is quite difficult to train in. And so would piloting here, even with the number of simulators we brought along.”

“That is a good suggestion as well. But I am not good with computers to the extent that I can program them, although, I will say that I am an alright pilot and a self-taught engineer,” Fay admitted. “Many of you are no doubt better than I in that area. I will cheerfully offer my services and training in meditation, the ability to detect falsehoods, and all manner of mental disciplines as well as helping to teach runes with Lily. But when it comes to computers, both programming and data investigation, I will hold my hand up and say that it is not my primary area of expertise.”

“In that case, we need to start thinking about more plans. Not just a single shop for maintenance and lightsaber building, but perhaps a series of structures. We brought along several of the training droids, I’m certain that they could help...”

As he stepped back and watched the debate begin, Harry mused that Master Fay had done it again. This was what Fay had wanted to occur when she had shown the area that she had designated as the lightsaber training zone. *“She wants the Jedi Order from Masters to this first batch of younglings to think that they are contributing. That they are part of the whole, instead of just moving into an already prepared ‘temple’,”* he sent to Aayla.

“Agreed, Fay’s very good at that kind of thing. And she did it in such a way that she can admit her own ignorance in the other aspects of being a Jedi without undermining her authority,” Aayla answered.

As they turned back the way they came the discussion continued, getting down to more basic matters, as several of the training Masters pulled out datapads, and began to create architectural designs on them, for the new buildings that they would have to put up. Others began to talk about what kind of furniture that they would allow the younglings to build, heading in that direction not join the youngling clans and teachers.

Still more debated on what kind of electronics and industrial material they would need going forward. There were quite a few things that they wouldn’t be able to create themselves here on Ruusan with no local industrial capacity, and while some of that had been brought along thanks to stopping in at Jaderin they would need more pipes, electrical lines and so forth to start on the construction of a few buildings which could then be used to train the younglings and former younglings among the Agri-corps workers in engineering and such.

Several of the Masters who had retired to the Agri-corps agreed to take over those projects, and they even knew some of the former Agri-corps members who had good engineering or technical skills which could be a major help going forward. Regardless, they would probably need to send out regular forays to Jaderin for new computer parts since the Tyrant's Bane had to return to the rest of the galaxy swiftly.

Called into the discussion at that point, Harry agreed, however, that the Tyrant's Bane could head back there to purchase a freighter, a small one, then could send it back here with a skeleton crew of the Masters and Knights who had been assigned here. He didn't need to look at Arjen to know that she would volunteer for that. While initially Arjen had been supposed to stay as part of the green Jedi's crew seconded to the Tyrant's Bane, she had found her calling in teaching the younglings, and was a sentinel herself. Beyond someone like Aayla or her Master Thorne, Harry couldn't think of someone offhand who could be a better fit for training future sentinels.

When the discussion got back to the landing area, and the ongoing work of disembarking the shuttles and unloading them, Master Fay smoothly broke off a few of the Masters to go and help with that aspect, and then looked over at Harry and Aayla. "But I am afraid I will not be much help in designing these new buildings. If you could create a design, and then I can look at it, and determine where around here to place it, I think that will be the best idea going forward. For now, I would like to speak with my former padawan and young Aayla along with any of you who like to work with plants and enjoy farming."

Despite the fact that it was named the Agri-corps, that obviously didn't imply that everyone seconded to it would come to enjoy their work there. So they only had a hundred volunteers to come with them, with several dozen more evincing interest, but only later once they had helped settle in and other projects were finished.

Regardless, Master Fay walked beside Harry as they trooped in a different direction, heading out towards where Harry remembered the plains began at the base of the mountains where the Valley of the Jedi rested. It took them several hours walk, during which the Jedi all talked quietly to themselves, and Harry and Aayla filled in Fay to reach the destination while they took in the changed forest and exchanged hellos with the Bouncers as they passed a few.

Harry thought that his Master would have some advice for them, perhaps even some critiques about how they were running the GDL, or about the rest of the political and social issues bubbling under the surface of the war. He knew Fay wouldn't have anything to say about the war itself, but even with that, Harry thought she might have some advice for him and Aayla, as Gallia had for when they met with the GDL Congress.

But she didn't. Instead, Fay asked several questions that led both Harry and Aayla to note things they otherwise might not have, spoke approvingly about some of the appointments they'd made within the GDL, and that was all.

Sensing his confusion, Fay smiled at him as ahead of them the tree line, which had already been fading ended, and the first sign of the land beyond could be seen. "If you were waiting for me to give you advice or even instruction Harry, don't. In many, many ways, you have already moved well past the point where my method of diplomacy and negotiation skills would be of much help even if I had your grasp of events and up-to-date information. This far removed and with war already ongoing, all I can do is help you see things you might otherwise have missed."

Feeling Harry about to object, she held up a hand, reaching forward to gently tapped his chest, as they waited for the other Jedi to catch up, her eyes flicking over to Aayla. "I am extremely happy that your Padme is keeping a window open to talking with her opposite numbers. I am extremely happy to hear that the Jedi Order has taken a stance against the continued use of these clone troopers. Lily once used a phrase that I believe is far too accurate: it is a good thing that war is so terrible, lest we become too fond of it."

"Exactly." Aayla said with a nod, linking her arm with Harry's. "Setting aside the basic moral considerations about using living people as if they were droids, the use of droids and clones removes the emotional and social impact of the war from the populations of both sides. Not only does this make the whole war seem less real, but atrocious acts are so much simpler to order and reason away if you know that your own people won't suffer in the doing."

"Exactly so." Fay sent a smile her way, then looked back at Harry, turning back to the larger topic. "Have you done things how I would do? No. Does that mean you were wrong to do things your way? No. I am proud of the man you have become. Do not think for a moment that I will ever try to fit you back into my own mold of what a Jedi should be."

Both younger Jedi bowed from the waist towards Fay, who acknowledged this with a wave of her hand. Looking past them, Fay noticed that most of the other Jedi who had come with them had caught up by this point, and with a brief use of the Force, her words carried to them all as it had earlier.

"To all of you who have professed to enjoy working with plants and farming, it should come as no surprise that there is a certain amount of technique needed to grow things. I have never had such, but my friend Lily has. Among the Force sect that she grew up in, they had developed the equivalent of what the ancients would have called Sith alchemy. And yet, when we studied it, there we realized her potions certainly did not need the Dark Side to work. The Force, yes, and trial and error most certainly. But you will find no Dark Side taint here as you would in the case of Sith Alchemy."

With that and ignoring the murmurings and shocked exclamations at the mention of Sith alchemy, Fay left the tree line and moved out onto the planes, which had greatly changed since last time Aayla and Harry had looked at them. At that point, they had simply been unending plains of grass, tall grass that had come up to Aayla's waist when they had explored it, but still grass as you could find on any human world.

Now however, a large portion of the plain directly abutting the forest had changed. Instead, a series of low rock walls separated different plots of land from one another, creating distinct fields, each of which was home to a different kind of plant. In the distance, a single, slightly higher rock wall created an edge between these farm fields and the rugged plains beyond.

In two of those fields were trees, although very different looking trees. One of them almost had a metallic sheen to it and had no branches save for a large, verdant area right at the top of the tree. The other tree type visibly had the bark of an oak tree, but looked more like a weeping willow otherwise, with hundreds of small eye-catching white flowers scattered along its fronds. The first were situated quite close to one another. The weeping willows were more spaced out, with only six of them in the same sized field which held fourteen of the other sort of tree.

One area looked as if it had blueberry bushes in it, except the berries in question were sharp prickly looking things, almost like the kelu berries that were among Padme and Aayla's favorites. Next to that plot of land was what looked like a fern bush, but made of crystal, its leaves gently tinkling against one another in the wind. This created a soothing sort of background noise as they moved this way and that in the wind. Another bush looked as if someone had come along and replaced its spikes with metal bits, sticking out in every direction, and looking very dangerous to the touch.

One of the older Masters gaped at one of the plants, moving forward to peer at it. The plant in question was a tall black hued... Harry wasn't certain what it was, really, and Aayla too was looking at it in confusion. *"It almost looks like something you'd find on the cold side of Ryloth, but not quite,"* She mused.

"Yep, it's way too bright for that," Harry mused. *"Good grief, what has Mum been up to here?"*

The plant in question certainly wasn't a flower, and it wasn't a bush or tree. These plants grew singly, and seemingly had an even greater need for space than any of the others, being located well away from one another, although thanks to the small size of the plant that still meant there were more of them in their field than the weeping willow variant. The top of these long, straight-stemmed plants gleamed with a light yellow radiance.

The Master who had recognized them spoke now, ending the confusion of Harry and the others. *"These, these are Zabrak Spikes, but they glow red and grow in bunches! How..."*

"The Zabrak Spike is from a planet that is locked in a permanent rotational position around the sun much like your Ryloth, Aayla, from the planet's cold side. Sometime in the past it might have been developed by a sect of Force users, but it turns out that if you plant them in the sunlight, that the colors will gradually change. It also, as I believe some of you may be able to feel, glows with a bit of the Force, hence my earlier statement on where these plants originally came from. Far more of the Force than plants their size should."

Several of the Masters and even a few of the younger Force sensitives among the Agri-corps moved to the separating walls, reaching out with their Force senses to the Zabrak spikes. All of them could indeed feel a kind of buildup of the Force within the spikes. There was no mind there, but there was a sense of energy and vitality that was astonishing in a plant so small. “Especially when these are already fully grown. They should not feel so strong in the Force, so vital,” Mused one of the other Masters, a Zabrak who had actually come across these plants before.

“Yes, the terminology we use to explain things when we talk about the Force does tend to come apart when we’re talking about plants, doesn’t it? Regardless, those Zabrak Spikes, and the Metal Worm trees over there are the jewels of our current collection. Lily describes it best when we form the basic, bonding element of several of the potions that we have so far discovered.”

“And you say this is not Sith alchemy?” Questioned one of the other Masters. Cin Drallig was a dour, suspicious fellow and was one of the teachers that Harry knew Master Yoda had been tempted to leave behind in the temple. But he was too good at basic lightsaber instruction to really set aside, while his leadership abilities and strategic thinking left much to be desired, making him a liability on the front lines.

Feeling the others turned towards him, he simply shrugged his shoulders and gestured to Master Fay. “I would never question whether or not Master Fay of all Jedi could fall to the Dark Side. And I can feel the warmth and welcome of the Force as we all have since entering the Ruusan Sector. And yet, when it comes to using the Force to manipulate both plant and animal life, the Jedi have never done so in the long term, only using the Force to grow plants faster or make carnivorous plants more aggressive so as to distract an enemy for a few moments. Changing a plant’s basic nature in the long term sounds far too much like Sith Alchemy.”

“While in terms of our record-keeping that may be true, but what I have learned from Lily makes me wonder. I think if you went far back enough, the Jedi might well have done their own experiments in this manner. Will I tell you that all of the experiments we have done are for peaceful uses? No. Nor have all our experiments been successful even with the Force guiding our efforts. But we do not use the Force to warp these plants overly to our design. Nor have hatred or anger ever been used to power the Force when we interact with them.”

Fay let a chuckle out of that, shaking her head as she pointed to two plants in particular, one of the berry-bearing bushes and another plant that crawled across the ground like a vine with wide, flat leaves. “I will not say that frustration has not tinged my use of the Force around them, particularly with those two. One of them has proven quite popular with scavenger animals near here, and the other was just very difficult to work with at all.”

“No doubt helped by the fact that you, Master, have the exact opposite of a green thumb,” Harry teased, lightening the tension further.

“But what do these plans do?” Asked one of the Agri-corps workers. He was a young Zabrak much like the older Master and had been staring avidly at the plant that shared his species name. But now he had moved on to examine the flower-bearing weeping willow like tree, and the plant in the next plot over, a shimmering iridescent purple silver and black leaved shrub that was made of multiple different types of triangles, without any actual branches visible through the number of leaves.

Face smiled. “We don’t know.” Everyone turned to look at her, the entire group of Force user staring in incredulity at the elven woman, and she laughed again, sending varied reactions through the group. Most were amused in turn; some were simply surprised at seeing a Jedi Master especially one so famous being so emotive. Other faces shut down further, their eye narrowing in automatic censor, but Harry knew that they would change their tunes. Master Fay was an inexorable force like that.

“We are still experimenting,” Fay went on to say. “Some of these plants were chosen by Lily given how similar they appear to plants she once knew in her youth. Others were chosen by me because I could sense the potential in them. Some, we found here by chance, including the Zabrak Spikes, and the Dagger Thorns. Those we found in dark, deep valleys in the mountains, where the sun has never shown since the terrain of this planet changed with the detonation of the Force bomb.”

She moved over to the outer edge of the farming area, pointing to the bush with the added metal spikes to indicate the Dagger Thorns. “We were interested to discover what would happen if we were able to transplant them, and that interest was definitely guided by the Force, because as I said, the spikes in particular have proven extremely important. Others, we have had imported.”

Now that intersystem commerce had begun again thanks to the Bane helping to transfer hyperspace coils and other necessary parts into the Ruusan Sector, there was a growing trade between planets within the sector, including Ruusan. Not much, because it was believed that even now with the Jedi once more on the planet, Ruusan was not a good place to visit to say the least. Indeed, many of the other planets, as they raised themselves out of isolationism and barbarity, blamed Ruusan the planet, for how long they had been separated from the rest of the galaxy at large. It was not a belief that was based on reality of course. But it was there, and Fay had told Harry and Aayla about that the last time they were in the sector several months back.

“And you say Mistress Lily was the lead on this project?”

Fay nodded, allowing a rueful little smile to appear on her face. “As much as he might have sounded somewhat disrespectful, my former padawan’s words were quite accurate. I do not have a good touch with plants for some reason. Sentient plants like the Neti yes, but regular plants, no. And my ability to cook is somewhat basic at best as well, just so you all know.”

That drew some laughs, but one of the Masters, who was a bit of a closet chemist, shook his head incredulously. “Were you attempting to follow the, the potions directions from Mistress Lily’s youth simply using new ingredients? Or were you using trial and error to discover things? If so, it’s amazing you have anything positive to show for it.”

“The Force guided us in many ways, and it certainly has not been trouble-free. Indeed, most the time our concoctions have exploded in our faces, which happens strangely a lot of times when you attempt to use the Force new and interesting ways. Or the concoctions simply do not do anything. But we have had a few successes.”

With that, Master Fay reached into an expanded pouch at her side, pulling out a small bottle. It contained a relatively clear liquid, with just a hint of blue to it, the glass itself being clear. “This is a potion. It is a relatively painless draught that will, if breathed in gaseous form or drunk, knock out any individual for forty-eight hours. Nor does it **just** knock someone out. It places their entire body into a kind of enforced suspended animation.”

Looking at the dubious expressions around her Fay nodded as their uncertainty made sense. “We tested this on a volunteer among the Bouncers and found that even open wounds would not bleed when the wounded individual was under this potion’s effect. Your heart is stopped entirely, so there is no blood to pump. It is almost as if you were put in cryo-stasis, but without needing to be frozen.”

There were a lot of shocked exclamations at that, immediately understanding how such a potion could be used as Fay went on. “This version is somewhat weaker than what we can contrive, and a proper application of the Force, or even enough blunt trauma to the head, will wake up the individual who takes it if any of you wish to volunteer. But in the stronger version, we estimate that nothing would wake them up within that timeframe.”

“That’s amazing!” seemed to be the general consensus of that, and Fay put it back in her pouch, pulling out another one. “This is a potion that is similar to the other one and contains many of the same ingredients. But whereas the other one knocks you out, this one simply numbs all pain.”

That potion, which had been a strange bright pink color, was replaced by another and the wry smile on Fay’s face broadened as she held up the bottle. “This is another draught which has a very odd effect. Something I can tell you for certain because we tried it on me, after making certain through the Force that it wouldn’t be deadly. It makes it very hard for someone to tell a lie and makes that individual also extremely talkative. Keeping the imbiber on task is difficult, and a wily enough individual might be able to work with that to obfuscate the truth, but an outright lie would be impossible.”

The next potion out was dark red, almost the color of blood. “This one, was made from plants that I had personally taken samples from a trip to Thyferra and Ryloth.”

This brought a gasp from several of the agricultural workers, and they moved as one to point at one of the ground plucking plans, with one, a Zelosian, smiling widely. "I knew I recognized this! It's Vritic Grain, isn't it?"

Fay nodded, smiling at the young Zelosian. "It is indeed. We lack the rest of the ingredients to create the substance known as Bacta, but it's inclusion in this potion should tell you what does."

"Obviously, it is supposed to heal you, but how well, Master Fay?" asked another Knight, this one bearing the marks of combat in the form of an artificial arm and foot.

"We have not been willing to test this one too far. It was able to heal away cuts and scrapes easily, and we have played around a bit with its potency. But if you're asking me to attempt to let it heal from a lightsaber strike or something like that, that isn't exactly something we can test without danger," Fay answered with a shrug.

"Given that accidents in training and in farming are part of life, I have no doubt that as the Temple grows, we will have numerous times to test the efficacy of those potions," Cin Drallig Master answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Indeed." Fay winced at that, but then glanced towards the forest before even Harry and Aayla did. A second later they saw Lily and Ahsoka coming out towards them, with Lily gesturing towards the various farm beds. Ahsoka quickly moved to her Master, smiling up at him as his mother hugged him around the shoulders before moving on, shouting out, "if you all want to know about the potions or the plants, ask me. This is my special little project, and I can tell you all about it. We've even kept notes, so we can go over those at a later time too."

This won many a nod of approval from the gathered Jedi. With or without the Force guiding you, copious notetaking was important to any kind of scientific research. And at Lily's shout, many of the gathered Force users moved towards her, asking questions in turn, making Lily reflect that Jedi training in good manners was an oft-overlooked aspect, but that didn't mean it wasn't nice.

Leaving Lily to that, Harry looked over at Master Fay, who led Harry, Aayla and Ahsoka back through the woods. "Master, this place is incredible! I've never been in a place so strong in the Force, I thought it might have been exaggerated from distance when we first entered the Ruusan Sector and felt the impact but here it's taken to an even higher level! And Lily was telling me all about the work they've been doing, not just on the dormitories and other things, but that it those experiments with the plants, figuring out what was edible among the local animal life and everything else! As busy as you and Aayla have been, Master, I think your mother and Master Fay have been just as busy."

"Idle hands do not serve the Force," Fay answered drolly, while Harry agreed with Ahsoka's sentiment. She just nodded at that praise and began to point out various animal tracks and markings, in particular one of them. It turned out that animal was the local equivalent of a boar,

although the meat involved had more in common with venison than pork. “That is the only dangerous animal to sentients around here. It is a rather foolish animal, whose instincts are to attack anything that is not one of its own kind. Of course, it is easy enough to deal with, but teaching the younglings and the rest the signs is going to be a first priority for me.

“And what else do you think you will be teaching, Master Fay?” Ahsoka asked, skipping around the trio until Aayla gave her some exercises to do as they walked through the forest, mostly squats and hops.

Shaking her head at the young Togrutan’s boundless energy, Master Fay wondered if, after the past few years with only Lily for company, she could get used to having several thousand younglings around. *I wonder if I have thought this entirely through...*

Still, Fay was willing to try, but it would certainly be an interesting experiment. *To say nothing of the fact that Lily and I will have to cut back on certain relationship activities during the day. No need to break the younglings and the rest from their pre-existing conceptions of what it a Jedi should be just yet.*

“In answer to Ahsoka’s question, I believe I will teach meditation, as well as a few more mental disciplines and an overview on diplomacy and investigative work. I will also serve as an arbiter in any arguments that might come up, and as titular head of the temple. I do not wish to be, but it is fact that I have seniority here, not just by my being part of the Force font and setting all this up, but also due to age.”

Without even looking, she reached over with her semi-ethereal hand, and pinched Aayla’s cheek. “You are about to make a joke on my age, my dear. Pray don’t.”

Harry laughed, while his lover nodded ruefully agreement. “You really have done an amazing job here Master Fay, I cannot say that enough.”

“Thank you, but I do not think the work is done just yet not even taking into consideration what the other various Masters were talking about earlier. But I would like to task you or those you choose to do something for us here on Ruusan.”

“You want more plants,” Aayla answered instantly. “And maybe eventually more hands to work with them.”

Harry blinked at that looking at his lover, then to his former Master. “Really? I’m sorry, but we won’t be stopping back in for a long while Master Fay. Indeed, even collecting plants isn’t really something we’ll have time for either.”

“No, not you personally, as I said. I would like you to choose among those who know the secret of Ruusan and who can be trusted with independent action to go out and purchase samples of various plants. Any plant, **every** plant. I would start with those on Thyferra, some of the algae there for certain. But our experiments and potion making have come to an end in terms of what we can gather ourselves. I would like to see more done in that area.”

Fay smiled briefly, a fond, loving look that Harry had only rarely seen on her face as she waved one hand back over her shoulder. "Perhaps even bring in ingredients from various animals. I know Lily made a list of some animals she thought could be used as potions ingredients, as much as I dislike the concept."

Harry frowned thoughtfully, but Aayla had a suggestion. "Why don't we ask some of the former Agri-corps members here? If they have piloting skills and some of the knowledge of Sentinels, they could be given a budget and told to gather such samples. I can sense a lot of interest from the group we were with just a moment ago, and some reluctance to stay from a few of the others when we were unloading."

"Indeed. Many of the workers seem to have been dissuaded from staying here due to the primitive nature of our lives on Ruusan," Fay added with some amusement.

Harry agreed that made sense, and the discussion turned to how Harry was training Ahsoka, with Master Fay giving the young woman some suggestions on how to defend her mind further from the downsides of being connected to Harry's connection to Aayla, as well as any other kind of foreign influence. Balancing the needs to protect her mind and the need to reach out to the Force was a very difficult thing to do, but Ahsoka had made a lot of inroads in that direction before, and Fay felt that she was already progressing nicely.

That evening, while Ahsoka ate with the other padawans and Master Fay discussed what kind of resources they would need to bring in to finish work on the temple, Aayla and Harry spent time with Lily. Most of that conversation was about what they had been doing with the GDL, and surprisingly, Lily had some interesting suggestions in terms of tactics, and how to keep the public on their side. She had apparently been friends with a history buff back on Earth and knew quite a bit about the various wars that had occurred there.

"Do not, whatever you do, lie to the public," Lily warned. "That kind of thing will always come back to haunt you. Don't say anything, say you don't know, let them speculate, fine, but outright lies need to be avoided. Exaggerations are okay, but you seem to have a major upswell of support for the moment, you need to keep it, and the best way to do that is to keep telling the truth. Heck, that will also undercut your opposition too. Even if something goes against you, use the reality of that to rally support instead of trying to hide it. The morale is to the physical as... what's the phrase, um, ten is to one, I think. I can't remember who said it, but it makes a lot of sense given what issues we ran into fighting Voldemort."

Lily continued in that vein, as her old friend had told her about how the first world war had been basically allowed to continue because people back home were fed lies for so long, they had no idea how bad it really was until near the end. She also mentioned how it had been impossible to figure out who to trust during the war against Voldemort when no one was able to tell fact from fiction in the public magazines, which kept on insisting everything was fine. Harry had no idea if that was accurate, but he wasn't willing to create a propaganda machine

like Lily described anyway, and some of her other ideas, like a monthly public state of the war address, were, while annoying still very good ideas.

Beyond that, there wasn't a lot in terms of tactics and specific strategies that could be carried over, but Lily still had a few ideas, especially for the cloaking device. She likened that to suddenly figuring out a way to create submarines in space, ships that went under the water and were hard to detect until they attacked.

Lily told them about how the United Kingdom, her and Harry's original home had been subjected to a quite nasty blockade that had used subs to sink thousands of tons of goods for the island nation. Thus, Lily recommended that they start getting that specific system out there in greater numbers, and not just to find the various factories and construction yards that were fueling the Confederacy fleets. "There's also the morale side to consider there too. Think how terrifying it would feel to lose ships to ships you don't even see. Your two captains already proved that those systems could stand up to actual combat and there is no better way to halt a war machine than starve it of resources," Lily opined.

"That sounds like a good idea," Harry said with a sigh. "But we are months away from being able to do any such thing in numbers large enough to make a difference. But when I get back to Serenno I will look into buying as many astromechs as we can. With the former Agri-corps members joining the rune scribes we might have enough hands on that task. Thankfully with how fast Jaderin and other type two planets can build frigates we shouldn't see a significant dip in their numbers even after Serenno switches over to the destroyer-sized Archer 2 class."

"Look at the bright side," Aayla said with a chuckle, leaning against Harry's shoulder, leaning up to briefly kiss his neck, feeling his hand on one of her lek, squeezing gently, even as they both acknowledged mentally that if they had thought of that idea, maybe Aayla's arguments would have won the day back when they met with Master Gallia. "With Master Gallia not having an actual Hypercom transmitter, there is no chance of a signal getting out about Freedom's Fence and anything going on there."

"Unless of course someone out there has figured out a way to miniaturize a Hypercom uplink system and is simply willing to send off a blind signal," Harry retorted. "Or has been able to place a bug on one of the frigates which we don't find because it's only recording, not sending out information just yet."

Aayla winced at that. "Yes, that makes far too much sense for me to ignore unfortunately."

"Properly examining all of the droids as they are brought in should figure that out, as well as the ships which I know you've said Master Gallia already does to look for bugs and such," Lily cut in, then looked at them both shrewdly, crossing her arms as she moved to hover in midair in front of them, legs propped up as if she was taking a seat. "And now, you can tell me the news that the two of you have been very careful to not to mention. I can tell that you want to talk about something with me, but not what. Something personal?"

Harry and Aayla looked at one another, sharing the thought *how does she know that?* and Lily laughed at their expressions. “The Force has nothing on motherly instincts. Now out with it.”

“Do you remember Padme?” Aayla asked deciding to get it over with.

“Padme... Oh, the young queen that you became such friends with? The one who was obviously besotted with the two of you by the time your mission to Kashyyyk ended?” Lily guessed, and once more, her listeners stared at her with wide eyes. “My dears, the two of you might have been the only ones who weren’t aware of the looks she sent either one of you occasionally. Why? Did something happen to Padme?”

“No, she’s doing all right, she is leading the Peace Party in the Republic Senate and is trying desperately to keep some lines of communication open between them and the Confederacy. She was also trying to create a few laws to try to mitigate the violence, and another to create a neutral order of medical personnel and ships.”

Lily winced at that. “I don’t see that gaining much headway. Certainly, it would never have done so back in my old world, not unless there was a third party with a very very big stick around to make both sides toe the line.”

The look she was giving them both though made Harry speak up in turn. “That’s, um, not what we were going to mention. You see, we kind of um, became involved with her romantically. Both of us.”

Humming thoughtfully, Lily tapped her chin looking at from Aayla to put Harry and back. “Both of you. Well, with your bond, the normal issues of having such a relationship won’t ever appear on your side of things, though I would never have seen something like this coming. And I have to wonder how it’s going to work in terms of the distance involved, and the fact that the two of you do have that bond and as a non-Force user, Padme doesn’t.”

“Padme knows about it, and she doesn’t seem to care. She’s mildly envious of the ability to talk with one another from decently long distances on a planetary scale anyway, but beyond that Padme doesn’t seem to be jealous about the fact that we can share our emotions with one another like that,” Aayla replied.

“That’s good. I know the both of you well enough that there’s no chance of her getting between the two of you, but I hope that you go out of your way to make certain that Padme doesn’t think she’s a third wheel or a simple addition, but an equal in the relationship. As much as possible anyway,” Lily added, shaking her head. “Honestly, the distance aspect is bothering me almost as much as your connection.”

“We all agreed that we want to make it work, and Padme acknowledged the difficulties when we got together, and she knew of the bond too. Heck she seemed fascinated instead of jealous. None of that is bothering us overmuch. But there is something else we would like your opinion on,” Harry said hesitantly. He then went on to explain the subtle flirting from Ta’a Chume.

“We’re just not certain how to handle it. If we turn it down, we might lose the Hapans as possible allies. But if those hints do lead to something, what should we do?”

Lily’s eyes widened, her eyebrows disappearing under her hair for a moment as she took this all in, then began to laugh. “Potter luck! I thought you might have avoided the whole romantic side of that with how quickly you and Aayla bonded mentally, but I suppose that was wishful thinking. This Princess, was she that little girl that you saved in the market square that one time? I can’t remember the planet, but I can remember that incident and the fact that she was watching you like a hawk watching a particularly juicy mouse the entire time Master Fay and the ambassador were chewing the locals a new arsehole.”

As Aayla and Harry both blushed, with Harry trying desperately to go over his old memories of that scene and realizing with some annoyance that his mother was right, Lily became serious as the grave, thrusting out a finger that she deliberately pressed into Harry and Aayla’s chest, one after another. The feeling was like having a very specific portion of your body dipped in ice, both on and under your skin. “You just got finished telling me about you two loving Padme, and now you are talking about this other princess?”

“Neither of us are willing to jump into bed figuratively or literally with someone like that without making certain that Padme agrees with us. We just wanted your opinion on the whole thing,” Aayla stated with as much dignity as she could muster while having on of Lily’s fingers pressing through her chest. Nor would Ta’a be the first woman they might invite to their bed. That honor lay at Zule’s feet.

Lily paused, thinking. “...I can see the political and military upside, I suppose. But if you’re right on this Ta’a’s desires, I don’t think that this is something that Padme is going to endorse. I think you need to be ready to deal with some fallout there, and quite a bit of anger on her side of things for even bringing up the possibility. In fact, be prepared to butter her up after she’s gotten her anger out, not before. I might have some ideas on that score from what I remember of Padme.”

Once more Lily thought about it for a few moments, then shrugged. “Another thing you need to think about is letting this Princess down easily. Or perhaps even trying to contrive a meeting between the two of them. They’re both Royals after all, even if one was elected to this position. Padme’s also seen actual combat, which your new Princess acquaintance might not, but would also respect.”

When Harry acknowledged they had already gotten that ball rolling, Lily began to question them about their own feelings and interactions with Padme, wanting to make certain that their feelings towards her were real, just as it was between the two of them. After all, they had just mentioned the idea of jumping into bed with another woman while also mentioning their relationship with Padme. That worried Lily more than a bit, and she made a point to mention that the bond might be impacting how they saw the physical side of things.

“With the two of you able to know intrinsically that you love one another coupled with Aayla’s empathic skill, you can tell the emotions Padme too. But she can’t do the same to you, and I hate to tell you this, but most people equate physical love to the emotional,” Lily said dryly. “You need to remember that. This Ta’a might want to, ahem, consummate the joining of the Hapan Consortium to the GDL, but her interest in that could only be part of the equation. And for certain Padme will see it very differently.”

Still, after questioning the two lovers, Lily decided they really did love Padme too. They were also willing to put in the time and effort as best they could with all their other duties to make certain that Padme knew she was an equal part of this relationship. That was good, although Lily was still a little bemused by it all and warned them to be very cautious in the future and kept on hammering the point “You cannot forget that for most people, physical love and emotional love are just as important and one and the same!” home.

It was with some relief that Lily took to teasing Harry and Aayla mercilessly with tales of their times as youngling when Ahsoka joined them later that evening. These tails covered when they were together on the training frigate and beyond. The tale of Harry’s first runic arrays blowing up his and Master Fay’s clothing particularly had Ahsoka in stitches.

But despite the embarrassment Aayla and Harry were subjected to during their private discussions with Fay and Lily, the time on Ruusan proved to be quite fruitful. Fay and Lily supplied Harry and Aayla with several different types of potions, including one that could create smoke so thick even a droid’s optical sensors wouldn’t be able to see through it. Beyond that, the trio threw themselves into helping to design the various buildings that needed to be finished for the temple. They spent time with the various teachers, accepting Arjen’s decision to stay, as work quickly began on enlarging the farming sections to include edible fruits, vegetables and grain rather than potion ingredients. After all, there were now several thousand mouths to feed now instead of Master Fay, who since merging into the Force font had eaten like a bird, according to Lily.

On the second day on Ruusan Harry and Aayla even had a whole night to themselves. Master Fay took Ahsoka away for some mental training along with several dozen older youths of similar ages, and Harry and Aayla took advantage of having Fay on the lookout for any sign that the padawan bond would once more be able to carry any emotions or sensations between them.

But, as all good things had to, their time on the planet ended the very next day. With all the demands of the war and leading the GDL, Harry and Aayla literally could not be out of communications for much longer.

So it was, that only two days after arriving on the planet, the *Tyrant’s Bane* left orbit once more. They left behind the Jedi youngling and the individuals who would build and man their new temple, inviolate from any scheme of the Sith, a secret light in the darkness.

Though they did not know it, in this one act alone, Harry and his allies had ruined one of the Great Plan strategic objectives. It remained to be seen if they could do so to the rest of its goals...

End Chapter