

**I am not Disney nor Lucas.**

Okay, as stated in *Stallion of the line*, this isn't the full chapter I wanted. I had too many meetings and world-building things to get done with before getting to Ruusan and the reunion there. But hey, this way I can have that segment be it's own small chapter next time. And despite the amount of talking in this chapter, I hope you all enjoy it.

I also apologize for getting it out so late, but hey, **Morde24** was able to get it back to me, and I was able to go through it afterward. So hopefully it will not have as many mistakes in it as *Stallion* does.

### **Chapter 18: Meetings, Mayhem, and Mysteries**

When the *Tyrant's Bane* began to head deeper into the system, the Lucrehulk battleship found itself and its four prizes bracketed by two divisions of archer class frigates, with other capital ships moving out towards them. It looked as if the locals had decided to treat this as an exercise, and Harry had to approve. He also approved of the number of defenses platforms, both fixed and mobile, that he saw throughout the system.

From where she was sitting beside him, watching as the tactical screen updated, Aayla shook her head in some bemused shock. The *Bane* hadn't been back in around a month, but it was very evident that Serenno and the Council of Counts had grasped onto the war as an excuse to ramp up their production of practically everything. Serenno was still the gateway on this side of the Ruusan Sector for the gas coming out of Jaderin, along with its own gas supply.

*"Plus, remember that while they are not the top ten richest in the galaxy, every member of the Council is among the top two-hundred. That means they had a lot of liquid capital to throw around and would do so much more openly now that war's begun,"* Harry reminded Aayla, who nodded but did not turn her attention away from the tactical screen.

The outer system was pocketed by scattered minefields and several defensive installations on a few outlying asteroids. Looking at them, Aayla didn't think any of them could last long against a real attack, but they could probably stop a raiding force and at least hold out long enough to give the thousands of civilian vessels moving around the asteroids and outer planets a chance to escape sunward.

The number of Arrow fighters around the star system had also doubled. Aayla picked out far more bases as well, smaller ones scattered across the system for refit and rearming. And around the gas giant were dozens of new hastily constructed single-ship construction yards, mostly composed of gantries and a few floating bits of machinery. Archer frigates were being constructed in each, along with four larger ships in the light-cruiser size. While on the moon itself and around Serenno, more defensive installations were being constructed.

"I was afraid that Serenno would find itself vulnerable," Aayla murmured aloud to Harry, rather than communicating via their mind. She wanted to see if anyone else on the ship bridge had anything to add to their discussion. "I realize that it would've been a tough nut to crack before we left, but nowhere near as tough as Corellia or some of the Core Worlds who have joined the league. And if they had struck here, they would've cut the head off the snake as it were. Now I'm not as concerned."

"I'm wondering where they got all of the people to do all this," one of the other bridge crew spoke up, a near-human Vasari (they were nearly human but had six fingers and slightly reddish skin) Green Jedi by the name of Lw'ret. "The resources aren't such a stretch, but the manpower definitely is."

"Actually, we can probably explain that away as well. It's been long known in the D'Astan Sector that Serenno has taken primacy over the old capital of Naz Peron economically. And now with the war and all, I'd wager a lot of people are hoping to move away from the other planets to a planet that they think can defend their families and loved ones," one of the Serenno natives muttered, shaking his head. "Remember, this is an Outer Rim sector. Despite how built up a few of the planets are, most of the other planets don't have anything like local defenses and what-have-you."

"And the Council of Counts would grab onto that concept with both hands," Harry agreed before sighing somewhat theatrically. "And on that note, I suppose I should check in with the Council of Counts as well. I am still a sitting member after all, despite having become the leader of the GDL."

"In fact, we'll probably need to set up meetings on that level as well as the political side of things concerning the entirety of the GDL. Not just the military," Aayla warned him, still talking aloud. "We've been keeping up on the military aspect of everything in a broad sense, but all we know about the political side of things is that most of our senators have left Coruscant and are on Corellia creating a new government."

"Involved in that, will you be?" Yoda questioned, his tone giving no hint of what he thought of the idea, although his eyes had closed as if to ward off the concept. Regardless of all the other hats Harry was currently wearing, he was still a Jedi. The idea of a Jedi being involved in creating an entirely new government, one that would undoubtedly stand as a direct, and legitimate challenge to the Republic going forward, was one that Yoda had issues with.

However, he was not going to bring that up with Harry right now. Yoda knew all too well that without Harry in the galaxy, acting as he did, it was entirely likely that the Jedi Order could be dancing to the tune of the hidden Sith. *Trust, I must, that Harry continues to know his limits. A good leader he has already proven to be.*

To Yoda's pleasure, Harry shook his head firmly. "No. I'll be only as involved as I have to be to make certain that the construction of our new government doesn't impact the war effort

and to make certain that every planet has a voice. Perhaps not an equal voice, because all planets are not equal, but still, each planet will be heard as separate individuals."

Ahsoka looked skeptical at that, shaking her head from where she had been sitting nearby, twisting in her swivel chair to look at her Master, her lekku swaying with the movement. "That is a lot of voices, Master."

"Perhaps my padawan, but that doesn't mean that they shouldn't be heard." He then smirked. "Besides, as I said, I won't be involved in listening to them, so long as the war effort going. And I believe that we can presume upon the general intelligence of anyone who has risen to the position of Senator, whatever we call the position, to realize that their planet's continued freedom depends on that war effort."

As Ahsoka snickered, Aayla nodded, then added, "And you're forgetting that the military side of things has been running for several months now. Garm and the rest of our High Command have a system to take in new fleets and personnel. That can act as a structure around which the political side of things can be built, with more say given to those planets devoting resources to the war effort."

She then poked Harry in the shoulder, teasingly. "And whatever this one might wish, no one is going to question who the leader of the GDL is, either politically or militarily. So that's another corner of the foundation already laid."

Harry's put-upon sigh won a laugh from Ahsoka and several of the other non-Jedi around the bridge. Then he moved back from the captain's chair to the observation area, gesturing Aayla to join him. "Come on, let's start setting up those meetings."

*"Do you think we'll have time to call Padme before we start?"* He asked mentally while he connected the screen in front of him to the ship's communications department, which would add several encryptions to every transmission going out of the ship.

Considering how long it would take them to get to Ruusan and back, they couldn't spend much time here in Serenno just yet. Harry and Aayla wanted the younglings safe beyond the wall of Master Fay's power and wanted to turn over the several thousand Agri-corps Jedi to Master Gallia on her space station. More than that, though, it felt as if it was time to check in with Fay and Lily, and both lovers knew that such faint hints were the Force telling them something.

Aayla did a mental calculation, then shook her head regretfully as Harry pouted, Aayla putting their joined thoughts into words. *"I don't think so, love. It's the middle of the night in the senatorial district on Coruscant at the moment. And as much as I want to see her, I don't think we can justify calling that late."*

Despite his pout, Harry sent back rueful agreement, and the two of them talked about their plans going forward on Serenno and what they hoped to learn about the military side of things since the last time they had checked in. Certainly, Garm's cheerfulness and allusion to Yoda's little trick gave them hope that not only had the war perhaps slowed for a time, but that Aayla's little plan going forward might work.

*"Before that, though, I'll start working on using Master Yoda's little trick to explain away our prizes. If we can get that firmly embedded in the public mind, then it will spread to spies here on Serenno and further muddy the waters on how we actually defeated that fleet."*

Harry nodded again at that, taking her hand in his and squeezing briefly before looking over his shoulder at his padawan, who had followed them up from the main bridge. Despite the self-control they had been teaching her, the young Togrutan's face still showed her thoughts too easily, and both Harry and Aayla knew that she was wondering what she would be doing today.

"Aayla, do you wish to come with us to these meetings? I don't want to shut you out entirely, but with that necklace of yours, and the number of other Jedi around, you could come down with us to the command center and even with me to the Council of Counts if you wanted."

The necklace in question was the same type that Harry had given Padme and Sabe except that Ahsoka had empowered it herself. It was a runic-based mental defense mechanism, which, while unable to defend someone's mind against a full-force mind probe, could defend against any lesser attack and inform the wearer that someone attempted to attack their minds. The work on it was extremely hard to do and time-consuming, but a week of working on nothing but that and meditation exercises with Ahsoka had been enough, even if Harry's hands still twitched occasionally thanks to the level of delicate work required.

Ahsoka frowned, thinking hard about it. "I'd like to come down with you, Master. Serenno will only be the fourth planet that I've ever been on even if you count my vague memories of Shili." The other two were Coruscant, of course, and Ilum, where she had gone to find her lightsaber crystals as all younglings had to, before being considered as padawans. "However, I don't think I would have much to add to these meetings, and I think I know myself well enough by this point that sitting still in the background isn't really one of my strong points."

"It could be a good opportunity to train your Force Stealth," Harry replied, but he still nodded at her words. "Still, that's why I asked."

"And I can't just be allowed out on my own, can I Master? Even with this," Ahsoka lamented, tapping the necklace around her neck and at first, she had been annoyed that Harry thought she needed the extra defenses, but Ahsoka had eventually agreed with the necessity of

it and actually found it amusing to have something in common with the Senator that Ahsoka had only briefly met, but whose Force presence she still remembered for being so unique.

*And I am not going to inquire as to what the heck is going on between her, Aayla, and Master Harry. Nope, not going there. Going to keep my speculations to myself, yep. Whatever might be... nope!*

"Correct," Harry answered, his brows furrowing as he felt Ahsoka's embarrassment, interest and guilt all at once. Still, he wasn't going to inquire.

"What about you, Master Aayla?" Ahsoka asked, looking over at the blue-skinned Twi'lek.

Aayla shook her head. "I'll be involved in most of the meetings with Harry, of course, and before that, I'll be on my own up here on the ship and then at the Command Center itself. Sorry Ahsoka, but this is the downside of having a Master who is so deeply involved with the war effort. Lots of hurry up and wait, combined with meetings galore."

The young Togrutan sighed theatrically at that, then looked over at Harry, asking what he would have her do instead if she opted out of the meetings.

"I think it's time to start working you up on starfighters. You said you were one of the best in your age group, and we haven't tested that yet." Just because Harry had no intention of letting Ahsoka take part in large-scale space battles didn't mean that he wanted her to be unable to do so if the need arose. "And when I get back, will spend a few hours before retiring on lightsaber combat."

As Ahsoka's eyes lit up gleefully, Yoda harrumphed, looking at Harry and Aayla both. "Time for meditation, you must make too," he advised. This caused Ahsoka to grumble, but she agreed after a few seconds.

However, despite not having been his padawan for that long, Ahsoka had come a long way from the overly-prickly, too emotional girl she had been before Harry had met her. She was willing to work for her much wanted starfighter time. "Erm, I think I should probably bite the blaster bolt and come with you to at least a few of the meetings, Master. I would like to be there to learn more about the war effort, and, um, maybe the Council of Counts. That way, I can start to get some training on the political side of things, without being, um, overwhelmed, I guess."

The smile Harry and even Yoda and Aayla gave her caused Ahsoka to realize that she had been correct to volunteer for her upcoming bouts of boredom. "Well thought out, padawan. For now though, why don't you do a few physical exercises while we set those meetings up?"

With his padawan sorted for the moment, Harry turned his attention to contacting the Council of Counts, lining up a meeting with them as soon as possible. Luckily, such was his position that doing so didn't ruffle any feathers on the Council, and all of them agreed to a meeting set for about thirty minutes after the Bane was due to reach orbit.

Aayla meanwhile contacted the space control center, requesting a skeleton crew for their ships and formally turning over the Munificent class ships to Serenno for refit. Aayla also requested skeleton crews for the captured Lucrehulks, cutting orders to send them both to Corellia for repair and refit. The locals eagerly agreed. By the time the Tyrant's Bane reached its orbital birth, several shuttles were waiting from nearby space stations. The moment the slaved ships reached orbit, the shuttles boosted towards them.

One of the Archer divisions and a full wing of Arrow starfighters moved in as well. The Arrow starfighters entered the two Lucrehulks' open landing bays, where they would be based out of for the ships' journey to Corellia.

Aayla asked several of the local space control operator and the GDL high command if that was enough defense and surprisingly was informed it was. The CIS was still not doing a very good job at interdicting the Galactic Defense League's merchant marine. It would come in time, and for this particular ship, they would take a roundabout route rather than the direct one, but they would be able to get to Corellia safely.

Meanwhile, Harry reached out via Hypercom to Corellia. There he contacted the Diktat and the rest of the GDL representatives, informing them he was on Serenno and willing to conduct long-range meetings with them.

Aayla exited the bridge, going out in search of the young padawan Orel. Over the past week of travel, it had been decided to follow up on Master Yoda's scheme to see if that it was, in fact, possible to mess somehow with the CIS droid forces. *"After all, just because people think it is impossible doesn't mean it truly is. Or else we wouldn't have the Force,"* Aayla quipped, causing Harry to laugh in reply along their link even as he got into an argument with a few of the GDL senators, who requested with a persistence bordering on rudeness that Harry travel to Corellia to meet in person with them and the rest of the Senators.

Despite a few politicians being far too rude for their jobs, within about an hour of having reached orbit, Master Yoda, Harry and Ahsoka were in a shuttle heading towards the planet. Harry and Ahsoka were dropped off at Carannia, and within minutes of their landing, were ushered in to meet with the Counts of Serenno in the council room.

Countess Maria greeted him with a cheery wave, while Counts Franco and Garibaldi both nodded their heads politely, their heirs smiling in welcome along with the rest of the Council. "So good of you to join us, Count Potter," Luthor grumbled, even as he tried to fight back a smile.

"Gentlemen, ladies, you realize that as the director of the GDL, I don't have as much time to devote to purely Serenno projects as I would like," Harry said, shaking hands and moving towards the table, nodding to the various heirs and heiresses as he did so. "Despite that, you requested a meeting in person once I arrived, and I'm here now."

"For the most part, we're all extremely satisfied with what has been going on even with the war beginning," Luthor began, shaking his head with a chuckle at his older compatriot's attitude while his daughter, Serena smiled openly at Harry. "However, there are two points that we wanted your input on as Director of the GDL, both of which are political in nature as well as economic."

"And who is this?" Countess Maria Nalju asked, gesturing at Ahsoka and looking puzzled at the inclusion of the young Jedi.

"This is my padawan, Ahsoka Tano. She has decided to sit in on this meeting to start her training on political matters," Harry supplied, gesturing Ahsoka into the seat that Aayla would have sat in if she was there, and Ahsoka noticed that despite his position as the head of the GDL, the table was circular, giving the impression that they were all equals here. Or supposedly anyway. It was a bit of legal fiction, but one that Harry embraced.

"Where is Aayla?" Countess Louisa Borgin asked, looking confused. She was the only one there who had not brought her heir along, although it was perfectly understandable why as the young boy was still a toddler.

"She has her own meetings to attend today, unfortunately. We have too much to do to tie both of us down into a single meeting at this point."

A few of the heirs looked a little annoyed that, primarily the male ones like Turlo, and Harry got the impression through the Force that they were not just annoyed at the idea that the Council of Counts was not Harry's top priority. *"I suppose that Ahsoka is, despite being cute, rather too young to be good eye candy for them,"* He sent to Aayla, feeling her bubbling amusement in his thoughts, as well as a rueful agreement with his observation.

Franco Malvern hummed at that, shaking his head. "Actually, that adds another point we need to discuss, but we'll get to that later. First of all, can we assume that you noticed how much more construction and shipping there is in the system?"

When Harry nodded, Count Luthor leaned forward, his eyes alight with almost unholy delight. "It's a sign of how things have been changing throughout the sector. As you know, Serenno's been rising to prominence despite Naz Peron being the sector capital. With the creation of the GDL, that process was hastened tremendously, thanks to our being the primary broker and source of the Tibanna gas spreading throughout the GDL. But since the actual start of hostilities, that power shift has become an avalanche."

"Which we have been encouraging," Countess Jessica interjected, smirking slightly. "But more than that, it has created a tremendous, and growing, rift within the sector."

"Bluntly put, we have been approached by the governments of nearly every other planet within the sector, all of whom wants to join the GDL as Isen and Doli have done. The only planets we haven't heard from are Naz Peron and two of its colony worlds. They are still hewing to the Republic. But if their Senator believes he still speaks for the majority of the sector, he is grossly misinformed. Or simply doesn't care. This needs to be addressed."

Count Orel manipulated a series of controls on the table, and the map of the sector popped up to one side, then zoomed in on a series of different planets, along with a series of trade agreements for each. "The problem becomes a little thornier here, in the Samarine subsector. These planets all have prior trade and defense treaties with Naz Peron but wish to break those contracts to join the GDL and create new contracts with Serenno personally. Agreements which are based more in the way of defensive exchange than economic ones, but they still wish to make their displeasure with Naz Peron's leadership plain."

Harry read over the agreements, gesturing with a few of his own controls so that the projection closed with him, frowning in thought as he read through each in turn. His eyes widened at one name, causing Garibaldi to snort at him. "Valahari!?"

"Indeed. So long as we can supply them with enough in the way of defenses, and have nothing to do with their government, the Valahari are willing to sell us some of their advanced starfighter designs," Franco murmured. He had been the one to talk to the Valahari representative.

"No." Harry replied firmly. "I don't want their designs, I want their designers. Exclusivity gentlemen and women, I don't want Valahari to turn around later and sell to the CIS."

With a few keystrokes, Harry edited the agreement, sending it over to the other Counts. All of them looked it over, and nodded in agreement, understanding Harry's point. With the Valahari designers joining the groups already making up the GDL, they were bound to make wonders in the future.

Valahari now seen to, Harry turned his attention to the rest of the treaties in front of him. "Now. tell me more about the rest of these planets."

Nodding, Luthor did so. The original treaties the planets of the Samarine sub-sector wished to abrogate reminded Harry almost of the various agreements that supplied Coruscant with all of that it needed to sustain itself, an ecumenopolis not being able to supply itself. In this case, Naz Peron was a major food supplier as well as the site of many of the higher education centers in the sector, but they had little to nothing in the way of mining or heavy



metals. It wasn't as one-sided as the Council portrayed it, and Harry called them out on that quickly in the case of three of them.

"Make the agreements you want, but do not encourage them to break the already existing ones. And do not further isolate Naz Peron," he finished firmly. "I fully agree that the political reality should come into line with the economic and social one here in this sector. But I will not allow you all to grind that fact into the faces of Naz Peron's leaders and the families that rule there. This is not the time to crow about the final downfall of your enemies. That kind of thing can cause trouble down the line. The Republic is not the enemy, the CIS is."

"For now," one of the other Counts grumbled. Serenno had long chafed under the rule of the Republic. Its issues with Naz Peron still being the sector capital and all of the Senators chosen hailing from that planet was only one aspect of why. Even now, old grievances still remained in the minds of the Council.

Harry winced at that but allowed the comments to pass by, simply saying, "We do not need more troubles on top of the war effort. Keep your eyes on that reality, ladies and gentlemen, rather than political world-building."

Beside him, Ahsoka nodded, holding up a hand as she spoke, showing that she too had been reading the contracts they had been reading. "Besides, these treaties are on a planet-wide scale, not on a family level, right?" She then looked at her Master, and at his approving nod, she used the controls in front of Harry to move back to one specific contract. "This planet, though, Rivvidu, has an agreement specifically with House D'Asta to use them to supply luxury... clothing and materials? Never heard of a lot of these items, but they sound like types of cloth, er, something anyway."

The padawan shrugged ignorance, then moved on. "But it says here that Rivvidu is afraid of how close they are to Ord Cestus and want defenses 'as fast as you can supply them'. So..." Ahsoka shrugged, not needing to spell things out. "That'll hit your real opponents where it hurts, rather than the general public of Naz Peron."

Ord Cestus was one of very few planets in the sector that had sided with the CIS. It wasn't a proper Ord system thankfully, having been a penal colony in the past rather than an ordinance silo. But Cestus Cybernetics was based there, and it was a supplier of higher end droids that were used throughout the Republic before the war. Now it no doubt housed a few droid factories for the CIS, but lacked the ship strength to threaten Serenno. But the other planets in the sector were another story.

"Hah! Done! That's perfect, honestly." Franco shouted, leaving only Garibaldi to grumble, while the other Counts and their heirs all just nodded, the expression on their faces telling the two Jedi they had been making the same point previously. Harry then took about 15 more minutes to discuss the various new agreements within the sector that accounts wanted to

make, only cautioning them that these new agreements would tie down quite a bit of Serenno's resources to fulfill.

"While as a Jedi I should not approve of such a petty move, I believe that so long as you do indeed continue to sell such goods on Naz Peron, then I will allow it. As director of the GDL, the ostracization aspect of these agreements is my only complaint here. You and the other planets in the sector seem to have a very strong grasp of the situation's military realities, and I am personally pleased to see other systems in this sector turning to the GDL. In return, I will contact the Senator from Naz Peron and inform him of the new realities."

Harry was not looking forward to that conversation. He had dealt with the D'Astan Sector Senator before and found him irascible, deeply suspicious and hateful towards Harry because of his own position as a Count of Serenno. Whatever feelings the Counts had toward the Houses of Naz Peron, the Senator at least, fully reciprocated them, as did the Magister, the head of the House D'Asta.

The Counts cheerfully wished him good luck on that, their smirks telling Harry they all knew precisely how much trouble that would be. Even Ahsoka could somehow sense that and she patted Harry on the arm in commiseration.

Beyond that, there were a few details on the economic side of things that the Counts wanted his opinion on. The most interesting one, and the only one that Ahsoka showed any interest in, was in a project proposed by a group of Mon Calamari ship designers that had arrived in the system recently, which all the Counts had enthusiastically jumped on. First of all, the Mon Calamari delegation needed Harry's signature and Garm's to help move them into positions here in Serenno so that they could work on upgrading the shielding and defenses of the already existing Archer class. And second, the group of Mon Calamari had looked at the Archer design, which had proved to be worth its weight in gold, and upscaled the concept to create a real destroyer class rather than a frigate.

Harry had some misgivings about that, but after about an hour's discussion with the Counts and the ship designers, during which Ahsoka once more took part, he gave the okay. The upscale in size wouldn't add all that much to the torpedo frigate's pre-existing main weapons system: the torpedo fusillade that gave the class its name. The larger ships would simply be more survivable, with far more anti-starfighter weaponry and **much** heavier shielding, Mon Calamari-style. The only true ship-to-ship weapons would be a pair of ion cannon mounts, which seemed a decent addition as well.

This was all in keeping with Harry and Garm's strategy: survive and build up your strength. And since Harry had a pretty good idea what would happen to any unenhanced Archer that found itself in the range of any other ship's guns, he was quite enthusiastic about the additions.

Yet Harry was a little leery about the idea of devoting shipyard time here in Serenno to them when Serenno was already going to start shifting a large portion of its production towards creating local defenses for the rest of the sector. As such, he had to nix the idea of putting the ship into construction just yet, until at least ten of the other planets in the sector had defenses built up to the level the new treaties called for.

Beyond that, if not pleased, Harry was, at the very least, satisfied with his meeting on the economic side of things with the Counts. Yes, all of the Counts gleefully told him about how their personal holdings had grown and how much richer they all were, something that he could see somewhat concerned Ahsoka as well. Harry knew that would help Serenno and, through Serenno, the rest of the GDL. He was okay with that, but the other Counts were an oligarchy. And Harry, as a Jedi and a student of history, knew that while an oligarchy that was good at its job could be good for the people, it was still an oligarchy. *Not exactly the best type of government, but it is one we have to work with.*

Eventually, the ship designers left, and Harry nodded at the other Counts. "That was actually fascinating," he said honestly, with Ahsoka nodding firm agreement, having actually pulled out a datapad of her own to make notes. "I hope to find the Mon Calamari that I will be dealing with when I meet with Garm, and the rest of the high command will be as amenable and friendly as that group."

"Don't count on it," countered Franco said dryly. "Oh, on the military side of things, they'll be fine, but I've been hearing rumblings about disagreements on shipbuilding priorities, designs, and so forth cropping up between Corellia and Dac." As the Count who was most involved in mining and the various metal industries, he would've been informed of most such arguments, having spread his influence out from Serenno and into the GDL.

"If so, I will sit on them hard. Both Corellia and Mon Calamari are extremely important to the war effort, and I'm not about to let one of them take primacy over the other, just as I have done between Corellia and Serenno," Harry stated firmly.

By all rights, Corellia should be the primary shipbuilder of the GDL. It had the largest economy by far and was famous as a shipbuilder throughout the Republic. But Corellia was so busy refurbishing and getting its mothballed fleets online that they didn't have room to lay down new ships yet.

Dac, on the other hand, did. And the size of their dockyards was almost entirely unknown to the rest of the Republic, thanks to how self-sufficient the Dac Sector was for the most part. That would change over time, and Corellia would probably have an extremely significant advantage on construction speed, but for now, any new ships would be coming out of Dac and the nearby Dominus sector from the Dorneans, something Harry was going to make plain in his meetings later that day.

Looking around at his fellow Counts, Harry asked, "Was there anything else you needed my presence for?"

"We wanted a full quorum to decide who would be our representative to the GDL Senate," Jessica said, shaking her head. "Although I do hope that the name of the body does not remain the Senate. If we are going to break away from the Republic, then we need to create a new identity for ourselves, and a name change should be a sign of that."

"The name is no doubt subject to change, just like the GDL's name was," Harry drawled, eliciting much laughter and a snicker from his padawan as he looked around at his fellow Counts and Countesses. "Who are you all thinking of sending?" *"Aayla, if you could listen through my senses for a bit here, this is a people-person kind of question, and I would like your input."*

After dropping off Master Yoda at the command center, Ahsoka had returned to the *Tyrant's Bane*. There she had been busy spending time with Orel. With his help and using several back channels and portions of the Hypercom code that Aayla had barely known existed, she had gotten him in touch with his family and offered them a job.

"I'm sorry, you want us to do what?" Asked the bouncing smiling face on the screen. There was no image beyond that smiling face, and it was only Orel's word of honor and a series of exchanged codes that let Aayla have any trust that they were speaking with the correct person on the other end of the line: the patriarch of the slicer clan that the youngster belonged to. Even the voice wasn't normal, it sounded as if whoever she was speaking with was speaking in a dozen languages at once, and that was with the encryption codes and everything else already being exchanged. *These people's security makes even the Order's look normal in comparison.*

"I want you to reach out to every slicer clan you possibly can and tell them that I am willing to pay enough to make you some of the richest people in the galaxy for your help," Aayla repeated herself.

The smiley face bounced around the screen, hands appearing for a second in front of it as if waving off Aayla's words. "Money doesn't really matter much to us. It's the love of the game that keeps our families slicing! If we just need money, we hack into a local bank and gift some of it to us. What are you actually after?"

Trying to ignore the fact the man on the other end – Orel had said his grandfather was the one who led the clan – had baldly admitted to cyber-theft, Aayla smiled. "I'm certain you've heard recently that we Jedi have developed an electronic means with which to override the identify friend or foe programming on the CIS droids?"

"We have, and most of us were extremely intrigued by the concept. Those of us in the community of slicers which are not affiliated with one political ideology or another were wondering how that had happened without us knowing anything about it," the man opined.

"I am certain that you can understand the need for security on such things. But let us say that our ability to duplicate that... system... failed. So much so that we are willing to look for alternative means of creating the same kind of event." Aayla answered.

For a moment, the other end of the communication was silent, and then the smiley face began to bounce even more across the screen, duplicating itself as it laughed at her. "I see, I see, and so you wish us to bring new eyes to the problem?"

"Exactly."

"In that case, let us get down to basics. What are you offering? And don't just tell me money. As I said, to any true slicer, money is no object. This project seems fascinating enough to hold our interest, but we're not going to work for the Republic or the League for free."

Aayla looked over at Orel, who nodded at her, and she began to offer a few different types of trade agreements, acting as if the slicer clan was a kind of government almost, rather than groups of renegades who would be thought of as criminals on most worlds. This seemed to surprise the individual on the other side of the line. But after a moment, he lapped it up, which told Aayla that she was taking the right tack.

And when she mentioned being in touch with the Verpine, the man on the other line instantly interrupted. "Sold! If you can broker some kind of contact with the Verpine, my clan is on board. And I'll wager I can talk a few of the other clans into joining us. Just don't expect instant results," the man hastened to add, the smile turning into a scowling mask almost. "This kind of project is going to be a long-term one, and we're going to need ships too. The best way to invade a system like that is when it is already being pushed to its utmost, which means mid-battle. And I'm not putting any of my clan in danger like that."

"Agreed, of course, I will get you in touch with someone from the GDL's espionage agency, and they will provide you with ships."

That wasn't the way that Aayla wanted to handle this. She wanted to put the slicer clan on one of the cloaked frigates and use them in that manner. But they only had two frigates that had the cloaking device on them right now and, once that array spread to other ships, they would have other tasks. Once more, they were coming against a resource wall, and, like Harry and the Counts, they had to deal with the reality rather than make plans absent of such understanding.

By the time that Harry was finished with the new missile destroyer's design team, Aayla was finished negotiations with the Smiley Face and had remanded Orel back into the auspices

of his youngling clan. Orel would remain aboard the ship to help them communicate further with the slicer clans going forward, although, at this point, no one had stepped forward to request to become his Master.

Thankfully this meant Aayla was able to piggyback onto Harry's mind as they went through the three candidates who had been put forward to represent Serenno and the majority of the sector as a whole in the GDL. Harry repeated that point as Aayla reminded him of it: that whoever they sent would be the noted first among equals in the sector and would have to be willing to understand that they could not speak just for Serenno at this point.

Eventually, the two of them decided to back the youngest of the heirs for the position and slowly swayed the rest of the Council of Counts to their position. None of the Counts were exactly happy with the choice, but they agreed to it.

And then, Countess Jessica decided to drop a bomb on the two of them, so much so that Aayla, who was heading back down towards the shuttle bay, stumbled. For the first time in years she lose her ability to concentrate on the physical world around her in favor of the conversation occurring with Harry.

"And now we come to the final points we wanted to talk to you about, Harry. The succession of your title of Count. That, and who takes over the GDL if you die."

"I'm sorry, what?" Harry asked in astonishment. "Why is this important right now?"

"It's always important," Count Luthor answered, his tone actually oddly kind for a moment. "You have to understand Count Potter, that part of being a good leader is creating the means through which you can pass on that leadership. In ancient times, that meant passing it on to your direct heirs, as it still thoughts for many of us here, for preference. But it doesn't. You still need to designate someone who can take over for you, however."

"Don't look at me!!" Ahsoka gasped out, worried about where this could go. "I am not getting involved in this Master, no way!"

This won some laughs from the other heirs and their elders, but Harry just rolled his eyes, coming back from his self-control.

"The same can be said on the GDL level," Maria spoke up before she could. "I've been following the issue of the emerging GDL government as well as I can from here, and we've all been following the military side of things as long as there has been a GDL. But one aspect that has never been brought up is who would take over the whole boondoggle if you died. Yes, Garm, the reprobate, could probably run the war side of things, and I know that the various senators are, oddly enough, getting along for the moment. But that is because you are in charge. Who will take over for you if the worst happens? It is a question you **must** think about."

"It is a question you should've been thinking about all along," Count Luthor grumbled, back to his normal abrasive manner, shaking his head. "You and Aayla. Humans and Twi'lek can breed, can they not? Family is always the best way to pass on leadership like this."

"With extreme amounts of difficulty, yes, we can," Harry muttered, shaking his head. "But even if I did have a child, the child would be far too young to take over. I need to designate someone you're right, but it can't be that way."

"And it can't be me. I want this understood!" Ahsoka interjected hastily, still looking like she was ready to bolt if anyone made the suggestion.

Jessica snorted at that, but when she spoke, she addressed Harry. "That's fine, so long as you find someone. And I would recommend two 'someones', in point of fact. One to take over leadership of the GDL, and one to take over as Count. That way, you can avoid conflicts of interest in the future. At present, because you basically created the GDL, there isn't much tension, but after the war, who can say?"

Harry deflected this entirely, shaking his head. "I agree with the idea of designating an heir, and I can even acknowledge the fact that I should've done so before this. But thinking about after the war shouldn't happen just yet, gentlemen. Remember how large the CIS is! This war is not going to be over anytime soon. We can consider the future of the GDL when the war is over in four or five years."

The counts all looked a little uneasy at that. None of them, even Garibaldi, who had more to do with the military side of things than the rest of them, had envisioned the kind of long-term warfare that Harry had been hammering into the heads of the people on the military side of things. This was not going to be a short victorious war. This was not going to be a war decided even by a series of large-scale engagements. It was going to be a grinding slog, and the GDL was most decidedly not built to take the losses that even their allies in the Republic could sustain.

"Be that as it may, you still need to designate someone to take over for you," Maria said after a few moments of silence.

"I will," Harry promised. "But I won't be rushed in this decision. Primarily because, as I said, the person I designate would have to be able to step into my shoes right away if the war was still going on. That isn't a job you can give to a child if that was even possible. And then there's the fact that I can't designate another Jedi to take my place as Count, or even as head of the GDL, at least not right now. I might try to convince the High Council to end that rule. And considering that I'm part of the GDL, any laws the Senate has created on that score won't bind me. But I am still bound by the Order's rules for now."

"Again, not it!" Ahsoka shouted, more because she felt the Counts needed some levity at the moment than any fear Harry would really choose her for the position by this point. The smile she received from her Master showed he appreciated it, which was enough for her.

"Another Jedi would be welcome so long as they realize that they have to put their present position as Count and leader of the GDL first rather than act as if they were simply an extension of the Jedi order," Louisa replied speaking up for the first time.

"Agreed. It is a problem and one I promise to think about. But as I said, I will not be rushed into it."

From there, the meeting segued into a few local issues that had come up between Harry's holdings on Serenno and the other Counts, allowing Aayla to retreat to her own body once more, as she and Harry debated the point that they had brought up. They did need to find someone who could take over for them, not for short periods but permanently, should something happen. But at the moment, there were no real candidates either could think of. And as fun as the idea of having a child in the future might be, it wasn't something they could think about now.

Shaking her head to clear it from that thought, Aayla really resumed her journey to the hangar bay, taking a shuttle over to the Serenno space control center, then down to the high command. There, she met with several of the starfighter design teams, introducing them to the Bomber design developed by the eggheads on the ship. It had been perfected since the first time that Harry and Aayla had been introduced to it, and though slower than either would like, the starfighter packed a nasty punch and had, high survivability for its pilots, thanks to the strength of its shields and armor.

This was deliberate. Serenno was now a major exporter of starfighters within the GDL. Indeed, it was the only one that could match Corellia at the moment, since Rendili and the new Core Worlds that had joined the GDL were concentrating on medium-sized ships, and in the case of Rendili, its own defenses thanks to the siege.

Meanwhile, Harry sighed, looking around at the Counts, who were looking back at him with some amusement, even more so than during the previous discussion about heirs. "Very well. Now that all the local business is done connect me to the Baron of House D'Asta. I will beard him in his lair first. And so long as you all remain silent, passing information to me via notes only, I will do so here." *At least that way, someone will have fun with this, even if it isn't me...*

OOOOOO

Elsewhere at around the same time Harry was having his mind blown, another meeting was taking place via Hypercom between the two Sith Lords. Sidious had decided to stop waiting for Dominus to own up to his mistake and report the attack's failure on Potter and the Tyrant's



Bane. And then, when Dominus's image had appeared in his pickup, Sidious began the meeting by using that image to concentrate his Force powers on the other human. Within seconds, Dominus was gasping, his throat muscles straining against a Force Choke. "You continue to fail me and the Dark Side, C'baath."

The use of Dominus's original name was a taunt, a slur to indicate that the man was no longer worthy of being a Darth in Sidious's eyes. "You failed to kill a single Lucrehulk and the Jedi within. You have failed to continue the war effort as I wished it to be into GDL space. And you did not even have the basic courage to own up to your mistakes without being called onto the carpet!" Sidious's voice was a hiss, his eyes alight in the darkness of his hidden throne room. "Tell me, Dominus, convince me that there is any reason why I should not replace you for your incompetence!"

But Dominus, despite being choked out, did not break under Sidious's anger. Instead, he too reached out for the Dark Side and attempted to break the Force Choke around his neck, trying to pull power from the Veil as Sidious had. Sidious snarled and bore down all the harder, his teeth bared almost like that of an animal rather than a man as he used his growing anger and fury at how the Great Plan hadn't been going as he had wished to crush the man's attempt at rebellion.

For several minutes Dominus tried to fight back, but Sidious was implacable, and the Veil answered to him, not to Dominus. His resistance cracked, and his control of the Dark Side fled him, fear now in his old eyes. "I, am sorry Master!" he gasped out. "I, I had wanted to wait to, to report to you the failure of the mission when I had yet to get any eyewitness reports about it. All we have is secondhand information and what the Jedi themselves are saying. Surely you do not think they are telling the truth?"

"Of course not. But if so, you had best tell me what you have discovered..." Sidious allowed his Force Choke to slacken slightly, thankful as always that the Veil was able to hide his use of the Force for set amounts of time. Indeed, reaching through space like this was actually much easier to hide thanks to the Veil than it would have been if he had been doing the same thing in person. *The Veil truly was one of my Order's most amazing creations.*

However, right now and Sidious could not dwell on the triumph of the dark side that was the Veil. Instead, he contemplated the man in front of him on the screen. "Well?"

Breathing deeply with only a bit of pain visible in his face, Dominus replied. "We have sent scouts into the system where Loremy was supposed to ambush Potter and Yoda. No survivors were found, although dozens of empty escape pods were discovered on the planet. There was little sign of struggle around them, which implies the Jedi's victory was so crushing that the surviving crews simply surrendered entirely. The debris was also analyzed all there are numerous discrepancies there. However, what the research vessels were able to discover was that there isn't enough debris to account for all the ships sent. That implies that those ships were either captured or turned traitor during the battle."

Letting his silence speak for him, Sidious waited, watching as Dominus licked his lips once in remembered fear before continuing. "I have gone over the data, and I believe that to not be possible. None of the captains that were part of that battle had Republic or pacifist leanings. This leads me to conclude that the Tyrant's Bane must have some kind of superweapon. I do not, however, know what kind."

Sidious frowned, annoyed now. *I had hoped for more.* "That is all?"

Seeing Dominus hesitate, Sidious instantly strengthened the Force Choke around the man's neck, only releasing it when he began to speak. "T, the amount of material in space shows that the Jedi performed some measure of salvage after the battle, but most of the material was left in place. We cannot yet say anything about that rubble. That is the equivalent of many months of painstaking work, cataloging the bits and matching them to records. We also have some telemetry from the computers of the escape pods. A recording of their heading after launch and some navigational data. But the computers were scrambled badly, so again, that it will be the work of months before we can see anything from that work."

Sidious leaned back, letting the Force Choke he had held loosely around the man dissipate, watching him with cold eyes. *Should I kill Dominus now?* A part of Sidious his mind was urging him to do just that, but despite what he had told Dominus before giving him the mission against the Tyrant's Bane, he didn't really have someone he could put in the man's place, not quickly.

*Not one who would command such instant respect among the CIS anyway.* Sidious could replace the other Darth as Supreme Commander. Grievous would be able to easily act as such. Better, his loyalty to the Sith was hardwired, a special backdoor in the cyborg's programming to let Sidious control him directly. But doing so would create a schism within the CIS.

*Many of the CIS leadership who are not yet blinded by hate and ambition would be unwilling to continue to follow the CIS line at that point. Their budding government would undoubtedly latch onto that, the weak among them pushing quickly to sue for peace talks.* No, replacing Dominus was not tenable right now, and while Dominus had surprised him by attacking the secret shipyards, since then, he had proven he wasn't competent enough as a military commander to be a threat to Sidious, even with his subordinates, some of whom were very competent.

*Worse, in a way, I cannot truly blame him for this disaster. He sent more ships than should've been needed, after all, and now we know that the Jedi have some kind of secret weapon. That in itself is useful. Blast it!*

"Very well, I can see that our lack of real information is blinding us on that score." Sidious intoned as if the man had won the argument. "Yet this, and the fact those Agri-worlds have been evacuated mean that we must find where the Jedi aboard the Tyrant's Bane is going. You must turn CIS resources to that score. Devote as many resources as you can to attacking

the ships moving the Tibanna gas through the GDL. That is the only thread we can follow on that score. The Jedi and Potter have done too good a job hiding where the gas originates.”

“I’ve already given orders to up the number of attacks on GDL shipping, but frankly, the CIS doesn’t have a dedicated commerce raider ship,” Dominus replied. “I can allocate many of the Captor class ships to it, but that will leave Munificents and Hardsell transports to pick up the slack on defending our own supply lines. And the Hardcells are not designed for that work.”

“Your forces will simply have to suffer then. We must find that source. Once we do that, we will find the Jedi and where they have gone.”

“In this, we are agreed,” Dominus answered sententiously. “The Jedi must die, root and branch.”

Sidious nodded back, neither man giving voice to the thoughts that they both knew all too well. Too often in the history of the Sith and Jedi, one side or the other had thought they had wiped their opponents out only for the losers to come back, having rebuilt their strength to overthrow the previous winner who had since become complacent. Indeed, the entire Sith Order as it was now originated from such a time. Sidious would further have argued that their representation of the seemingly unending cycle was the best because it was a planned maneuver, Darth Bane had set it into motion deliberately so that the Sith could hide, gathering their strength, weakening the Jedi Order from the shadows and through intermediaries, ripening the fowl for the executioner’s ax.

"Yet you cannot find them with the Veil?" Dominus asked, a sneer in his voice as he ended the moment of camaraderie if such it could be called, between them.

Yet as he did, Sidious could sense the anger and weakness in the man. Furious that his new attempts to take over the Veil had been so easily foiled and equally afraid now. *Good. His fear will keep him docile for now. He will still have to die, but for now, he is safe. Although that does not mean he will not be further punished...*

"Even with the Veil, I cannot follow every Jedi just yet." *Or rather, I can, so long as I am concentrating on doing so to the detriment of everything else.* “At the moment, I can sense thousands in the direction of Serenno, but whether or not they will remain there is anyone’s guess.”

Dominus turned away for a moment, consulting another screen, scowling in fury as it showed his initial thought ward correct. “We could gather the ships necessary to assault Serenno, but it would leave us vulnerable in several nearby sectors, and one of those sectors, in particular, has been turned against the CIS recently. And given our lack of information on the Tyrant’s Bane, any attack there would have to be massively overwhelming.”

Leaning back, Sidious thought about it, then shook his head. "No. The lack of information on whatever weapon the *Tyrant's Bane* used means that it could be a trap. The CIS might be able to afford to lose the fleets involved, but I do not want the GDL to create any more positive press. Already the number of planets wishing to join them and leave the Republic has become a nuisance." *Of course, if I still had the Republic's hidden fleet and hidden shipyards, allowing a second enemy to grow would be fine, but as it is, I cannot allow the GDL to seem so competent in comparison to the Republic.*

He looked at a map of the Republic, seeing the colors indicating the GDL and CIS-controlled space. "Corellia. The Green Jedi. There is a CIS-controlled planet in the Corellian Sector, the Jumus system."

Dominus nodded, seeing where this was going. "It will take several weeks to divert the Forces necessary to assault Corellia if that is what you intend, and would be a tremendous drain on CIS resources. It will take more time if you wish the attack to keep the buildup a secret and keep the pressure, such as it is at this point, elsewhere." Dominus scowled at that, admitting without doing so that he had been forced to kowtow to the fears of his commanders thanks to Yoda's scheme.

"Do so. An attack on Corellia can serve as a means to both wound the GDL horribly and as a way for the Republic to regain its primacy once we can take advantage of the concentration of forces. Further, activate as many of your Blanked as you can within the GDL." Sidious snarled, once more losing his temper as he thought about the thousands of Jedi-trained Force users and younglings already gone from the board. "In particular, target Serenno. Let us see if we can do a good, old-fashioned data raid. But however you do it, the Jedi must **bleed!**"

*They will pay. The Jedi will all pay for not performing as the Great Plan decrees!*

Shaken by the power and force of that declaration, Dominus shivered, nodding agreement. "I, I will see to it."

"See that you do." Once more, Sidious reached through the Veil, Force Choking Dominus even as his voice thundered into the other Sith's mind directly. *"And always remember who is the Master here, Dominus!"*

With that, Sidious cut the connection. The image of Dominus spasming in pain on the other side the last thing he saw. Then in the now completely lightless throne room. Sidious leaned back, slowly reining in his temper, with far more difficulty than normal Sidious felt, as he wondered bleakly what other surprises the Jedi had waiting in the depths of space. After a moment, though, he had indeed regained control and knew what he had to do.

*The Tibanna gas is indeed the key, but I cannot let that only to CIS forces. I will have to use Republic resources as well. And now that the war has begun, I can use certain... resources*

*that I could not otherwise. Yes, cut two sets of orders, then... yes, I think it is time the clone ARC troopers are unveiled, if not against the CIS as most would think...*

**OOOOOOO**

While Sidious ended the communication with Dominus, on Serenno, Harry and Ahsoka arrived at the command center. After passing through several checkpoints, the two of them were ushered into the main bunker, and from there, after two more security stations, into the GDL's command center, which, Harry reflected, seemed to be in the process of eating the ground around it since they had been here last. Even as they entered, there was work going on expanding several rooms to either side of the buried command center, and several Verpine were even now working on the various electronics going into the enlarged command room.

Ahsoka frowned at it all, worried about this being a security issue until she noticed that several of the workers were young Jedi Knights. Then she simply inquired, "Master, what is all the extra space for?"

"As the war expands, so too will the various fronts. Garm and the others can't give out orders to any specific battlefield. We're not getting real-time data, you understand. But gathering information as fast as possible might allow us to divert some of our fleets to this or that front in time to do some good," Harry explained as the door to the current command center opened ahead of them. "Then too, the GDL has grown militarily since the start of hostilities, which means more fleets added to our order of battle and more commanders to deal with."

"Which I imagine is just one of the many annoying jobs we've dumped on your head, First Marshal Iblis," Aayla added, moving forward to give the man a handshake as he moved towards them. First Marshal was the label which had finally been decided on as Garm's rank as head of the GDL's armed forces.

"Truly, I hope we're not stepping on too many toes coming back unannounced like this," Harry said, clasping hands with the older man as Aayla had.

Garm laughed, shaking his head. "It would be hard for our Supreme Commander to be stepping on any toes whatever time it might be, Count Potter," The Corellian replied, playing to the crowd of officers around them as the two Jedi had. "However, if you can come with me, I will move things along right snappish." He then looked at the young Togrutan by Harry's side. "And who is this?"

"I am Ahsoka Tano, Master Potter's padawan," Ahsoka introduced herself, smiling at the older, rather friendly-looking man.

"Ouch, my condolences, young one. Having to follow this one around can't be fun," Garm noted, smirking at Harry.

“Actually, I rather think that depends on your definition of fun,” Ahsoka giggled.

For his part, Harry simply smiled at the jibe, asking, “Are you prepared for the conference?”

“We’re preparing will a large auditorium for it,” Garm waved one hand out the corridor. “And I’m not talking about the work going on to either side of us. We’ve set aside a different meeting hall above us to handle the diplomatic side of things. We’ll be using it today for both that and the military meeting. Considering the number of admirals and officers we’ll be meeting with, I felt it appropriate.”

Harry nodded. “Whatever you think best, Garm. This is, after all, your command center.” As always, Harry made a point of making everyone aware of the chain of command here. While he might lead the GDL, it was Garm who led the League’s military.

Then Harry asked quietly, “Do you want to know about the battle with the Tyrant’s Bane now or after.”

“We’re still waiting for confirmation that a few of the fleet admirals can join us, so now would be good,” Garm answered just as quietly.

After a few more public exchanges, Harry nodded, and the three of them retired to Garm's office. Within, they found Yaddle and Yoda sitting across from one another, meditating. As the new group entered, they looked up, watching as Garm activated a series of controls, completely isolating the room from the outside world for a time via a faraday system.

As Garm did so, Aayla pulled a small necklace out from within her robes, holding it out to the Corellian. “This is for you, Garm.”

Garm looked down at the piece of jewelry somewhat askance. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I rather doubt the colors would flatter me, Aayla.”

“It’s not just jewelry” Harry rolled his eyes, sitting down and gesturing Ahsoka into a chair beside him rather than behind him where she had been about to move it. Once he had thought of the idea of using the defensive array to defend Ahsoka, creating a second for Garm was a natural progression, even though his fingers might not forgive Harry for a while.

“It's to defend our secrets, a runic array that creates a Force-based defense around your mind. It can be overcome, but not without warning you that the attack is occurring. I realize you probably are living here in the base command center, but even so, you might occasionally go outside, correct?” He teased Garm, who snorted. “And there, you could perhaps be susceptible to Sith spies despite all the security around the base.”

“Even with the number of Jedi around?” Garm was somewhat disconcerted despite his amusement at Harry’s words.

“It’s just a precaution.” Harry pointed to Ahsoka, who mocked snapping at his finger with her sharp teeth. “My young padawan here wears her own such necklace, just in case.” Harry turned back, smirking at the older man. “And look at it this way, Garm, if that piece of jewelry shines, then you will know that the Sith is nearby, can lock the base down, and maybe find them.”

Garm perked up at that and nodded firmly, taking the necklace and putting it around his neck. Once he had done so, Aayla reached forward, placing two fingers on the centermost stone of the necklace, which was a near-perfect replica of the one given to Padme, even if the setting wasn’t as magnificent. A second’s concentration pushed some of the Force into the rock, awakening the runes within which glowed brightly.

Yaddle looked on in interest while Yoda harumphed under his breath. He had learned quite a bit about runes while aboard the *Tyrant’s Bane*, but a mere week two weeks wasn’t nearly enough to truly understand how they worked or what they did. Especially something like this, which even Harry and Aayla thought of as extremely difficult. “Fascinating it always is to see new uses of the Force,” Yaddle said as she felt out the Force around them, watching for a few seconds before the light in the stone dimmed down to nothing.

“Maybe,” Garm breathed, staring down at it, “although the reason behind this gift is a bit much. Still, let’s move on. Tell me about the fight! How did the *Tyrant’s Bane* do? And how quickly do you think we could turn those Lucrehulks you towed into another monster?”

“Answering your second question first, the Lucrehulks we brought into Serenno will not be turned into a new *Tyrant’s Bane*. Instead, they will be sent to Corellia for refit there, as I’m certain you already knew. I trust that your fellow Corellians can make something even more dangerous out of them than the Trade Federation could. The two Munificent’s will remain here.”

As Garm looked torn between national pride and regret, Harry went on unhurriedly. “But we **will** be creating another ship like the *Tyrant’s Bane*. We took three Lucrehulks after the battle and will be taking the other one, which we left out in the deep dark, with us to Master Gallia’s space station. There, the ship will be refitted and rebuilt just like the *Bane*.”

Now smiling openly, Garm nodded, understanding Harry’s reasoning. “How fast do you think you’ll be able to turn it around?”

“Actually, work on it will probably go quite a bit faster than it was for the *Bane*,” Harry laughed, causing Aayla to giggle as she took his hand in hers. “Remember that the work on the *Bane* was mostly done by myself, Aayla here, Master Fay, and as many droids as we could program to help us along eventually. The process has now been perfected, and we’ll certainly

have far more Jedi and droids involved in it. I would estimate..." he looked at Aayla, asking mentally, "What, three weeks?"

"Around three weeks for the runic portion." Aayla cautioned aloud. "But the runic arrays will be the fastest part of the project once the damage to the ship has been repaired. Putting in the planetary shield generators, the factories, the weapons and everything else will take quite a bit longer. But yes, the ship should online within say... a month and a half, maybe two months considering the resources from within the Ruusan Sector we can call upon."

Garm sighed, leaning back in his chair, relief pouring through him. "Okay, we can work with that. Two months, that's pretty darn good, frankly." He leaned forward, staring at Harry and then at the others. "And now the battle."

Harry described the battle from beginning to end, with Yoda, Aayla and even Ahsoka interjecting here and there. Ahsoka emphasized the impact that the bigger concussion missile magazines for the Vultures had on the dogfights, in addition to how well the Falcons had done in a large-scale engagement. Harry smiled at her, nodding in approval, and then turned the discussion back to how well the Bane itself had done before commenting on one other item. "There was another secret that we used in that fight, one that is almost as important or perhaps even more important than the space expansion arrays themselves."

Garm's eyes narrowed. "What was it? Because as good as the Tyrant's Bane is, those expansion arrays aren't a true war-winning secret. Not yet, not until we roll them out in larger quantities. We already using the space expanded freighters in large quantities. Some two hundred freighters at last count, with added security and Jedi among the crew. And those ships are a tremendous boon for our ongoing industrial and defensive efforts. But even so, that impact is minimal in comparison to putting more ships like yours in the battle line."

"Actually, I think that this could actually be even more important because as impactful as the Bane can be, we would still need an offensive target eventually. And this secret might just help us find one. You see, we have developed a runic array that acts as a true cloaking device."

Garm's eyes widened, as did Master Yaddle's despite Yaddle's Jedi control. "How does it work?" Garm questioned eagerly.

"You know that we have two Archer frigates aboard the Bane. What you might not know is that they were a testbed for everything we've been doing. They are much more dangerous than any other frigate could be, and the runic array I was talking about just now is part of that. Essentially, the cloaking array does just what it says. It keeps in all heat and energy emissions and turns the entire ship into a dark patch on the sky. Coupled with some more runic arrays on the outer hull to emulate the sky around the ship, and you have ships which can disappear."



"You can't use it in hyperspace," Aayla cautioned. The energy made by jumping in and out is still visible, no matter how fast you turn it on or off. And, worse, is the heat."

"Keeping in the heat, with extended use, unbearable the ship would soon become," Yaddle deduced.

"Exactly. So while it is incredible, it does have its drawbacks. But I think that it can indeed be a war-winning concept if we can roll it out in sufficient numbers." With that, Harry leaned forward, fixing Garm with a stare, then looked at Yaddle. "This is a point we've been debating the past few days. We want that cloaking device on at least two dozen ships which we can turn into spy vessels, and we want to set them on the task of finding the enemy's hidden shipyards, the yards that created the CIS's massive fleet."

"But we don't yet have the trained manpower to do both that and work on the refit for the Lucrehulk," Aayla took over the discussion. "We will be dropping off several hundred more Jedi who wish to work with Master Gallia, but they are not as well trained on runic arrays as the group she's already working with. They will be training on the job, and it won't be many more months until they are fully up to speed, but we don't have them just yet."

"So, I want to ask you, Garm, right now, which will be more important for the next few months: putting another *Bane* style ship online and ready to defend say here in Serenno, or in Corellia or wherever, or the spy ships?" Harry demanded. "You've got a far better idea of the total war effort than we do."

Garm really, **really** wanted to say the cloaking ships. A defensive war like this was not natural to Garm's way of thinking. He wanted to strike back and take the war to the enemy. And they couldn't. Not yet. They didn't have targets other than the known Confederacy worlds, and all of them were extremely hard targets. If the GDL struck at one which was militarily industrially important, they would have to pull most of their defenders into a single fleet to do it.

Again it just came down to numbers. The CIS had the numbers to both defend in-depth and attack both the Republic and the GDL across the entirety of known space. The GDL had the numbers to defend itself using a strategy built on space-based guerilla tactics and never getting bogged down against superior numbers. But they lacked the numbers to go on the attack. It was that simple. With that in mind, Garm reined in his initial instinct and asked, "I'm curious, what do you all think?"

"I wanted to slow down both projects so they would come online at the same time," Aayla shrugged. "But that might be too greedy, I suppose."

"Felt I did that concentrating on training inductees, better it would be in the long term," Yoda grumbled. "Trust, I do not, the use of astromech droids to create the majority of runic arrays."

Yaddle chuckled at that. It was well-known throughout the order that Yoda was something of a technophobe, especially when it came to droids.

"We need that Force-reinforced ship," Garm said before Harry could speak. "We need that ship up and running and ready to be sent to any battlefield and turn the tide. I realize that using that ship and the *Bane* this way might out their secret before we're able to strike back, but I am deeply concerned about how much of the CIS offensive is aimed at the GDL. Too much, really. We're not a strategic threat to them. We won't be for months, maybe even a year from now. Whereas the Republic, even with the losses they have incurred, are most certainly a strategic enemy."

As it was, the GDL constituted around ten percent of the Republic's population, although they constituted a little more than nineteen percent pre-war industrial capacity with the Core World Sectors that had joined them, since a majority of the Core Worlds were more interested in their own economies, not really producing anything Republic-wide. That number would change as the war went on, but in comparison to CIS, which was around eighteen percent of the Republic's population but forty-two percent of its industrial capacity, that was nothing.

"But they were pressing us hard before Master Yoda's trick made the rounds among their commanders. They're adapting to our strategy too fast. We need a punch and will need it soon. That is my recommendation, Harry."

Harry stared back at the older man, then nodded slowly. "Very well. However, with that being said, I think that once we reach Master Gallia, I'm going to order Harrington and Rafael off. We'll replace them with two other frigates from the group that's on guard there, but the two of them will at least give us a starting point on trying to find a target for when we can go on the attack."

Garm nodded, and the discussion turned from that point to what else Aayla had been doing that day and Harry's earlier meeting with the counts. After he stopped laughing at how Harry had been blindsided on the whole 'heir' thing, and gleefully admitted the Specters would love the help of a few thousand Force sensitives (once those Force sensitives memories had been modified to hide the secrets of the runic arrays) Garm gave them a brief overview of the war effort. They were still being brought up to date on all the various battles going on when one of his aides knocked on the door and told him that the admirals were beginning to contact them for the meeting.

Harry and Aayla looked on as face after face appeared in the massive array of screens all around them. Each screen was labeled a different name, sometimes a sector, sometimes a specific star system, and in several cases, simply by the fleet designation. A few screens were then linked to others, showing which operational theater they were in. A few specific people were invited into the meeting by their superiors, mostly Jedi accompanying this or that battle

group. Alecto appeared, and he and the two lovers smiled at one another while the room filled with different admirals, flotilla commanders, and planetary defense officers.

A few others they recognized and even a few Harry would call more than friendly acquaintances. One of those faces, sharing the screen with a rather elderly gentleman with a handlebar mustache, was Master Ti. And next to him, Ahsoka stiffened, looking at the image of the older Togrutan almost shyly. In return, Shaak Ti smiled back, looking in approval at her and Harry for a second.

However, that was all they could allow for personal interaction in this meeting, and as the last fleet admiral logged in, Harry began quickly, keeping his voice personable and somewhat sardonic. "Ladies and gentle beings, greetings. I would apologize for taking you away from your duties or your rest times as judged by your local time zones, but time and war wait for no man. I realize that this is the first time that I have met with many of you in person, but for those who don't know me, I am Jedi Knight and Count Harry Potter, leader of the Galactic Defense League. Which as yet has not added to my list of titles, thankfully."

There were some snorts at that, or the species' equivalent, anyway. After all, while Harry hadn't met with many of the military officers arrayed in front of him, he certainly had met with their political leaders, or else their systems or sectors would not be part of the GDL. In turn, Harry smiled wryly at them, while Aayla smirked too, leaning forward in her own chair.

Behind them, Ahsoka leaned back in her own chair, watching events, knowing she would probably not have much, if anything, to contribute. But Harry had told her to listen and maybe start learning about tactics and logistics here, as boring as Ahsoka thought the idea of learning logistics might be.

"At this point in the meeting, I would like to throw open the door to any specific issues or concerns any of you have before we get to looking at the overall picture and talking about specific battles, as well as what we can learn from them. Even though the war isn't even a month old, our continued survival is based on our ability to roll with the punches. I trust Garm has been doing as well as anyone could in keeping everything running smoothly, but if anyone has any specific concerns you want to raise to him in person or to me, now is the time to do it."

There were more than a few of those, and Aayla and Harry listened intently. These were the men and women that were fighting the war from the front, and that would help give them both a perspective both knew they lacked at the moment. One of the problems was one of the things that Garm had told them about earlier.

"While many of the attacks have paused in the past few days thanks to some kind of rumor going around about some kind of droids command override program or something, those attacks that are continuing still destroy outer system manufacturing capacity and resources with every attack. I know that my governor will take this up with you later, Potter, but we need to start doing something more about it! We repelled the last attack sent at us but

still lost millions in credits worth of material, and seven thousand, two hundred and ninety beings I was sworn to defend,” one of the commanders practically shouted, getting in his words first.

But he was not the last to speak on this score. Several hundred system commanders spoke up on this score, as did two of the Fleet admirals, having seen the destruction firsthand. All of them spoke angrily about the destruction being rained down on their systems, with one of them going so far as to bring up video evidence of it, the video replacing his own image for a moment, complete with the same kind of audio Garm had shared with Harry and Aayla.

Eventually, Harry held up a hand, asking for quiet, and it was a sign of the amount of respect he had, or their own discipline, that the various officers fell silent. “Garm has told me of this shift in their attacks. But as military men, you have to know that there is very little we can do if an attacker stays in the outer system, where they can simply hyperspace out again quickly before you can scramble to meet them. If we start putting stronger military forces out there, we put them in danger of being jumped in turn.”

“I realize that, Count Potter, but I also realize that my system depends on out-system resources to continue production.” This speaker was a Dellaltion, a species that looked almost like short humanoid ducks, yet his voice was deeper than most humans could have managed as he shook his large head. “If we do not have that material, we cannot continue to create starfighters for a few nearby systems which are looking to us to supply them.”

“One possible solution for this problem would be to move most of that manufactory deeper in-system,” Aayla suggested before she addressed the first man who had shouted out his concerns on this score. “How expensive would that be for you, commander? Since you spoke up first.”

Moving the factories deeper into the solar gravity well was doable. Most of the work done was inside large refining vessels or guided by the same, which could then transport the finished product in the system themselves, or space stations. Pulling space stations via tractor beam further in-system was possible, although few space stations were built for that kind of thing. But the resource gathering productions, the mining and the surveying had to stay with the resources.

A few dozen system commanders admitted their asteroid mining station couldn't be moved in-system simply because they didn't have the capital ships do it. Harry and Garm then turned to the order of battle for the GDL and quickly began to put together a small independent flotilla. It was built around two Mon Calamari cruisers with accompanying smaller ships, including two divisions of Archers. They would move from one such system to another, perform this service, and lend their weight of fire to any defensive operation needed.

This was only a stopgap measure though, and Harry turned the conversation over to Aayla. Aayla asked a series of questions, and it came out that basing starfighters out near the

edge of the system was a much better idea than basing capital ships there. Patrolling starfighters, or a Combat Air Patrol as was the proper term, could respond to raids or full-on attacks far faster than capital ship squadrons at rest. "So the solution is twofold. One, give our starfighters a better punch, and two, designing a starfighter base which can be thrown up as quickly as a Golan Defense Station, and whose loss will not devastate the system it is in."

"We have that, I believe." With that, Garm pulled up a ship design from Corellia, complete with some information on various parts of it to one side. It was a very odd design, the equivalent of the Captor class carrier that the CIS used to protect its commerce and, at times, to bolster its attack force, only it was far smaller, designed to carry two squadrons of starfighters.

The ship was extremely fast, judging by the size of its engine output, but its shields were almost negligible, causing several snorts from the people watching. The Corellian's, Garm, a few of the fleet commanders, and the Corellian Diktat, who had, to Harry's surprise, decided to take part in this meeting as well as the next, all got their backs up at that point.

But before they could say anything, Shaak Ti spoke up, her voice a soothing alto, cutting across the argument. "The design seems to be good on the surface, but there are two points that we must address about it. One, can we create these ships fast enough to get enough of them to all the different systems where they are needed? And two, if we get unlucky enough for an attacking force to come out of hyperspace directly on top of it, could it survive long enough to get out it's second starfighter squadron. We would need what, ten of these for every system?"

At that, the grumbles from both sides of the dispute subsided. While the Corellians were willing to argue about the primacy of speed over durability, they couldn't deny the numbers problem. "We have only about fourteen of these ships mothballed, and they were not a priority..." The system commander for Corellia said, looking over at Harry. He was, oddly, a Twi'lek, one with yellow skin and a wry twist to his features.

He needn't have bothered answering that question. Harry Garm and Aayla all shook their heads firmly. "No. I am not changing your priorities sir, I want your mothballed fleets reactivated in the order we have previously discussed. I want your destroyers and dreadnoughts."

"The need for dreadnoughts brings up a point, but I will come back to it when we are done this discussion," one of the fleet admirals, Fleet Admiral Douglas, intoned.

Harry nodded at the man, both acknowledgment and gratefulness that he wasn't pushing that point forward just yet, as Harry and the others continued to pick up the issue. To deal with the need for more offensive punch, Aayla introduced the group to the bomber design created by Heren and the rest of the design team on the Bane, which drew some interested looks from various sources, although Harry noted that the Mon Calamari and a few of the other species didn't seem as enthusiastic.

However, the Dornean representatives, the group who had created the extremely effective Braha'tok gunboat design, grasped the idea of these bombers with both hands. They all spoke over one another to request the full design to start to put it in production in their sector. While the Dorneans had resources, they lacked the dockyards to build larger ships. Bombers, gunboats and starfighters, though, they could do.

Ahsoka and Harry conferred on that mentally for a brief second, then gave the okay for the Rendili to start producing them when Master Ti asked forward in turn. Aayla had not anticipated that so many would like that concept so much, but spreading the design throughout the GDL was an excellent idea, the better to roll the bombers out in sufficient numbers to make a difference faster.

But even with the bombers, the issue about the Confederacy's new attack strategy was a serious one. And the Corellian design, called the Carapace-class for some reason, was not a viable solution.

Eventually, it was decided to commission Rendili Shipyards to create a new semi-mobile station that could house a set amount of starfighters. It would never be able to survive a long-term engagement, and it would have to be designed to keep the number of personnel on it to a bare minimum, so much so that one force commander admitted that it would probably be hardship duty for the starfighters on deployment there.

That and Harry authorized a shift of another 3% of the overall military spending into creating mines and minefields. They could be used as area denial weapons and could be a major help in stopping the enemy from simply jumping in wherever they wished on the outer edge of any specific system.

From there, the conversation turned to other matters, local issues each of the commanders had wanted to bring up with Harry and Garm in person. This ranged from personnel issues to requests for reinforcements, things that Garm could have handled on his own, but which these people wanted to bring up to Harry, mainly because many of them, as Harry said initially, hadn't met him or Aayla before.

But Harry refused to micromanage them and said so bluntly. "I will not tell you how to run your fleets or sectors. I will simply repeat our mantra. Build our strength, try not to lose capital ships, and if the battle is truly lost, you are to retreat rather than die where you stand. Guard our industry, our economy, our numbers."

However, there were a few issues that had to be addressed by Harry and Fleet Admiral Douglas spoke up now on one of them. His sector included one of the planets that had a Hyperspace Relay Center within it. It had been both attacked, then probed several times in the past week. "Indeed, examining the enemy's movements has shown us that they might have been attempting to draw off my forces in several battles, hoping to launch a full-scale attack on the HRC afterward."

“The same happened to us,” fleet Admiral D’Richelu interjected, with Alecto nodding firmly in agreement, along with a few of the other Jedi who were working with that fleet. “At first, we thought that perhaps they had been attempting to draw out the full fleet, to bring overwhelming numbers to bear on our fleet. But they attempted to attack the planet again three days later. It was a probing raid, and it stopped quickly, but it is a sign that the CIS is prioritizing the relay centers.”

“If they destroy one of those centers, what will the immediate impact be?” one of the other admirals whose sector didn’t have one of them in it asked. When he had Harry and Aayla’s attention, a Gand, shrugged his shoulders. “I realize that the long-term ramifications will not be good for our economy, but would there be an immediate impact from it?”

That was a question Harry and Aayla couldn’t field, and they turned to Master Yaddle, who had not taken part in the previous discussion. “Master Yaddle, do you know what would happen if one of those relay centers was destroyed? What would happen to the overall Hypercom Network?”

From where he had been observing proceedings – and making notes on how the GDL ran things in comparison to what he had seen of the Republic High Command before leaving Coruscant - Yoda spoke up before Yaddle could. “In the new Sith wars, relay centers destroyed they were occasionally. Communications in those territories cut off it was. A dark, dark time for the galaxy it was. Redundancy, built into the Hypercom system there is. But destroy enough, vast sectors of space, cut off the planets will be.” He looked at Harry, frowning. “But, GDL, enough of these relay centers for that to occur do not have.”

“And we don’t know if the Republic is dealing with the same attacks,” Aayla murmured. Then her brows furrowed. “But the enemy would be dealing with the same kind of lack of communication! Both sides are using the Hypercom system after all.”

That was a major point of contention between the Republic and the CIS before the war actually began. The CIS controlled something like 45% of the galaxies Hypercom Relay Centers. And the ‘borders’ between the three factions were so mixed in places, neither side could be simply locked out of the system as a whole.

Ahsoka frowned, her words slow and thoughtful. She had been silent up to this point, but now felt she had to say something “The Dark Side feeds on fear.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone there took that in, and then Harry chuckled, causing the other Jedi to smile, even a few who had begun to glare at the young padawan for taking part in this discussion. “My Padawan is right. These attacks on those positions have nothing to do with any kind of tactical goal. Those planets don’t matter except in the area of communication. No, they are either trying to force the GDL into paying for their repair, which would swiftly bankrupt us and force us to rejoin the Republic...”

He stopped as many of the system commanders, and even one of the Fleet Admirals growled at the very idea. Indeed, the only ones who didn't come from Rendili and the Core Worlds who had joined the GDL. They were looking askance at the images of their fellows, and Aayla made a note of it. *"I think our political discussion is going to be very interesting later, Harry,"* she mused. *"It isn't just the Council of counts that wishes to make a clean break from the Republic. I know we had anticipated something like this, but so quickly?"*

*"It isn't quickly, love. I think this has been building since we've begun the GDL,"* Harry demurred. *"And while it might indeed be a problem for the future given the whole not having any set kind of border thing. But at the moment, it's actually a good sign."*

Aayla waffled on that point for a bit but didn't address it just yet, as Harry continued to speak aloud, smirking around at the growling faces. "And to sow the fear of being cut off like that, to fuel the Dark Side. This is already being fueled by the emotions of this war throughout the galaxy."

Many of the admirals didn't really buy into the whole Jedi mumbo-jumbo. They knew it existed, but they just didn't really put much faith in the Force. The other idea, though? That these attacks were meant to bankrupt the GDL that they could easily understand. Which made the point Douglas wished to broach even more plain. "We need to make those planets hardpoints. We need them to become walls, like Corellia, like Serenno, Rendilli or Dac. Better than the various systems we were using as mock fleet bases before the war began."

The Mon Calamari among them snorted, exchanging glances with their Dornean counterparts, amusement plain on their faces for those who knew their species well. Dac could be besieged like Rendili. But if anyone thought just because they were an Outer Rim system and relatively unknown, they would be in for a very nasty surprise. Even the nearby Dominus sector would prove incredibly a hard nut to crack, although in a very different way.

"What we need is more capital ships," said one of the Core World commanders bluntly. "We need to start fighting the CIS on an even footing. We'll never be able to match them in number, but our dreadnoughts exceed them in quality. That's been proven on several different battlefields, but we need more of them, more than just Corellia can provide."

Other Core World system commanders and one of the fleet admirals spoke up in agreement, but before they could get going, Harry shook his head firmly, holding up a hand for quiet once more. "Wait, please." They all did so, and Harry started to pull up some information, showing precisely how much material and time a dreadnought took to make, as well as how long it took to make one. In the same amount of time that even Corellia could create a battleship, like the Lucrehulk, they could build four heavy cruisers. And a dreadnaught would take even longer.



“This doesn’t even include the personnel aspect,” Garm interjected. “A dreadnaught can take upwards of 10,000 crewmen to run in combat. For that number, we could field a whole division of Mon Calamari style heavy cruisers.”

“And Corellia does not have the construction capacity as of yet, with their priority being refitting and bringing online its mothballed fleets, to start laying out new construction,” Aayla added. “Nor, I am sorry to point this out, do any of you. There is a reason, after all, that Rendili is being besieged at the moment and why it, Kuat and Corellia are so important on the shipbuilding side of things normally.”

“We’re around four months away from completing that project. After that, we’ll have time for new construction. Although we’re building so many planetary shield generators that even at that point, it’s going to cut into our total output,” the Diktat interjected, taking part in the conversation for the first time. “And we cannot stop that production,” she went on, almost glaring at her own system commander and a few others as they made to speak.

“Agreed,” Aayla and Harry both spoke up, backing the woman up, with Aayla going on. “There are still Type 1 planets out there that do not have planetary shield generators, and that is unacceptable, gentlemen. I realize that those planets do not really have anything to offer the war effort, but they are still members of the GDL, and we still owe it to them to try to defend them as best we can, especially since so many of them are understanding on that score.”

Fleet Admiral Senteros, a Sluisi, smiled a wintry little smile. “And actually, if you leave out the political side of things and simply look at them in cold calculation terms, those planets do offer something. Bait. Any raiding for send against them and then bounced by one of our sector fleets. The fact that they have sometimes tried to turn that on us means we can hurt them more before fading. One reality from this war, gentlemen, that all of us have had to learn, including me, is that space is kriffing vast. There’s always somewhere to run if you look for it.”

“Exactly. This means that we do not need a handful of more powerful ships a year from now. We need to continue production of our destroyers and other lighter classes.” Harry took over the discussion once more, looking at the Core Worlds commanders and admirals, as well as the Corellians. They were not going to like what he was about to say. “Because of that, I am ordering two things on the logistical level right now. One, all construction of large-scale ships is to stop. Medium-sized cruisers, light cruisers, destroyers and our missile frigates are the priority at this point. This order is going to affect every planet within the GDL, bar Dac.”

The Corellians instantly started to argue, shouting over one another in their outrage, and the Core Worlds systems were not any slower. Even the Duros representative, who had been silent since the conversation about out-system infrastructure, now spoke up in outrage. But Harry let their confusion and annoyance flow over him, simply waiting for it to subside, leaning back with steepled fingers as he did so, the very picture of an adult waiting for children to quiet down in class.

This won him some snorts of laughter, and the commiserating look on his face slowly began to force the dissenters into silence. Finally, the Diktat herself shook her head. “You have better reasons I trust than simply not wanting us to spend our limited dock space on such things, Count Potter.”

“I do, my lady.” With that, Harry nodded to Ahsoka, who quickly got to work on the controls to one side of where she had been standing. In the center of the room, a large hologram appeared, which began to show a series of combat data from several of the different fronts they talked about with Garm earlier that day. Each of them played out, with Harry calling on the various commanders who had taken part in those battles to give them a running commentary.

By the end of it, many of the commanders who had previously been protesting were scowling, crossing their arms and looking away. The Diktat, though, was not a military person. “that was fascinating, but if there was a specific point that all of that was supposed to make, I’m afraid it passed me by.”

“Each of those engagements were microcosms of larger battlefields, where heavy cruisers and starfighters combined to defeat larger ships, my Diktat,” Garm replied politely. “Moreover, the cost analysis of battleships is, as Harry already mentioned, not worth it. I agree that we need more real **battleships**, but Harry is right. Laying down new dreadnoughts now is not worth it.”

“Very well! I’ll concede on the idea of dreadnoughts. But why do you want us to stop building heavy cruisers or battleships? Why are you favoring the Fish Faces?!” Shouted one of the Core World commanders.

“Admiral Britt, this meeting is a place of calm consideration and deliberation. It is not a place for personal aggrandizement or ethnic slurs,” Aaya shot back, speaking up before Harry could, although his glare backed her instantly. “If you cannot be civil when talking to your allies in a discussion like this, how are we supposed to trust you to keep your head on straight in the battlefield?”

Since Admiral Britt was one of the admirals from a Core World that had yet to be engaged in the current war, that strike hit home. The man puffed himself up to retort but deflated quickly as the impact of Harry’s glare worked on him. That he then cut the connection was a bad sign, but not one they could address now.

Shaking her head, Aaya continued. “Well, now that Britt has decided to run away rather than act like an adult, the answer to the question he posed is simple. Of all of the disparate shipyards, only Rendili and Dac have the space necessary to lay down new hulls.”

“Rendili is justifiably concerned with its own matters and cannot supply the rest of the GDL in terms of large-scale ships.” Harry nodded towards Shaak and the man in the pickup with her, both of whom nodded back. “Dac is slower and doesn’t have the shipyard capacity of

Rendili, but it does have enough space to, say, put down four new ship hulls, bringing them to completion faster than any of the Core Worlds while also continuing their own refitting of the Dac merchant marine," Aayla continued. "This is something none of your systems can say."

That was as close as they could get to calling the Core Worlds economy and particularly their shipbuilding abilities into question. The Core Worlds did have a lot of manpower, but they did not use them efficiently. There were many reasons behind that, but broaching the subject now would result in nothing good.

"And, to put it bluntly, their shipbuilding designs are closer to the ideal that we wish our capital ships to have: redundancy and durability," But then Harry turned to the Mon Calamari representatives, in particular zeroing in on the system defense admiral For Dac. "However, that doesn't mean that your own shipyards are all that **efficient** either. You build magnificent ships, but ships which are also works of art should be created in times of peace, not in times of war."

He kept his tone mild, yet even so, the Mon Calamari twitched, their eyes fluttering to either side as their gills flared. Yet, they understood his point. From there, they segued into a logistics discussion based off of that area, the need to push for standardization both in ship type and specific weapons designs, which the Mon Calamari again were not exactly enthusiastic about. Even if you called a specific ship class an actual design among them, each specific ship within that design would be different in myriad ways.

However, with Harry on one side and the Dorneans on the other agreeing with him, eventually, the military officers agreed with the necessity and agreed to add their words to Harry's when he spoke with their political superiors to pass that on to the shipyards in question.

The discussion then came back to why dreadnoughts were a bad idea. The fact was many of the military officers in the conference believed that their superiors would push for them, regardless. Yet Harry and the others were adamant, and they soon got the conversation back to the actual war effort, where Garm and Harry and Aayla worked together to stave off the true war hawks among the fleet admirals.

Several of the admirals and one or two of the Jedi were hoping to go on the attack, but it wasn't time yet.

"We have targets!" Douglas said, now arguing back against Harry, whereas before, he had agreed with him on the dreadnaught issue. "Even raids into their capital systems would be a good idea, knocking them back on their feet a bit."

"And in so doing, we would cause thousands of civilian lives, just as they are doing to us. Only a large majority of their military is run by droids. We would not hurt them nearly as much as they could hurt us in similar circumstances," Aayla disagreed, shaking her head. "The only way to really harm them would be to not only smash their out-system infrastructure as they are doing to us but to move in and take over the orbitals themselves, destroying shipyards and other things. We don't have the forces necessary for that."

“Not even with your ship and its superweapon? You’ll note that I’m not asking how it works or where it came from,” drawled one of the others, shaking his head.

Harry and Ahsoka exchanged a glance, debating how to answer that quickly via their connection, before Harry said slowly, “With that weapon, we could perhaps move into a specific system and destroy its orbital systems. But not without causing tremendous amounts of civilian casualties and bringing down an equivalent response, both on the attacking force and on our own planets. And I’m not willing to condone that. We must keep the moral high ground and gentlemen, untainted by past transgressions as we head into the future.”

After all, unlike the Republic, the GDL was an entirely new creation, and as such, no one could blame it for past atrocities. Harry and Aayla, and even Garm, agreed on this score. Holding the moral high ground, along with their previous efforts to actually create the GDL, would pay dividends as the war continued and the CIS continued its own barbaric ways.

Harry looked across the room, holding the eyes of the admirals who advocated for terror strikes before he went on quietly. “Now, was there anything else specific any of you wished to speak with me about?”

Soon after that, the military side of things started to subside. All of the fleet admirals and officers who had yet to meet with Harry now had a far better idea of his personality, which was partly why they had all been interested in taking part in this meaning, above and beyond everything they had actually discussed. They came away somewhat impressed, although more than a few thought that Harry was a bleeding heart on the idea of not destroying shipyards simply because they would have civilians on them.

It certainly wouldn’t have stopped the CIS from doing the same thing. There were even rumors that the Republic had committed one or two things that could be seen as war crimes already. But all of those war hawks consoled themselves on a single point. For all its savagery up to this point, the war was, after all, still young. And so long as they kept learning, and kept building, that was fine.

As the various officers began to be replaced by political officials, Ahsoka stood up quickly, grabbing at some dainties on a nearby tray as a server droid pushed it into the room. “Well, Master, I think I am rather all out of patience for meetings. Do I have your permission to go and do something else for a bit?”

“That’s fine, you did very well, Ahsoka,” Harry nodded, looking over at Garm as he gestured to the young Togrutan. “Is there any place that she can exercise or something without getting in the way of the trainees outside?”

Garm nodded. “There is a gym in the bunker, actually, for the officers and everyone else within the bunker, and right outside, there’s a small walking path as well.”

Harry nodded, and Ahsoka beamed, practically hopping out of the room, while Harry moved over to the food, mentally girding his loins as Aayla did the same. Both knew this meeting would be just as tiring but far more argumentative than the last. Politicians, after all, were much more likely to try to push their own ideology and what they assumed were the needs of their constituents rather than the needs of the war effort.

*Still, that's why I have the big hat. Because with it comes a very big stick. If I have to lay down the law, I will do so,* he thought grimly, getting a snort of internal laughter from Aayla, as well as a sense of her firm agreement with that statement.

**OOOOOO**

As Harry and Aayla took a brief break between meetings, elsewhere, on Ord Zat, Master Ki-Adi Mundi stood in the center of the planet's command center. Barely twelve hours had passed since he had first arrived, bringing reinforcements to the planet as he had promised the Chancellor, before the awaited attack on the strategically important planet began. Ki-Adi had let himself think for a few moments how sad that was, considering how the war as a whole had slowed noticeably thanks to Yoda's trick and how ironic it was that the greatest living Jedi knew so much about using fear as a weapon.

That was before the rolling thunder of deep space combat began, and now, hours later, Ki-Adi examined the tactical screen with his normal smile in stark abeyance. The command center itself was hidden deep within a sector of the ecumenopolis that looked as if they had been designated for destruction, only for that reconstruction to stop halfway, leaving behind what could only be called an urban forest of destroyed buildings and ruined landscape several thousand stories deep.

Indeed, a large swath of the planet looked like this, whole swaths of areas left to squatters and debris. The planet had tragically faced a plague that had decimated the populace thirty years ago, made worse when the local pirates attacked the Republic's relief ships. While the plague had been defeated, the economy of the planet had never truly recovered. Yet, it was still a somewhat important Ord system thanks to the campaigns against those same pirates and still housed enough ordinance to supply several fleets for long-term operations. This was why the enemy was pushing hard for it now, coming in close-orbit over the planet, trading body blows with the space stations that still remained.

But what the attackers hadn't learned yet was that the local military had, during the ramp-up to hostilities, bought many of the blasted, destroyed segments of the planet-wide city. Now, as the enemy fleet continued to duke it out with the various space stations above, several planetary-scale ion cannons slowly emerged from hidden hangers and began to fire up words. The locals, mostly humans but with a large population of Ithorians, liked ion cannons for some reason.

Regardless, the ion cannons instantly had an impact. One of the Lucrehulks in orbit started to slowly fall out of formation. Another moved to escort it, taking another Ion Bolt across its shields. The rest of the fleet spread out, using their own hulls to discover how much of the planet was covered by these new weapons.

Ki-Adi watched, giving out a few brief orders here and there when he sensed this or that ship was moving out of formation. But for the most part, he continued to let the locals fight the initial aspect of the battle themselves. They had a much better grasp of their weapons and abilities, and the Cirean's experience in space combat was limited.

However, it quickly became clear that even with the ion cannons in play, they could not stop the CIS from destroying the rest of the orbital space stations. As this happened, Ki-Adi could feel the emotions of the locals around him starting to turn. With that, he began to take further command, ordering the locals to shift targets from the Lucrehulks in orbit to the troop transports, who were waiting for the planetary shield to be battered down far enough for them to sneak through.

Reaching through the Force, he felt the other Jedi that he had brought with him waiting elsewhere, his smile turning grim as he did. He gave each of the Jedi the feeling of readiness, preparing them for what was to come. Then he moved over to a group of locals who were working feverishly on redirecting the energy from the planetary grid to this or that portion of the shield, trying desperately to keep it up and powerful everywhere at once.

As he did, Ki-Adi pulled out his own datapad, inputting a series of commands in it to put pull up a map. By the time the map Ki-Adi wanted appeared on the pad, he was behind the two locals and gently tapped them on the shoulders. "You forget the plan," he rebuked them very mildly. "Remember, we cannot hold them in orbit. The CIS has brought too much weight of metal to this battle. But we can trap them on the planet where we wish."

With the touch, Ki-Adi allowed himself to use the Force to slowly calm their minds. He then reached out for the rest of the individuals in the command center to do the same as he nearly repeated himself. "We have a plan. We just need to follow it. Your planet will be invaded, but it will **not** be taken."

Spines across the room stiffened, and all of them nodded firmly, the local commander even going so far as to tap his chest in a salute to the Jedi. Ki-Adi nodded back to the man, then handed his datapad to one of the two energy technicians, tapping it with one finger. "In that plan, you have your own roles to play. They are seemingly small but vastly important to set the stage. Can you do it?"

The Ithorian that Master Mundi had handed the datapad turned one of his eyes to look at the map before going back to his work along with his fellow. But both of them nodded rapidly, which was something to see considering the Ithorian's body type. "Yes, Master Jedi, we can do it."

Ki-Adi nodded, and without another word, took a single step back, his entire body language and the Force radiating calm approval and watched as the group of technicians did their best. Portions of the shield continued to go down. But only in the sectors they wanted them to.

This drew the CIS troop transports as Ki-Adi knew it would. Even if the Sith leading the attack knew that it was a trap, she could not afford to not go for it. The longer they took to knock out that shield, the more the planetary-based defenses hammered at their orbital fleet, which would start losing ships soon enough. Even as the Jedi watched, another Munificent reeled away from the planet, while a Lucrehulk lost shielding and turned, desperately following its smaller fellow away from Ord Zet.

No, the Sith would have to do the intelligent thing: the troop transports would wait until a segment of the shield was down, then burn for the surface as one large group, attempting to overcome whatever trap was there through brute strength. They could afford to lose entire army divisions of droids more than they could lose more starships.

*Former Jedi Knight Kadrian Sey will also be plagued by the normal Sith Arrogance and will know that she will make a bigger difference in a land-based battle rather than in space. Aided by the fact that all of the Jedi I led here are hiding under Force Stealth. The Sith will only sense me, Master Farn, her padawan, and Knight Leto if they are particularly good at sensing such. If not, they will only sense Master Farn and her padawan.*

Soon enough, the orbital aspect of the battle started to ebb out, the last of the defense stations being destroyed in a series of explosions that lit up the sky. They had taken a tremendous pounding, and the wreckage of one Lucrehulk, six Munificent, and twelve Hardcell-class transports orbited the planet now, along with the debris of the defenders.

Elsewhere in the system, another Lucrehulk had been destroyed thanks to a lucky hit on its engines along with another Munificent in a running battle against the defending fleet before they retreated into orbit. And even now, an asteroid fortress in the outer system was still alive, fighting it out with a separate flotilla built around a single Munificent. Although the enemy still retained too many Vulture droids for the Jedi's liking.

Even as the Jedi Master watched, another Lucrehulk's shields flared under a series of ion cannon bolts from the planet. Still retaining its engines, the massive ship quickly retreated from where it had been pushing forward around the world.

Unfortunately, the planet just didn't have enough weapons to protect from every angle at attack. An issue many planets had. But that was fine. Ki-Adi had known that coming in and had devised a trap. It was simple, but it was built on sound tactical doctrine, as well as a phrase he had heard from numerous sources over the years. *All war is deception. But that doesn't mean that the Sith should have a monopoly on it.*

As he saw the first of the troop transports pass through the pale series of yellow dots indicating an area where the planetary shield had gone down, Ki-Adi moved over to the command center's chief officer, saluting the man. "I will move myself to the front. You are in command here as you have been. You know our plan. Please, be ready for the next portion of the operation."

Moving to the front took a while despite the planet having a good public transportation system, which had been turned over to the military, the locals having been bundled into thousands of well-hidden bunkers. Eventually, the monorail dropped Ki-Adi off near the prepared front, where a staging ground for the clone army he had brought had been created out of several dozen hab-spires and the roads connecting them.

Moving upwards through one such hab-spire, Ki-Adi found himself coming out onto the rooftop, where the clone General, who Ki-Adi had Named Nate, and his officers and communications team. Ki-Adi saluted the man as he turned towards him, and the clones all returned the salute.

Hiding a faint frown at the moment of synchronicity, Ki-Adi moved to stand beside the general, turning in the direction from which he could hearing the sharp retort of heavy fire in the distance. There were a series of loud 'Crump' sounds, the sound of the artillery going off. Then a moment later, as he could faintly see starfighters moving down towards where the attack originated, Ki-Adi could barely hear the Anti-Air quad lasers firing.

This was followed by the even heavier return fire from the troop transports. Those troop transports were practically assault ships, thanks to their heavy armor and durability, and were known for ramming through other ships in space and being able to land in nearly every environment. *Thankfully our intel was correct. They lack the weapons load to act as defensive hard points once they land.*

Most of them had already crashed down into the planet-spanning city. And now, droids and tanks had begun spreading out into the urban jungle.

"General Nate, how is the situation? And can I procure some transportation towards the front?" Ki-Adi inquired, his hands in the sleeves of his Jedi robe.

Nate saluted and gestured the Jedi Master to follow him. Moving over the roof towards an ear hidden under urban camo held between two spires, Nate gestured down to a street below them, where several trucks and hover-bikes were waiting with more clones ready to be transported either to the front that had already begun to open or to any other landing place.

"Unfortunately, the enemy hasn't spread out as fast as we had hoped. Instead, they have stayed concentrated, pushing out in one direction. They have since punched out through the 242<sup>nd</sup> Regiment before they could pull back to their prepared fallback positions. Those



positions are now filled with the 243<sup>rd</sup> and the 244<sup>th</sup> Regiments and are holding, for now. I am leery thought of springing our surprise on an enemy that may retain its firepower advantage."

From below, a hovercar appeared, moving to settle in next to the side of the roof, while Ki-Adi used his Force senses to see where amid the attacking army of mindless droids he could sense Kadrian. "My own 245<sup>th</sup> are moving in to support while our artillery is getting hammered. We haven't done much damage to those assault vessels, but we have managed to destroy several of their tanks and portable shields as they exited the ships."

The two men both got into the hovercar, moving back down into the dark confines between the hab-spires and then forward, using the skyline as cover. As they moved towards the front, the noise grew, amplified through the city, the artillery now getting into things and hammering the position. They hadn't been able to be put the mobile artillery into position early, or else the enemy might well have backed off entirely, or, once they were underneath the planetary shield, gone elsewhere, trusting their troop transports to be able to take enough of a pounding to remain mobile. Thankfully the weakness in local defenses, so matching the previous planetary defense, seemed to work.

The report continued, and Ki-Adi listened, also pulling out his own communicator. As the noise in front of them started to rise to a crescendo, and they started to see troops clad in white on the various rooftops ahead of them and moving along other roads, he opened his own communicator and contacted his fellow Jedi. "Calan, Sirrus, are your forces ready?"

"We are in position Master," came two voices from the other end. Master Ki-Adi had led a force of two Knights and two padawans to bolster the planet's defenses along with the Republic forces, meaning there were a total of eight Jedi on the planet right now, with Ki-Adi having seniority over Master Farn.

"Good. Remain in place, for now. Engage when you see the signal." With that, Ki-Adi began to reach out into the Force, trying to find the Sith once more. Kadrian had just landed on the planet, and the Cirean knew that doing so now would act as if he had just waved a red flag in front of a Rancor.

It worked, and a second later, Ki-Adi could feel the Sith's own Force powers reaching out towards him. Feeling the anger and hate pulsing through the Force, the High Council member shook his head. *As good as they are in combat, the Sith can be somewhat predictable.*

As they turned the corner the hovercar's occupants abruptly found themselves within sight of the front. As Ki-Adi watched, at the far end of the road they were on a troop of clones raced forward. It looked as if two platoons had charged forward as one, firing their rifles towards an oncoming droid force.

As Ki-Adi watched, both sides took horrendous losses before the surviving clones started to fall back. Only now did they start to fight like real soldiers, groups splitting off to lay down

cover fire while other fire teams continued on, taking their place before doing the same. Still, there was little cover on the road itself, and the clones continued to take casualties. The droids didn't care about searching for cover. The droid companies simply came on, soaking up the enemy fire, as they fired in turn, pushing the clones backward.

"What was that!?" Ki-Adi asked, a faint scowl on his face as he looked over at the clone commander next to him while their driver began to reverse before plunging off and down the road to another one directly below them.

"That group of droids was close to pushing out of the trap area, Master Jedi. We had to stop them," Nate shrugged. Above, another company of clones moved in to help close off the road, while behind them, heavy weapons began to fire, destroying segments of the nearby habitations, bringing down chunks of the walls to use as cover.

"There were better ways of stopping them. Destroying a few of the buildings as you are now only more so. Let the rubble fill the streets, pull back just a bit and create a fire trap perhaps, not charging forward like mindless droids." Since Ki-Adi and Nate were right here with the rest of his personal regiment, that seemed like a senseless waste of life.

"The objective is all that matters," Nate answered coldly. "We were able to stop them, Master Mundi. That is the most important thing. If they make a hole like that in our defensive envelope, they'll get out of the trap. The enemy commander is too good and would quickly be able to take advantage of that kind of thing. Look how well they are utilizing their air forces against our artillery."

Indeed, by this point, despite the nearby Anti-Air forces, the mobile artillery had been forced to retreat or been destroyed, the 'crump' sound no longer creating a backdrop for the other sounds of battle. Yet Ki-Adi didn't back down. "That does not mean that those clones' lives should've been wasted. We have reserves for a reason."

"General, I realize that you have... philosophical misgivings about war, but in battle, people die. Those men gave their lives for the objective. The objective is all that matters. Victory is all that matters," The clone general replied, shaking his head at what he thought of as the Jedi Master's naïveté.

Ki-Adi did not get annoyed at this taunt, simply continuing the argument in an even tone. "You are correct that the whole battle matters more than any single objective. However, as I previously stated, there were other ways of doing that. And this is not the first time I have seen such things from clones. I am afraid that your training and your indoctrination to this point have given you a false assumption. You are not, droids. You are not simple resources. You are men and should fight as such."

"You are wrong, Master Jedi. We are a resource. We live to serve the Republic," Nate replied, although Master Ki-Adi thought he saw at least a bit of uncertainty in the man's tone. It

was extremely hard to tell since the clones all have a very muted, almost dull, presence in the Force.

"You might have been created as such, and perhaps, even the Senate might think you are. The Jedi Order does not, and you should not. Remember, you are people. You think, feel, bleed. You were not created out of unfeeling metal, even if you were designed to serve a purpose," Ki-Adi snorted, shaking his head as the hovercar came to a stop once more on a rooftop, looking down and over the fight. "Now, I believe it is time for us to fall back."

The clone general frowned, staring down at the readouts, then listening to several reports coming in from the front before sighing and nodding, agreeing with what Ki-Adi had felt through the Force. "I had hoped to hold longer. We could still sustain more losses before pulling back. Baiting the trap is important."

Ki-Adi turned to the man again, reaching out with a hand and grabbing Nate's shoulder for emphasis. "No. There is no need. Kadrian knows I am here. She personally is now coming towards this position, towards me. There is no further need to try to hold where we are."

Ki-Adi and the command group remained there for a moment as the clone General organized his troops, falling back all across the front.

And it was now a front, rather than in the development of the landing zone, as Ki-Adi had hoped, although Nate was still concerned at how concentrated they were. The enemy advanced, pushing into the now undefended areas of the sector around their landing zone.

But as they did, Kadrian Sey paused, frowning in thought. She was a Zabrak, with a dark tan skin and long black hair done in several braids, each of them containing several gold bangles so tightly wound they made no sound. Kadrian had once been a Jedi, a Guardian known for her somewhat aggressive sense of justice and her pugnacious attitude towards problem-solving. Now her face showed the faint traces of traditional Zabrak tattoos, and her eyes gleamed with the yellow of the Dark Side. Her lipstick was a rich black color, another way of showing her evolution to the Dark Side.

Now the Dark Side was warning her of something, some danger, but it wasn't... "Below!" She shouted, causing the nearby droids, many of whom were carrying communications equipment, to turn to her. They continued to stare as she looked down at the 'ground' below them for the first time since feeling the Jedi's probe. "It has another layer below!"

The planet did indeed have several layers to it. Not the hundred-plus layers that Coruscant did, but Ord Zat had been an Ecumenopolis for more than five hundred years. It had two layers below the one currently in use, although the locals, for all their scavenging nature, were actually much better about not allowing their criminals and poor to retreat to the lower layers than Coruscant had ever been.

But right now, what really mattered, was that the area directly below the attackers was full of several brigades of clone soldiers and five Jedi.

Implanted mines went off, not designed to really destroy the droid army above them, but instead to create holes in the 'floor level' of the topmost portion of the ecumenopolis. The clone engineering corps had been incredibly good at placing them, creating avenues up through which the attackers moved, hammering up into the disorganized droid army. And with them came the heavy weapons and tanks that had been so lacking in defense of this point. This included large-scale jammers, destroying the droid army's cohesion.

The droid army was not prepared for this, being attacked directly below practically everywhere across their column of march, whole roads collapsing to let the attacker up and at them from below. Each company fell back onto its own devices and swiftly began to be overrun from below as more and more mines went off, creating more avenues for the clones. With them came the Jedi. They were not separate, but a single fighting unit, leaping upward with Force-assisted jumps, landing in among a few droids which had been in place to fire on a few of the clones from below almost immediately as they charged into the midst of the droid army.

Kadrian snarled, looking down at the surrounding chaos, having quickly leaped upwards then up again until she was near to the skyline. Now she pointed at her companions, six droids wielding staffs who had climbed up the side of the hab-spire to keep up with her. "You, with me. And contact the droidekas."

From where they had watched all this unfold, Ki-Adi nodded to the clone general, setting down his binoculars. "You have command of your troops, Nate. Kadrian is ours to deal with."

Nate grunted before barking an order into his communicator. Soon his own troops were moving back the way they had come, adding their own weight to the counterattack.

Above them, the planetary shield, which had been almost nonexistent about this position for a while now, snapped back into place. There were no weapons available to hammer the fleet, which had taken position directly above them here. Planetary weapons had a set angle of fire, and the locals hadn't gone into offensive weaponry as much as they had redundancy on their shields and energy systems. Immediately the invading fleet began to hammer the shield, trying to bring down once more, but the fact that they had stopped doing so before, while the invasion looked to be going well, had allowed the local power generator stations to rest, rebuilding their reserves.

Not that Ki-Adi cared overmuch about that as he raced through the front, his hovercar a burnt-out ruin behind him thanks to a stray concussion missile. Uncaring of the car, Ki-Adi simply flipped himself through the air and away from the thing, Force Pushing the driver with him out of the vehicle at the same time.

Now he landed in among a series of droids, one of whom had fired the concussion missile launcher which hit his machine, slicing them in half, with his twin lightsabers before racing through into the building they had been in. Several flights upward took him to the level where he sensed the Sith and the other Jedi, but there was no exit or window.

*Oh well, I have a universal key.* With that, Ki-Adi Mundi started to cut through the outer ferrocrete of the building, after which he leaped out into the air and across to the next.

All around Ki-Adi, he could feel the battle turning against the droids, more clones moving up from down below, pushing upward all the time. The droid's command and control had been shattered. Their momentum halted in place as if they had been a human being who had just run into a corridor only to have spikes shoot up at them.

As he came out from the next building, Ki-Adi paused just a second as he watched the battle going on directly in front of him across a highway of some kind. To his surprise, it wasn't just the Sith who was fighting his fellow Jedi. No, she was accompanied by six droids of a strange new variant as well as a force of four droidekas, who continued to lay down fire at the Jedi every chance they could.

But it was the new droids who seemed more dangerous. They were roughly two meters tall, with a humanoid body shape. They wielded large vibro-staffs, but the metal of the staff was evidently something special as they were able to block the blows of a lightsaber. Even the body of the droid seemed to be very durable, as while Ki-Adi watched, a blow from a lightsaber cut into the leg of one of them, but the droid kept fighting, it's movements only slightly impaired.

Whatever their designation, the strange droids were currently holding their own against five of the six of his fellow Jedi who had been able to come together here. This forced Master Farn to face the Sith alone.

Ki-Adi leaped forward out into the air to land on the highway, but he was too slow. One of the Jedi fell, and two of the new droids turned towards Master Ki-Adi, barking out comments as they did. "Warning, another Jedi has entered the combat arena. We will move to engage."

The droids did so, their staff ends vibrating as they did, while Ki-Adi ignited his lightsaber, his eyes narrowed as he took in the body of Padawan Latah, a young human girl who had shown much promise, lying behind them. Her Master, Knight Calan, a Ootoolan, was also falling back, one arm gone and bleeding out, but still holding up a Force Shield, holding back two of the other droids from converging on the three remaining Jedi from both sides. Meanwhile, another Force Shield was being held in place by Sirrus' padawan while Sirrus' and Master Farn's Padawans, Aubrie Wyn and Asherous respectively, fought the remaining droids.

*They should have shifted more of their number to me,* Ki-Adi thought as he raced forward before rolling on the ground. *Time to make them pay for that.* Just as they were about to lightsaber range, Ki-Adi conjured up a Force Shield, taking their blows on it, bouncing the

attacks to either side as he moved between them. A quick Force Push in either direction hurled the droids backward.

One went over the edge of the walkway while the second crashed into the back of one of the droids attacking the other Jedi. Asherous instantly took advantage, stabbing both of them, but only a hasty Force Shield of his own kept him alive from a blow from the other one, as one of the beleaguered droids grabbed at his arm, holding him in place. Again, the droids were showing an incredible amount of durability.

Ki-Adi swiftly moved to engage the next nearest ones, cutting the heads off the two severely damaged droids before closing with the one who had just nearly killed the young Padawan, although he was surprised to see the two beheaded droids continuing to fight. "Padawans pull back, work together to Force Push the droidekas off the edge. Sirrus, with me."

Working together, the padawans were able to do so, but it would've left them vulnerable to the other droids if not for Master Sirrus and Ki-Adi Mundi engaging the three survivors.

Yet by this point, Farn, an older human woman was being overwhelmed by the Sith on the other side of the fight near the original position of the droidekas. Kadrian pressed her heart, and as in the council chamber, Ki-Adi Mundi saw that she had a mastery of several of the Clan Saa techniques. A small Force Shield, reddish in color, appeared around her arm, blocking Farn's lightsaber for a second as she stabbed the woman through. Farn had tried desperately to get up her own Force Shield to block, but the stab overpowered her shield, and the Jedi Master died as the lightsaber tip took her through the heart.

The Sith did not have time to gloat, as Asherous, a young Iktotchi male, was on her quickly, lashing angrily, turning from the sparking hacked bits of one of the remaining droids. "NO!"

The younger sentient showed a mastery of the Force techniques as well, a stunning technique lashing out, so overpowered that it was even wider than the walkway, followed by a Force Grab which Kadrian barely managed to shatter. Then a Force Shield was in the Zabrak woman's face, blocking her lightsaber. She dodged around it, once more trying to attack the Padawan, who met her charge.

The two of them exchanged a furious series of lightsaber blows as the Padawan gave in to his sudden rage at seeing Farn's death, falling into the Dark Side so abruptly that it shook Ki-Adi aback for a second. But it was not the first time Ki-Adi had seen such, and Ki-Adi knew that those who fell like that would burn themselves out quickly, especially when fighting against a real Dark Side user, who were experts at turning their enemy's emotions against them.

Ki-Adi leaped upwards over the continuing battle to land next to the Sith just as Asherous lost his arms, both of them sliced through cleanly by the Sith's lightsaber. He fell with

a howl of agony, but the Sith was barely able to get her lightsaber back up in time to block Ki-Adi Mundi's blow. She snarled, raising a hand in front of him and gesturing, but the Jedi Master batted aside her Force Stunner, lashing out in turn while parrying another Force Push with his own. "You cannot beat us all Kadrian Sey. Surrender. I think enough sentients have died today."

"Never! The Jedi are weak. The Dark Side is strong, Cirean! You will all die here, and I will prove to be my Master's greatest servant!" Kadrian hissed.

The two of them danced back and forth, lightsaber against lightsaber, Force technique against Force technique. The woman used a Dark Side infused variant of Djem So, with more power and more anger behind every swing of her lightsaber. Yet despite the enhanced aggression this was something that, Ki-Adi had some experience with. After all, he had once been the Dark Woman's student, and she had been a stern teacher.

Behind them, more droids had arrived, firing into the backs of the Jedi, forcing Sirrus to turn in that direction, while another of the staff-wielding droids was dealt with by his Padawan's Force Push. But there were still two more droids, and Ki-Adi Mundi knew he could not spend too long on Kadrian before his companions were overwhelmed.

A straight blaster bolt moved over the rest of the battle, almost hitting Ki-Adi, causing him to stumble a second, then the Sith was pressing him hard, knocking one of his lightsabers up and moving in, stabbing. "Die Jedi!"

A Force Shield appeared, blocking it, but it faded quickly under her thrust, and Ki-Adi Mundi stared death in the face until a blast of Force Push crashed into the woman's side to hurl her aside as Leto arrived. He leaped up from below, one hand outstretched toward Kadrian and the other lashing out with a lightsaber into the back of one of the droids. Kadrian stumbled and had no time to recover before Ki-Adi's remaining lightsaber removed her head from her shoulders.

"Pardon for being late, Master Mundi, we ran into a much larger variant of the normal combat droid, much larger and more heavily armed and armored. It was massacring a group of our clone troopers caught in the open," Leto said, a wide angle Force Shield flaring between the still active droid and young Aubrie Wyn, protecting the padawan.

Then Leto, a Cironian like many of the planet's natives moved in towards the last of the staff-wielding droids. Sirrus joined him, then Ki-Adi Mundi, and between them they were able to make short work of the last of the droids, despite the one Leto had backstabbed a moment ago trying to rejoin the battle. Meanwhile, Aubrie raced to her fellow padawan, desperate to keep him alive. Thankfully lightsabers cauterized wounds, or else he would have died due to blood loss, like Master Calan.

As the last staff-wielding droid fell, beheaded and bisected down the middle, Ki-Adi looked across the battlefield, and then up space where the flickering of the shield was slowly

ebbing out. Seeing that, The Cirean shook off his exhaustion and pulled out a communicator connecting him to the planetary command center. "The battle is turned here, commander. Call in the fleet."

OOOOOOO

The sector fleet had not fought to the last ship in orbit of Ord Zat. Instead, most of their ships had not even been a part of that battle, having been moved out of the system and into deep space barely an hour before the enemy had arrived. That movement had not been noticed, even by Kadrian thanks to the sheer number of starfighters left behind and the mines left at a few of the locations most used by incoming ships.

Now, the fleet under Commodore Grunger moved in, attempting to pin the attacking fleet against the planet.

It didn't work, of course. With Kadrian Sey dead, whoever was now in charge of the CIS forces in Ord Zat quickly decided to cut their losses. They retreated directly away from the planet, not allowing the limited planetary weapons system to fire on them once more, slugging it out with the sector fleet as they left the system.

Even then, they might well have won if they had been willing to pay the losses and ships. None of their enemies was larger than a light cruiser after all. But more than a few of the Lucrehulks were still dealing with damage from the previous battles, and they had exhausted many of their Vultures and munitions before losing the entirety of their invasion force. Without boots to put on the ground, they would not have been able to take Ord Zat.

However, the sector fleet was mauled as the CIS fleet retreated out-system. The enemy commander had apparently decided that destroying those ships would have to do as a secondary prize. This included Commodore Grunger's ship, but the commodore himself survived even as his fleet was mauled for little return against the heavier ships of the enemy, only destroying two Munificents and the last of the Hardcell transports, although all of them had been damaged in some fashion. But eventually, the battle ended, the CIS commander having no desire to remain in this system if he could not take the primary prize.

Ord Zat was still in Republic hands and with it the vast material present on the planet. *So despite our losses, this was a victory* Ki-Adi reflected as he sat with the other Jedi bar the horribly wounded Asherous in meditation by the bodies of the three Jedi who had died. *But far more than I had hoped to pay. Those droids were an extremely nasty surprise, one the Order must be aware of.*

OOOOOOO

Little did Master Giiett know that something else was going on simultaneously as he was becoming dismayed at how the battle on the surface had turned against the Jedi. Out in space,



the surviving Ord Fleet worked feverishly on SAR, desperate to save their fellows. Such was the damage that had been done that they had few resources to do so.

Because of this, the blasted, scattered remains of Lucrehulk that had been initially destroyed in the running battle through the system didn't have any ships near it currently. The ship had been horribly mauled, its engines exploding and destroying much of the outer 'C-shape', and its crew evacuated. But its central control globe was still somewhat in one piece if you ignored the shattered remains at the back.

And now, nearby, a falcon fighter waited in the dark, powered down, as its three occupants moved through space into the command sphere.

"Well, Arcee? Are you sent seeing anything we might be able to use?" Jedi Knight Mak Lotor asked, staring into the smashed out hollow of the control center, staying in position despite there being no gravity thanks to the electromagnetic clamps in his spacesuit's boots.

An astromech was connected to the ship's navigation console, held in place by Kass Tod with the Force and a technique Harry had called the Sticking Technique. Nearby, Kass waited for herself, having just plugged in a series of batteries into the system, to act as if the console was getting power from its original generator.

From the communicator built into his helmet, the voice of the astromech droid they had decided to take with them from the *Tyrant's Bane* replied. The tone was a low dulcet female tone, matching the R2 droid's self-styled paint job, pink with purple highlights. Arcee was one of the first droids that Kass or Mak had ever met that identified itself as a female. "You will have to be patient Master, I am correlating."

Mak waited. Jedi were good at waiting, although it was hard to be this close to such a battle and know that they had not taken part in it. Both he and Cas knew that despite the vague nature of their mission, it was incredibly important, and they could not endanger it by interacting with anyone else until it was completed.

After a few moments, the two Jedi's patience was rewarded as their droid told and triumph. "Mistress, Master, I have found it. Their astronavigation data is not complete, there are large segments of it which have been removed, perhaps by some kind of emergency program, but I have a start."

A few moments later, the droid spoke up again, now much more discouraged. "Masters, I have examined the data within and compared it to my own navigational charts. And I can find no discrepancies. There is nothing new here."

"Damn," Mak muttered.

This mission had been something of the wild chance anyway. He and Kass had first procured a small tramp freighter for themselves, a tiny thing that had barely enough room to place their Falcons within it. They had then spent four days working on the ship, adding the cloaking array to it and a few other surprises. After that, they had thought that perhaps trailing one of the Sith might lead them to the Dark Side pillars that were the true objective.

Unfortunately, that had failed from the start. None of the Sith were operating as solo gents as far as they could tell. All of the ones that they could discover evidence of from the Order's files were also now leading armies or fleets. There were still a few Jedi that might have encountered C'baoth that were missing, no longer part of the Order or the CIS, but they were simply missing utterly, so no help to the two lovers.

But, they had decided to try to follow Kadrian's movements since this Sith was the only one that was operating in an active theater at the moment. Hidden under their runic cloak whenever in real space, the two of them had followed the enemy fleet into the attack on the system, remaining hidden, waiting for a chance to strike even as the heat slowly got to them. Finally, to their well-hidden relief, Kadrian had decided to lead the planetary assault, leaving them with the option to retreat or oust their present to the Republic and the Order.

Then Mak had hit upon the idea of searching through the rubble of the space battle to see if they could discover anything that they or their allies could use about the CIS.

"Are you telling me there's nothing new there?" Kass asked despondently. "This was a waste of time?"

"There could perhaps be something here, Masters, but I lack the subroutines and processing speed to truly make anything from the hash that is the majority of this computer's brain," Arcee replied tartly. "It was online upon the destruction of this vessel, and the memory was fried in the subsequent surge. I would wager that this system was even designed to do so."

"Dammit! I had hoped at least that we would find something that Harry and the others could use," Mak grumbled.

"Do not be so hasty," Kass cautioned, ending the sticking technique on Arcee and force pushing the feminine droid towards Mak. "We knew setting out that this would be an extremely difficult mission.

"I know, but it is looking more like trying to find a needle in a system-wide haystack," Mak grumbled before breathing in deeply, centering himself in the Force. "I would just like a starting point, a direction, even a reason behind why these pillars are so important. We've never been on a mission which has given us so little to work with."

"Do not lose hope," Kass answered, almost repeating herself as she came up behind her lover, hugging him in mid-space, resting her helmet-clad chin on his shoulder as Mak Force

Pushed Arcee towards the Falcon and the waiting locking clamp there. "We are together. We are on the mission that the Force required us to be. We will find a way forward."

She then smiled and twisted her helmet, clocking the side of her helmet against his. "And perhaps, that whole needle in a haystack thing image you gave me just now was enough. I think I have an idea to follow up on. For now, though, let's get back to the Seeker, and we can have some fun with your 'needle'."

"Ouch," Mak muttered, his good humor restored by the joke and by the feel of his lover's chest pressing into his back almost as much as the idea of having a starting point for their mission. "The least you could do is call it my lightsaber."

"Boys, you have egos about the silliest things, and lightsaber, you said ouch to a needle, and you expect me to refer to that portion of your anatomy as a lightsaber?" Kass taunted before moving around Mak and heading back to their ship, using small ventral thrusters on her spacesuit. "You would have to do something particularly amazing to earn that appellation."

Mak watched her go, then turned to look out into the deep dark all around them, shaking his head once before turning back to follow his light and Lady towards their ship.

**OOOOOOO**

Harry's prediction had been correct. The political discussion was indeed far more vituperative than the military side of things. That was part and parcel of building a new political construction as it were. The GDL could not be a true government like the Republic, but something like a league, with every planet having an equal say in overarching matters, except on defense since they couldn't contribute equally to it. It was an imperfect system, but it was still being built. Moreover, many of the GDL planets were becoming more prideful in themselves because of how they were contributing to the GDL as a whole and how they could now defend themselves.

More than one of the political representatives bluntly stated that they would not be going back to the Republic after the war. "Even if the problems with how resources are distributed are solved, which doesn't look to be happening, we won't. The GDL seems to be working and under extremely trying circumstances. There's no reason it can't continue to work once the war has been dealt with."

Harry's words in response to this and similar sentiments were always the same. "It is too soon! The war is barely a month old. The war will be a long one, we have to consider that. I fully endorse the idea of a league-type of system, but you must understand that everything else is supporting the war effort rather than being ratified by it. It is the military side of things and military decisions, and so forth that will call the shots on industrial construction, shipbuilding, and defense."

This could also lead to problems in the future. But Harry and Aayla knew that and hoped to stave off any issues that could create after the war once the Sith were dealt with.

“Speaking of defense, what do you think of the Hapes Cluster reaching out to us? If that is not a surprise, I do not know what is,” said one of the former senators, shaking his head. He was a representative of a cat-like species that Harry had never dealt with before, with tawny fur, deep black eyes and a lion-like mane.

“Garm told us about it, but that nothing had been settled just yet,” Aayla said, leaning forward and once more. “Garm, tell us more about what happened and what the Hapes Cluster wants.”

Still in his chair from which he had not moved since the meetings began, Yoda had to nod at how Harry and Aayla were handling these meetings. Neither one of them was dominating either side of the meetings, military or political. They were moving in lockstep, no doubt using their mental connection to their advantage to portray a united front, but one which was not as set in its ways as could be expected. *What one does not see, caught by the other it often is. Alone, formidable, they are. Together, multiply one another’s abilities they do.*

“We can do better than that,” Garm said, gesturing to one side. Quickly a technician began to play the battle of Vena starting from the moment the CIS attacked. It sped up through the first segment of the battle, then slowed down as the Hapan fleet arrived.

Harry watched, frowning a little. He had known intellectually that the Hapes Cluster used extremely different types of ships compared to the rest of the Republic but seeing them in action was fascinating. *Ahsoka is going to be sad that she missed this*, he sent to Aayla.

She responded with a mental laugh, even as she too leaned forward. “*You were there, weren’t you? On that planet?*”

“*Yes, I even met the ambassador from the Hapes Cluster.*” Since he needed a refresher on a memory that old, Harry pulled Aayla’s mental projection into their conjoined mindscape leading her through the memory crystals on Ryloth’s nighttime surface until they came to one from that timeframe.

They watched the events in the bazaar on Vena occur again. How Harry had approached a group of seemingly local women and then how everything had segued into violence, which Harry had stopped, saving several lives in the process.

As the memory ended, both of them turned their attention to the battle as the recording shifted to show the dialogue between Ta’a Chumei and the local Duke. The instant the Princess’s image appeared in the recoding, Aayla’s eyes widened in sudden supposition, which Harry felt. “*That’s her!*”

“*It can’t be. Her eyes are different,*” Harry protested, although it was a lukewarm thing as Aayla’s observations were already rolling into his mind.

*"The facial structure is the same, the nose, the jawline," Aayla replied firmly. "That is either the woman you saved or her twin sister."*

"So let me get this straight. The Hapans are not willing to deal with intermediaries, correct?" Harry inquired aloud, carefully hiding his shock at his past catching up to him like this. "Instead, she wants to deal directly with me. Not the Diktat? Given the matriarchal society of the Hapes Cluster, I would've assumed the Diktat would've been who she wanted to deal with for preference, or at a pinch Aayla." Despite the fact in practice she was his equal in the GDL, Aayla didn't hold an official rank.

"That is true. But we have to be very careful here," cautioned a human man who represented a type 2 Inner Rim world near Hapes. "The Hapans are extremely piratical in their dealings, which I know is somewhat ironic given their history, but we don't want to just give them everything they want without getting something tangible in return. Any promises made should be made knowing that they will break any agreement made with them if they think they can get away with it. They are too certain in their defenses."

"What can they really give us?" Aayla asked, frowning in thought, as she typed into the system, bringing up an image of the Hapes Cluster and information on the cluster. What was known wasn't much, but the uncorroborated theories segment of the information shown was interesting.

Meanwhile, Harry looked at the overall map of the Republic in that segment of space, putting it on the main screen so that everyone there could see it. After a few moments, the map he brought up became color-coded, showing the various factions: CIS, Republic, and GDL, with Hapes a third, pink color. "That entire sector seems to be almost entirely Republic and Confederacy space, with only three GDL planets here and there, mostly type II thankfully, like your own, Congressmen Anjo." The decision to change the label of the planetary representatives had been one of the easiest in the previous discussion.

"This would change greatly if the Hapes Cluster became an ally, creating an extremely strong, easily defensible segment of space right there, in what could be called the Confederacy backyard, not its heart, but certainly an important area," Garm interjected. "It's why I think it's worth pursuing despite the Hapan's having proven untrustworthy in the past."

"It's definitely worth pursuing," Harry agreed. "Despite the limitations of the technology, their ships are well made. They must have a strong industrial base, and that defense is very good."

Harry frowned in thought, looking in particular at the Lesser Lantillion Trade Route, which was almost entirely owned by the Confederacy around that area. Then he mentally traveled along it to a few specific CIS planets in the Japreal Sector, thinking deeply. Most of that route had been interdicted by the Confederacy: hyperspace traps moved into the trade lanes and so forth.

This meant the Confederacy would know how to move through the area fast, while an attacker would not. Republic and the GDL had done the same thing, of course, which was part of why Harry had been so pleased about Serenno making deals with the other planets in the sector since it would allow them to do the same thing throughout the sector. *But even so, the possibilities are intriguing, especially when you see how close the Perliman Trade Route is to the Hapes Cluster at its other side...*

“They gave us contact information, correct?” Why don’t we call them up now? Unless anyone else has any objections or anything further to discuss?

The Diktat and the other political leaders all shook their heads, not happily in many cases. The millennia-old conflict between political desires and physical realities had once more been fought, and again, the favorite had been the winner after all. In particular, the Core World Congressmen were somewhat annoyed, having assumed their concerns would sway the meeting, and had found that was not the case.

*Especially since they haven’t met their personnel requirements yet*, Harry thought. Each planet of the GDL had to put a set percentage of their total manpower under arms. For many, most of those men and women would simply be part of the defense fleet. However, since the Core Worlds had much larger populations, they should have been able to add at least three-fourths again to the GDL’s existing personnel. They hadn’t yet.

Harry and Aayla spent several moments simply electronically saying farewell to this or that individual, promising to call to follow up on this or that problem, most of which would be handed over to Garm’s staff to be truly dealt with. But they at least gave the impression that they were listening and that the opinions of the individuals making up the league mattered, which far too few planets outside the Core Worlds could have said was the case with the Republic and the Senate. Even there, Harry’s more personable nature and his lover’s interactions with them were better than what they had dealt with in the Senate.

Soon, the two of them, Garm, Yaddle, and Yoda were alone in the massive room. “What time is it on Hapes right now?”

“Just pushing evening. If we put it off for too long, Ta’a Chumei or whoever we’re really dealing with could be asleep,” Aayla sighed. “And I am very thankful for Jedi training, or else sitting for so long would have given me the mother of all cramps!”

“Mentally or physically love,” Harry responded, putting an arm around her shoulder and kissing her lekku before moving to her throat, and nuzzling in, uncaring for the moment of their audience of three as they both retreated into their mindscape. After the various meetings, some cuddle time sounded magnificent.

Alas, the audience was not prepared to let them fritter away the moment, and Yoda’s harrumph brought them back to reality. “Hrhrhrhm, if going to fornicate the two of you are, waiting until we leave, the decent thing it would be.”

Harry looked over at the aged Grand Master, shaking his head. "Do you have to work on being so grumpy, or does it come naturally, Master Yoda?"

Again Yoda snorted, but everyone there could see his mouth twitch up words. Then he sighed. "Looking forward to leaving, I am not. Yet, heading back to Coruscant, I must. The duties waiting for me, wearing on me already they are."

Harry could've said something blithe, 'like welcome to my world'. And a bit of his personality did try to push him in that direction after the day they'd had. Instead, he simply nodded his head.

"The weight of leadership is one that never settles well on the shoulders of those who are worthy of it," Garm quoted a Corellian philosopher, gripping Harry's shoulder and standing up. "But for now, I think that myself and Yoda at least make ourselves scarce for this one. You said it yourself, Harry, the consortium is matriarchal."

"You have a female aide, don't you? Irene, I think her name is?" Aayla question. "Send her in. We might need more in-depth knowledge of the logistical side of things for this meeting."

"And," Harry added, "that'll give us time to stand up and stretch a bit." The fact he and Aayla could both do that and have some mental cuddle time was not worth mentioning.

Within fifteen minutes, they were joined by the woman in question. "Sena Midanyl, at your service sirs," the Corellian woman said with a smile. She was closer to Harry and Aayla's age than Garm's, with black hair tied up in a severe bun and violet eyes. She was about as tall as Aayla, dressed in a severe uniform, and the way she stood and moved marked her as perhaps the most serious Corellian that Harry had ever met.

When told of the nature of the meeting she was going to be sitting in on, she promised to keep her mouth shut, as she immediately went to work on figuring out what resources the GDL could move into the Hapes Cluster, as well as what they could expect in recompense. Meanwhile, Harry and Aayla used the number that Garm had given them to contact the Hapes Cluster directly.

To their surprise, they didn't have to deal with any middlemen beyond the first individual, a young woman who looked back at them and quickly nodded her head. "Count Potter and companion, your call was expected. Wait, please."

A second later, her image was replaced by another young woman. This one, though, had a far more striking appearance, starting from a pair of green eyes that almost matched Harry's in color and long blonde hair. The hair was currently plaited into a series of long ribbons flowing down her front, and the young woman wore an expensive, and very overdone, outfit from what they could see in the pickup. This included a high ruffle that rose almost to the top of her head that looked like the fin of some reptilian creature, and the colors of bright green and white in

patterns across the front of her dress, with several dozen gems of some kind wound into the neckline.

Aayla took a look at the raiment the Princess was wearing and quickly shook her head. "Is that a computer projection, or were you just at some formal function? If so, we can call back."

At this jibe to royal fashion, Harry deliberately bit his lip to keep from laughing. For her part, the woman on the other side of the communication looked a little nonplussed, then snorted. "I Just came from court, actually. If this number is agreeable to you, I will call you back."

"*Heh, now that reminds me of another Royal lady of our acquaintance,*" Harry remarked to Aayla.

Something about that sparked an observation in Aayla's mind, but Harry couldn't grasp it just yet before she spoke up once more. "Before you leave, and yes, you can use this contact information to call us again. How well-encrypted are you on your end?"

Ta'a Chumei's smirk turned caustic. "We are encrypted at the highest level. I don't want anyone to know just yet that we are holding formal talks. Indeed, there are people even in my own government whom I wish to remain ignorant of these conversations."

Harry nodded. "That's good. You'd be surprised how few people on the political side of things do not think of security like that."

"You're used to working with those of lesser intelligence. After all, the majority were probably men. And all men have an issue with thinking ahead, regardless of race."

"True, but we are quite good in action when it calls for it, aren't we, Kaylee. That was the name you told me when we met on Vena, wasn't it?" Harry retorted instantly. He then had the distinct pleasure of watching Ta'a Chumei's eyes widen in surprise, even as she flipped the switch screen to end the call, having wanted to have the last laugh.

Five minutes later, Ta'a Chumei was back. She was now also dressed in a much less overdone outfit as she looked into the pickup a slim white one-piece dress of some kind, which only served to highlight her neck and high cheekbones, leading to lips that had been touched up just slightly by pink lipstick.

For her part, Ta'a looked back at Harry, taking him in, a feeling a trickle of something like desire going through her. *He has grown up quite handsomely.* She was not one to believe that the image on the screen would match the reality in person, but even so, those emerald eyes were even more striking than she had remembered. *And with them alone, he is more striking than most of my lovers.*



Ta'a then thought about the video showing Count Potter fighting the Zabrak Sith on Rendili, snorting in amusement. *Each and every one of my previous lovers were chosen from the concubines of the court. They are all handsome, well-skilled at lovemaking, massage, music, song and poetry, but perhaps that was why I have slowly gone off them.* There is no strength there, no independence. Harry had strength physically and perhaps mentally as well.

"I am pleased that you remember me. That was, after all, more than a decade ago. But alas, my real name is Ta'a. Kaylee was the name of my dear senator's daughter. I took her guise during that trip," Ta'a Chumei began.

"A Jedi trick of the mind," Harry replied. "We can bring to mind ancient memories very easily. But even if I didn't, my lover Aayla here was able to pinpoint the fact that you and the young girl I saved were one and the same."

"And yet," Aayla interjected her voice into the discussion again, "I do not believe that you are the sort to reach out the hand of friendship simply for old time's sake or something as soft as fellow-feeling. You certainly wouldn't wish to use your position to connect the Hapes Cluster to the GDL for something like that, not given the Hapes Cluster's isolationist policies in the past, and not given the nature of this war now."

Ta'a Chumei frowned for a brief moment but had known going into this that Twi'lek girl and Harry were apparently Force-bonded in some fashion, and that love had grown out of it. It did seem something of a fairytale to her, but since so many different sources confirmed it, she had no choice but to believe it. That was fine. *Let her deal with the issues of being his primary lover. I do not want that, nor to stand beside any male in such a way.*

"You are correct. I want to use you and the GDL. But in return, I will allow you to use the Hapes Cluster. My mother's policies are not aiding the the Consortium to grow stronger. Instead, our isolation has made us weaker in many ways. The Confederacy is too grasping, and I have studied the history of the Sith in as much detail as I could. I am concerned about them as well. But I am unwilling to discuss a more permanent agreement between the GDL and my people over the Hypercom. Even as well encrypted as this transmission is, I firmly believe in making such agreements in person."

"Do you expect that to happen anytime soon," Harry questioned. "Because it isn't going to happen. We already have several long-term demands on our time, several of which will take us out of communication for up to a week or more soon."

"And these missions yours are more important than bringing the Hapes Cluster into the GDL?" Ta'a Chumei asked archly. "Perhaps you are not as above the normal male stupidity as I had hoped."

"I am afraid it is, in many ways. I am willing to bow to your desire to meet in person, but I cannot do so right away, and I am not going to bend on that," Harry retorted, taking no umbrage in her disparagement of his gender. Such things were beneath a Jedi.

Ta'a leaned back, her expression becoming flummoxed, then somewhat amused. Few men would tell her no. Indeed, only the Queen's own concubines and her professors could do the same. Fewer still would be able to make it stick. Ta'a didn't like the feeling, but it made her more certain that Harry's willpower was part of what interested her.

"Very well," she intoned coldly. "However, I will require some form of down payments. Intervening as we did has already caused us to see and if need to the Confederacy and the Shield Worlds have dealt with a few probing attacks since."

Of course, they were not very powerful attacks and had never had a chance of breaking through those worlds' defenses, which were very aptly named. But, Ta'a wasn't about to share that with Harry just yet.

Harry leaned forward. "How deeply involved in the war effort do you wish to become, and how big of a logistical base can the Hapes Cluster become for the GDL?"

"That will depend on what we get in return. Turbolaser technology is a must, shield technology another. Your starfighters designs, and many other aspects," Ta'a answered smoothly.

"And in return?" Aayla asked, laying one hand on Harry's as she too looked at Ta'a Chumei coolly. "You're talking about what you can get from us, not what you're willing to give."

"I will not disclose our order of battle or industrial capacity over this communication," Ta'a scoffed, shaking her head. "As for what we can offer? Suffice it to say that while everyone knows the front door to the Hapes Cluster, we alone know of back doors. And further, we have no need to build up our ship strength, or even our personnel strength as many of your allies do. We have so many naval personnel that we can rotate them on and off our ships."

"Truly..." Harry murmured, interest plain in his tone, but he didn't lean away from the pickup, staring into the Princess's eyes, giving her the impression almost as if they were having a stare-off in person. Ta'a wondered idly if that was a Force trick, but she didn't look away. This was a contest of wills, as much of anything else, and she would not be found wanting.

Next to Harry, Aayla smiled faintly, then asked, "You're asking for technology and ship designs that we would normally share-out with our allies as a matter of course for joining the GDL. But I get the impression that you want something specific."

"Oh, very specific~," Ta'a's tone became the female equivalent of the bedroom voice that she had heard from her lovers occasionally. "And something for my people as well. We would like more construction yard ability. Eventually, I will wish you to act as a broker with Rendili for one of their portable construction yards."

"We would need to either break or run the blockade at this point to get you such," Harry cautioned.

But his face still showed his interest even so, and Ta'a smiled thinly. "I see we understand each other on that score."

"As for your other... specific need..." Aayla said thoughtfully, looking at Ta'a with her head cocked to one side. Both Jedi had noticed her tone and wondered if it was a ploy or a sign of what Ta'a was actually after. "I think that too we need to talk about more in person."

"Agreed," Harry stated, only now leaning back thoughtfully as he looked at Ta'a. "We will make a meeting with you in person our priority once our current task is completed. But some of the information we can give you now." He nodded to Sena, who came forward, placing the data chip into the hologram device. "We are willing to send you the Arrow design, the Vulture designs, and all the information we have about the movements of the Confederacy in your area of space. In return, would you be willing to work with our nearest Fleet Admiral? Not in terms of large-scale battles, but perhaps in terms of commerce raiding while you make the switch-over to our starfighter designs?"

"That would depend on the fleet Admiral in question. Until we have something more permanent in place, I will not be able to convince my Queen Mother to work directly with any male, although depending on his species, it might be possible." *For as much as my mother knows about the agreements I wish to reach, anyway, Ta'a added mentally.* There was a reason why she didn't want anyone else in the court to know any specifics of what she was up to, after all.

The nearest fleet Admiral was thankfully a Nautolan, and she was actually the highest-ranking Nautolan in the GDL.

When she heard this, the princess was pleased. "Perhaps. Perhaps that is possible."

"Realize that this is also a test Ta'a Chumei, Queen's heir," Harry said firmly. "We expect to get something out of what we are already sending you, Princess. If you prove unwilling to pay for even the little that we are willing to share with you now, how can we believe that you will deal with this in good faith in the long term? Hapes has proven untrustworthy in the past, and we will not be anyone's fools."

The Princess's eyes narrowed at that, but she nodded acquiescence. She could understand his point, even if it had been very bluntly spoken. Yet even Harry's ability to say such a thing to her over a communication like this simply spoke of how strong-willed he was. *Yes, I believe that this could be at the start of a most interesting relationship.* "Agreed. I will see cutting orders personally to that effect. I will not commit our Battle Dragons and the reason I wanted the Archer and vulture designs in the first place because our own starfighter designs are subpar. But we will do what we can."

Harry nodded, but just before he started to bring the conversation to a close, his eyes widened as he felt a sudden spike of fear from Ahsoka through their limited connection.

OOOOOOO

Having no desire to be inside any longer, Ahsoka had left the bunker after availing herself of the officer's gym for the first few hours after she had been released. She and her Master had been alone and inside for one meeting after another since they had arrived early that morning, and, now that she had eaten and exercised, Ahsoka wished to stretch her legs and feel the wind on her skin for a bit.

Walking around the base, Ahsoka was thankful that Garm had somewhat undersold it when he had described the outside training grounds. The high command's bunker was centered in a military encampment, but the base had a park built into several walking paths.

The young Togrutan wondered idly why until she remembered the number of Jedi that she had seen since she had arrived with her Master and the number of other people who probably spent far too much time underground. *I guess everyone needs just some time to walk around outside in the nice weather, rather than being stuck inside. I know I would've gone spare on the ship even if everything had been enlarged without the hydroponics areas.*

Letting her mind drift, Ahsoka walked through the park, simply breathing in deeply, smiling at getting outside, letting that feeling just wash over her for a time. She was not as into nature as it was rumored Master Ti was, but Ahsoka still very much preferred to be outside and doing things rather than stuck inside and forced to sit still for so long. *I wonder, does meeting and discussion time count as meditation time? Bet I could get Master Harry to agree to that...*

Ahsoka giggled at that, then thought about the smile of approval that she had seen on Master Ti's face when the other older and prettier Togrutan saw her sitting behind Master Harry. That approval had mattered more than it probably should have, and Ahsoka wondered idly if that was because of her Togrutan instincts. They were an incredibly communal society, after all. *Then again, that's about as much as I can remember of my time with them, and I've always held Master Ti in high esteem, even now that my need to try and measure up to her has been so thoroughly removed by Master Harry. That's probably...*

She frowned, then seeing a few other people around. Several of them looked almost furtive in their movements, eyes flicking here and there in the twilight as they stared around the darkening park, while a few were very clearly Jedi, complete with lightsabers, and she frowned at that thought, remembering a question that Harry had asked her at one point.

*When did the lightsaber become a symbol of the Jedi, rather than simply a tool of defense? And just because someone carries a lightsaber doesn't mean they are a Jedi.* Moreover, the overall look of the group was weird. It was obvious they were together, but the furtive-looking people were trying to stick to the shadows, while the Jedi, four of them, were moving almost brusquely towards the command center.

Making her mind up quickly, Ahsoka moved to intercept them, coming at the group from their right side as she announced herself. "Greetings, Masters. I'm surprised to see..."

Ahsoka didn't have time to finish speaking before the Jedi in question turned to her, and even in the low light of the evening sunlight through the trees, the look in their eyes caused Ahsoka to take a step back before righteous indignation and sorrow filled her. "Blanked!" she hissed, her lightsaber flashing into her hand, as a Force Shield appeared on one side of her body, her lightsaber flicking on as she charged forward.

There were four Jedi facing her. All of them were middle-aged, two humans, a near-humanoid with almost translucent skin and a Trandoshan.

They spread out, their own lightsabers flicking on, while the men with them turned and raced in different directions. Ahsoka wasn't having any of that, though. "Stunner!" she shouted, falling back on a youngling trick to help her concentrate on the spell without letting her Force Shield fade. The Jedi ahead of her cut the red wave where it would have hit them away with their lightsabers. But they had not been her aim. The men running away had been, and all of them fell, unconscious.

However, one of them had just enough time to press a button he had been holding before the light red Force wave crashed over him.

Elsewhere, a hover truck brought into the base as part of its regular round of supplies opened up, revealing that it did not carry any foodstuffs. Instead, twelve droids of the same class of combat droids which had begun to appear on battlefields all across the Republic leaped out of the truck.

Vibro-staffs made short work of the walls surrounding the supply zone, but once out into the rest of the commissary, the droids ran into trouble almost immediately. Even though most of the base's security was built around the outer edge, Garm and Garibaldi had not left the various buildings without internal defenses. So the moment they started to move out from where they had hidden, security was informed. Large quad lasers dropped down from the ceiling of the hallway that the droids found themselves in, firing on them with enough energy to demolish a Vulture fighter. One of the droids was struck, coming apart instantly soon after while several others used their vibro-staffs to cut into the sides. In this way, they got out of the building out into the rest of the base. Another droid died before they escaped out onto the base's grounds.

And again, they ran into issues. This was a military base, with a large number - at the moment two brigades worth - of infantrymen training nearly round the clock. And all of them went around armed for the most part. Several nearby troopers began to fire at them with rifles or handheld blasters, forcing the droids to defend themselves. But they were extremely fast and agile, able to dodge much of the blaster fire coming towards them and close.

The droids had a single objective. Kill anyone they could, cause chaos. They spread out, several of them moving to engage their attackers. One closed with a group of soldiers who had the bad luck of having been about to enter the commissary for the evening meal. The men and

women fell screaming as the droid eviscerated them methodically before being gunned down in turn by several more men nearby. But those men died to the droids as they closed faster than anyone had ever seen a droid move, almost looking like they were alive given how they dodged and closed. Several of them even grabbed up rifles as they went, returning fire against the various soldiers nearby, slaying several.

But they were not the threat facing Ahsoka. That was the four Jedi in front of her, Blanked but still Jedi. Ahsoka had been among the group of younglings defended by Master Yoda when the Blanked had initially revealed themselves in the heart of the Order's power. She had seen the Blanked, had felt the emptiness underneath the bubble, and the feeling was horrible to Ahsoka. Now she recoiled almost as much as that feeling through the Force as the attack from the four of them.

There was a riotously loud noise of "FZzaark!" as the four lightsabers smashed as one into Ahsoka's Force Shield took the hits, and she twirled her lightsaber to block one low as one of the Blanked tried to get around her. Then she leaped upwards, meeting another in midair, bouncing up and over a second who whirled in place. Her strike was blocked, but she used the momentum from that to hurl herself to the side, creating another Force shield which took two blows before Ahsoka's lightsaber redirected another. A second strike from the same human-like (normal humans, she reflected wildly, didn't have bright pink hair and slightly greenish skin) sent Ahsoka back as two of the Jedi who had struck her Force Shield leaped up and over her head, cutting down at her.

The shield grew as she directed it, blocking the blows, and then Ahsoka was flipping up and away, but as she landed, she stumbled to one side, barely dodging another strike. *My Force Precognition needs work*, she thought, desperately getting her lightsaber up to block the blow coming from her side, her shield having vanished as she moved. *Time to try something new!*

Reaching for the Force, Ahsoka began to use a technique that Harry had been teaching her ever since they had found out the element she was most closely aligned with. Harry normally started their meditation time by conjuring a tiny flame into being between them. Then she would slowly snuff the flame, transferring the image into her mind.

Now though, Ahsoka didn't conjure a small friendly-seeming candleflame. Instead, she created a head-sized fireball in midair, which smashed directly into her attacker's face, causing him to fall back. But the Blanked didn't scream even as his hair burst into flame, and Ahsoka barely got her lightsaber up, cutting the man's hand off, sending his lightsaber flying even as her gorge started to rise.

But that strike had taken her out of position. She couldn't create a new Force Shield fast enough to defend her own arm from a downward stroke from another Blanked. The latter had just leaped toward her from her original position.

Ahsoka had barely a moment to fear for her own life when she was suddenly elsewhere stumbling to her knees next to her Master. She looked up at him, seeing his face somewhat strained, but even as she noticed that, Harry was reaching out with his hands.

"A, About time, Master," she gasped, shaking and shivering from her near-death experience as she hid her relief behind her normal bravado.

"Yes, well, I couldn't teleport to you, so I had to use my legs to get here. Are these the only ones?" He inquired almost politely as the group of surviving Blanked moved towards him. The one Ahsoka had set alight was still burning, something that Ahsoka was trying very hard not to look at, instead concentrating on her Master's face, seeing the lines of strain there.

It had been strangely far more difficult to teleport Ahsoka to him rather than teleporting them both away as he had on the Lucrehulk they had investigated. It was almost as if Ahsoka's Force power had fought him for a moment there, forcing him to smother it. Still, Harry had power to spare, and his fingers started to glow quickly.

"The only Blanked, there was a group of men over there that were with them," She answered, using Harry's question as a lifeline.

"And you knocked them unconscious?" She nodded, and Harry smiled at her in approval, as he began to use the Force to reach out to the minds of the Hallowed. He found there the same nothing under the thin veneer as he had before, and with a sigh, He let them close once more, gesturing Ahsoka to wait. Then the young padawan and Harry began to glow as he pushed forward with one hand, a feeling of wholesomeness and joy washed over her, so much she gasped in delight.

The Force light hit the three remaining Blanked, and they dropped like marionettes with their strings cut. While not the pure mental technique that was the Force Light Needle Aayla had created on Coruscant, it still worked. The bubble that had existed in their minds allowing the Blanked to act like the people they had once been before being completely dominated by C'baoth shattered, leaving nothing behind.

Ahsoka looked at her own victim for a time, feeling sick. Then she felt her Master's arms around her shoulder, pulling her into a hug, as he blocked out her view of the Blanked she had burned alive. "They were already dead, Ahsoka," she murmured, patting her head, something that Ahsoka normally would've taken umbrage to. She was not an animal to be petted and sent to its kennel after walkies.

But now she craved it, staring at the Jedi in front of her, or rather the dead people who had once been Jedi, hugging her Master back as she stared at the three Jedi. How is that possible Master, how does C'baoth do that?"

"How does he drain the Force from them, drain their personalities?" Harry frowned, looking at the Blanked himself even as he slowly started to lead Ahsoka away from them. "I

don't know. If you're asking me if it's possible to drain someone of his or her Force powers, I'm certain Aayla or I have taken strength from one another occasionally. Draining someone else would take dominating their mind and will to an utterly disturbing extent. Taking it even further, to drain them of their very lives? That I have no idea on. It is one of many questions I want to put to Master Fay and my mother when we meet with them."

Indeed, that question, and whether or not it would be possible to spot such before they were given orders, without resorting to the Force Light Needle that Aayla had developed, was one of the main reasons why they were taking the *Tyrant's Bane* all the way to Ruusan, rather than just to Master Gallia at her space station and letting the Ruusan sector's freighters take the younglings and the rest heading there the rest of the way.

He moved over to the six men who had been knocked unconscious by Ahsoka's stunning technique, smiling at her in deep approval. "You did well, Ahsoka, very well. Although," he added dryly, "I am uncertain if I am pleased with your ability to find trouble or worried that you have somehow acquired that ability from me. My mother calls it Potter Luck, and if it is passed down from Master to Padawan, you are in for a most interesting life."

"If you'd asked me an hour ago, Master, I might not have had a problem with that. Now, though? Now I am uncertain if I like it or not." Ahsoka answered just as dryly, looking over her shoulder at the Blanked and shivering.

Two of those Jedi had barely been padawans, newly made probably, before they and their Masters had met C'baoth before his darkness was known. And now they were dead. How long have they been like that? Going about their business, interacting with those around them like Jedi, going on missions, maybe even interacting with acquaintances in the Order, all while being Blanked inside?

"Come on. Whatever manner of attack this was its over, but we need to deal with the aftermath," Harry said, moving towards where he could hear faint screams as Aayla finally made an appearance the normal way, rushing out of the command center.

However, she would arrive in time to only help with the cleanup.

By the time Harry had finished comforting Ahsoka, the droids had been dealt with by Master Yaddle and Master Yoda, who had quickly disproved the notion that the droids were at all equivalent to the greatest living sword Master of the Jedi or a Jedi who had six hundred-odd years under her, albeit tiny, belt. Unlike her older companion, Yaddle had never been known chiefly as a lightsaber duelist, but she had a technique that was even more applicable to taking on droids than a lightsaber or any other of the new techniques could be.

The droids facing her were unprepared for it entirely. They were still charging towards where the two green-skinned Jedi had been rushing towards them when Yaddle paused and raised a hand. Electromagnetic Lightning, distinct from Force Lightning due to its yellow and pink color, flashed out from her fingers. When it struck the droids, they all spasmed, their



onboard systems completely overloaded, dumping them all to the ground despite their immense physical durability.

By the time Yoda was done destroying the last two with precise strikes at their spine and neck, Yaddle was already moving through the rubble of the droids, ordering a few of the nearby troops to heft them up and take them to a lab for study. She then turned, her eyes widening melodramatically, her ears flopping in good humor. "Done you are, at last? One supposes, for old-age, allowances must be made."

The older Grand Master looked at his younger counterpart with a faint look of disapproval, although his own ears were twitching in humor. "Funny as you think you are, you are not."

Later, Garm stared in annoyed anger at the base's security commander. As he gave them a preliminary report. "We're questioning the prisoners with Jedi aid to sniff out lies or untruths, but it looks as if they were Confederacy deep undercover operatives, given a job to try to infiltrate the base. Their subtle attempts hadn't done anything, and we know there was an APB out on four of the men in custody for computer espionage. This seems to have been something put into place quickly, but it was professional for all of that. If they hadn't been found out early, they might have been inside the command bunker before anyone knew anything."

Yaddle shook her head firmly. "The Blanked, give the attack away they would have. Check every new Jedi I do when I see them." Yaddle was one of the few in the order outside Harry and Aayla who could use Force Light, even the needle variety.

"Know this they did not," Yoda interjected. "A good plan it might have been. Blanked, attack here in Serenno they have not before. Surprise, confusion, fear, work for them, they would have."

"Well, regardless, they wanted to steal our order of battle, as well as discover where our various fleet bases are based out of, according to one of the prisoners. They were to use the Blanked..." he stumbled over the term, "and the droid assault as cover for their operation. I'm also getting reports of other attacks by Blanked on Duros and Corellia, but we've sent out warnings about more, and the Green Temple has sent several of its most senior masters out to bolster defenses in various places."

"I'm astonished they went through with it once they realize that I was personally here, and this isn't pride speaking," Harry said, holding up his hand as Yoda's mouth quirked. "Surely they knew that more Jedi were coming down with me, and thus more security. They would not have gotten through."

Yoda held up a hand as his eyes closed, and the others in the room waited for him to speak. "Secondary objective there was, a message for us this assault was. A message of fear. Strike us they think they can anywhere, regardless of our defenses. Believe, C'baath does, take

council of that fear we will.” He opened his eyes, shaking his head. “Wrong he is. Security reviewed perhaps, but fear of the unknown, fear of our fellow Jedi, we must not give into.”

The other Jedi in the meeting, even Ahsoka, nodded firmly at that, and Yaddle went on brusquely. “Regardless, use them to break any Confederacy cells on the planet we will.”

“So long as we can assume on Jedi aid, I think we can,” the security director answered.

Yaddle nodded firmly. “Will take this job myself, I will. Find any more spies, we will. Duties here in the command center, others can perform for a time.”

“A finite number of Jedi Blanked out there can be,” Yoda murmured, scowling as he shook his head about the failure of the Order there. “C’baath only met so many other Jedi since his fall to the Dark Side.”

“We’re assuming, and I hope it’s a good assumption, that only C’baath can do this,” Aayla said, scowling faintly. She had been forced to handle the end of the meeting with the princess and had not seen any of the action, which had left her with a slight feeling of annoyance. But she and Harry had done their part healing those the droids had wounded. Until they had run into Yoda and Yaddle, those droids had proven deadly, killing more than a hundred troopers.

“My question is, how did the Blanked get on the planet in the first place,”

Yoda sighed. “Sentinels, all of them were. Supposed to be on an anticorruption mission Master Ncod and his padawan was. Assigned to a child abduction case, Knight Abraxas and his padawan were. Last seen in the temple, six months ago they were.”

The words came out smoothly and without any added inflection, but Harry had spent enough time around Master Yoda now to read his body language, and could see the slight stiffening of the ears, how they lowered as he named the fallen. And he wondered, once more, how many Jedi that Master Yoda had been forced to bury before their time in his nearly a thousand years.

“An idea of how they arrived on Sorrento I do not have. But moving undetected, a necessity among the Sentinels. Specialized Investigators, they all were.”

While Yaddle and the security officer promised to find out how the Jedi had gotten onto the planet, Aayla nodded, smiling faintly at memories of her own training with her Master Vos. *“After we’re done with the Hapan princess, we’ll need to follow up on that lover.”*

“Do you want us to stay here until you’re more certain of your security?” Harry asked, looking at Garm and Yaddle while also sending Aayla an affirmative feeling.

Yaddle firmly shook her head. “A mission you already have. Delivering the padawans and younglings to Ruusan. That objective completed it must be.”

Yoda nodded also. “Hrhrhrhm, Agree I do. Learn something of import you will on this mission, certain of that I am, if not the contents.”

Harry didn’t like it, but he understood. Once more, it just felt right, and the stronger Harry thought about it, the stronger that feeling was. The Force might not be able to pierce through the Veil of the Dark Side to give them actual visions without aid in the form of his and Aayla’s Force Constructs. That didn’t mean that it couldn’t tell them things.

*Or else the Jedi order would already have been defeated,* he thought morbidly as Garm asked, “By the way, how did it go with the Hapan princess?”

“Strangely,” Harry chuckled. “Yet also normally in many ways. They have their own agenda obviously, and their own desires for Jedi aid for something.” From there, he described the initial agreement they had made, and soon after, the meeting broke up. Harry and Aayla bid Yoda farewell and then led Ahsoka back to the shuttle, which took them back up to the Tyrant’s Bane. All the meetings were done for now, and, As Yoda had said, they had a mission to finish before they could turn to anything else.

*“Desires for you, you mean,”* Aayla quipped in his head, unwilling to leave the subject of Ta’a Chumei just yet.

Harry’s mental avatar shrugged his shoulders as they boosted for orbit. He had gotten the same impression, but whether or not they would follow up on that was very debatable. Nor was it only just Aayla and Harry that would make that decision. Padme would have to get involved, Harry was very certain about that. Even if the princess only wanted a physical liaison, Harry would not be willing to go through with that without Padme’s agreement and involvement.

*“Agreement and ‘involvement’ is it,”* Aayla teased again in his head, causing Harry’s mental image to blush as she sensed his thoughts. But thankfully, he kept it off of his face with the ease of years of practice, even though Ahsoka was looking at the two of them in question now.

Quickly Harry diverted her attention, asking Ahsoka how she felt about the recent battle, praising how well she had fought before he had arrived. It worked, but Harry knew that Aayla was simply biding her time. The teasing would come. For now, though, he once more had a somewhat disturbed to deal with.

**OOOOOO**

In a hotel room in the capital city of Serenno, Kinman Dorian leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers as the news blared about the assault on the GDL base blared across the screen in front of him. While he had no part in the attack, the local Jedi and the GDL’s espionage service, known as Galactic Security and Espionage, or GSE, would respond appropriately with its Specters. *And while I have some faith in my background, I do not have*

*faith it will stand against the scrutiny of Jedi already suspicious and using their mind powers to ferret out secrets.*

*As such, Kinman would have to move up his departure date. That is unfortunate, but I should be able to do so without giving my own identity away. As such, I might be able to use this cover again rather than take precipitous action to keep my identity from coming out. Yet it is also unfortunate in that the operation failed so miserably. When I had discovered someone using Confederacy Special Forces codes here on Serenno, I assumed that their plan would fail in parts, but to not even succeed at one objective?*

*That is annoying, as is the fact I couldn't discover a means with which to use the turmoil for my own ends. I have not discovered nearly as much as I had hoped about the Tyrant's Bane or the Tibanna gas passing through here in Serenno out into the GDL. Kinman had learned that it was mostly being transported by Corellian freighters now, but the freighters never stayed overlong, and the security around them as they unloaded the gas was astonishing.*

It was strange and somewhat disturbing, but there was little chance he could crack that security independently. The same could be said about the Tyrant's Bane. It was surrounded by a no-fly zone, one enforced by the immediate destruction of any ship entering it. Kinman had thought to create a stink on that but hadn't been in place long enough to create his own local network to do the work before the CSF's fiasco. *Still, I will not be returning to my Master entirely empty-handed.*

Despite the trouble he'd run into since arriving in Serenno, Kinman had learned about the younglings aboard the bane. An innocuous purchase here in Serenno of several thousand education-type datapads and a few thousand inoculations for various children's diseases had been bought through the Jedi Order and then shipped to the Tyrant's Bane. This confirmed that the younglings were aboard the ship and would remain aboard it for now. Because of that, Kinman was certain that the Jedi Order had no intention of leaving the brats here in Serenno at the training center, or even, although this one was a little bit more stretch, taking them to Corellia to the Green Temple there.

Furthermore, he had conclusively disapproved the theory of some kind of virus program having been the cause of the destruction of the ships sent out after the Tyrant's Bane. That hadn't been his original mission, but his cover as a space construction foreman had gotten him some contacts among the rest of that community here in Serenno. Luckily for Kinman, the recent influx of manpower from the rest of the sector into Serenno had covered him as well as the extremely expensive background story and ID that hid his true identity as well as Kinman's own nondescript looks could in a crowd.

The Munificent class ships that would be staying in orbit here in Serenno and becoming part of the defense fleet had no internal damage. They had no vultures aboard either. There was certainly some damage inside, but nowhere near enough to say that the limited number of droids aboard the ships had rebelled. These ships had simply surrendered. The Lucrehulks, too,

were both horribly battered on the outside, as well, though Kinman hadn't been able to talk to anyone who had been aboard either ship before they were already on their way back out-system heading to Corellia.

Yet that was enough. Whatever had happened to these three ships, it had been an external conflict that forced their surrender, not an internal one. Kinman wasn't one to speculate most of the time. He had learned early that speculation could lead one's thoughts astray and lead to one overlooking things. But even so...

*Perhaps, the Jedi have found the katana fleet? I know for a fact that my Master and indeed the Republic as a whole often overlook the Agri-worlds. And more than one of them have gas giants in them. They might be too diffuse to create valuable gasses, but they could certainly hide a small shipyard and a few ships at a time.? If those ships were found, it would be a tremendous asset to the Jedi Order and further explain why they were now transporting so many of the former Agri-corps workers. They could form an officer cadre if nothing else...*

Kinman shook his head quickly, dislodging the notion. It was interesting, but there was no evidence, and regardless of his suppositions, it was time for Kinman to leave. *I am a foreigner here, and moreover, an individual once bought will be willing to sell his wares once more.*

His cover identity's reason for leaving Serenno was simple and one that often pulled on the heartstrings: Kinman used the old 'parents caught in a hovercar accident' concept, getting out of work quickly and easily. The fact that this cover's parents had indeed died in a hovercar accident would add just a tiny bit to his cover. That, and Kinman's own looks being so nondescript, would cover him going forward. *I will remain useful to my Master, whatever he wishes of me.*

Unfortunately, the cover he was using and the GDL's security meant that it would be several days before he could get back to his own Scimitar and report in. But such was life for an espionage agent.

**OOOOOOO**

That night, Harry and Aayla were back aboard the Tyrant's Bane. With Aayla handling any last-minute details, Harry had spent time with Ahsoka, talking her through her jitters about the battle and her use of a fireball on the Blanked. As the Lucrehulk began to start heading out-system once more, Harry rejoined Aayla in the bridge's observation area, putting up a series of sound bafflers as they powered up the Hypercom uplink.

Because thanks to the time difference, it was now early morning on Coruscant.

Soon, Padme and Zule were both there, and the two lovers send a smile towards their friend before concentrating on Padme. "Padme, Zule. We thought we'd check in with you two,

considering some rumors have reached us about violence on Coruscant. I'd be willing to trade stories ..." Harry began.

"Indeed. Since you left, we've had quite a bit of activity, although nothing compared to the full-scale space battle that you both apparently found yourself in. I'm sorry to hear that you were forced to use the Droid Override Program before you could use it as a strategic weapon," Padme interrupted, shaking her head and giving Harry a look.

Both Harry and Aayla understood it instantly. With every relay center between them and Padme, there was an added chance their encryption would be broken, no matter how good. Since the young slicer had a part in creating it, Aayla was pretty certain it would take a long time to break, but there was no such thing as an unbreakable code. So, Padme was telling them about the main rumor going around, which they could run with, thereby reinforcing it over the reality.

"Needs must alas," Aayla snorted. "Of course, that means they will be ready the next time and have changed their security, so it's doubtful we will get lucky again. But since the alternative was to die, well..." She shrugged, then leaned forward, smirking at Padme. "Now, your own tales, Padme."

"Hah!" Zule laughed, throwing an arm around Padme's shoulders, who did not object to this contact. "And I thought you were a trouble magnet, Potter. Padme's got you beaten."

"I do not!" Padme gasped in shock and outrage. "How dare you even insinuate that I can attract danger Like Harry can! Black holes cannot attract gravity better than Harry can trouble. In comparison, I am but a babe in the woods."

"Hah!" Zule snorted while Aayla giggled.

Harry feigned hurt, actually pouting at Padme, before he suddenly smirked. "Well, why don't I be the judge of that, Padme? Or you could perhaps say that my ability to attract trouble... rubbed off on you?"

With the particular twist, Harry gave those last three words. Padme could all too easily remember the times they'd had together on Coruscant before Harry and Aayla had to leave. This led to her having a rather dopey smile on her face before she shook her head and rather reluctantly joined Zule in filling their distant friends in on the ambush in the restaurant and then the surprise assault from the pro-human Pius Dea group.

"...Okay, so maybe you are a trouble magnet. But at least, just like Harry and I, you have friends and great big teeth of your own to deal with trouble when it comes knocking," Harry muttered. "And given what happened today with Ahsoka, I am genuinely concerned that Potter Luck is contagious."

It was all Aayla could do to not burst out laughing at that, as Padme replied to Harry's quip. "I'm still wondering why they targeted me personally out of all the other Senators, but I can't say that I have any sympathy whatsoever for their point of view. Yes, humans outnumber any one other race, but we are in turn overmatched by the sheer number of other races out there."

"It is awfully hard to see their point of view. Especially when I know that given my relationship with Aayla, I would probably be seen as a...what was that word for a person who mates with animals?" Harry replied dryly, shaking his head. "Fools."

"Hah, true. And I would wager that idea wouldn't have lasted very long. Just until one of the Pius Dea gentlemen felt they held a position of power, those of us who are humanoid enough to fornicate with. Then any disgust with the idea of sleeping with us would go away, or better be explained away as something positive," Aayla snorted.

Padme laughed and agreed that even the most rabid pro-human patriot would probably be tempted by someone with the body Aayla boasted. That was as close as they could get to flirting over the Hypercom. Zule being there too was also a kind of armor against any kind of rumors starting that Harry, Aayla and Padme were more than the best of friends.

But the need to be circumspect and even Zule's presence didn't stop them from trying to flirt or get one over the other. For the next twenty minutes, the three lovers exchanged inside jokes and mild flirts while Padme continued to ramp up her innuendos and facial expressions, enjoying how Harry and Aayla's eyes would show their reaction to her flirtations so well. Zule, too started to get into it, more to tease Harry and Padme than Aayla, who returned fire better than Harry did. She had a natural grasp of metaphor and insinuation that Harry lacked. In turn, Harry's tone was a weapon, and more than once, both Zule and Padme shivered as his timbre dipped in register.

*"Are you alright with this, Aayla? I mean, this is like I'm flirting with them both,"* Harry asked mentally as he saw Zule blush, her already red skin darkening noticeably at a comment he had made about gymnasts and flexibility being important for their... profession.

*"Are you alright with me doing the same?"* Aayla returned, feeling his amused approval at that very thing before she could finish forming the question. *"So why would I have a problem with you doing the same. Besides, Zule's been circling our relationship ever since we returned from Ruusan. I don't think we love one another as deeply as Padme already does, but I think we could certainly move in that direction if we'd had the time to devote to one another more often since then."*

*"...I thought the same thing occasionally, but didn't want to presume,"* Harry sent back, along with such a flood of loving tenderness for Aayla that she nearly joined the other two girls in blushing. Even so, Harry had felt her own interest in Zule as Aayla replied. It wasn't as much as she was interested in Padme, but it was there, much like Harry's own attraction to their Half-

Falleen friend. Still, Harry felt following up on this new speculation had to be done in person. Not over the Hypercom.

Aayla agreed, and slowly the two lovers got around to the official reason for this call. This was to invite Padme or a Peace Party member that Padme chose to come and observe the Congress of Planets as that body held its first inaugural session. "It would allay Republic concerns that the GDL is a military Diktatorship. Although technically speaking, we sort of are as far as the war goes. Still, it's supposed to happen in four months, and it will be a momentous occasion for many reasons."

"And will you be there for its first inaugurating meeting?" Padme questioned, although she was frowning as she did so. The news that the GDL would continue to be a separate entity going forward was... well, it was going to make the Centrists scream their fool heads off. While the war had hammered the Republic so much that at the moment, they were too terrified to do much, that wouldn't be true forever. *Or if it is, we have far more problems than just their bleating. Yet, I can still see this becoming an issue in the future. I pray I am wrong, though, and the GDL and Republic can learn to coexist.*

"I hope to be," Harry replied with a nod. "Unless the war pulls me away."

"Then I believe that it would be a sight to see. Although I don't know if I personally will be able to get away," Padme replied with a sigh, wondering what the future would bring. Yet, despite her concerns about the Centrists and what they would think of the GDL's Congress, Padme found her spirits had been greatly uplifted thanks to this discussion. "We will see. Until then, my friends, I'm afraid I have to sign off. I'm at yet another committee meeting soon."

"Until next time that," Harry replied with a sigh, shaking his head. "May the Force be with you," he said, with Aayla and Zule both saying the same words at the same time as they held their hands up into the pickup. Padme was still laughing at that and nudging Zule in the ribs as the communications cut off.

Long before the conversation had ended, *Tyrant's Bane* had reached the hyperjump limit. Now it was with a sigh that Harry moved from the observation area where he and Aayla had been sitting to reclaim his seat in the Captain's chair down below in the primary bridge. "Set course for Space Station Victory. We have a mission to complete and alas, after that, a war to get back to."

OOOOOOO

It was late night on Coruscant, but wat never sleeps, so the Republic High Command's admirals were not exactly unused to being summoned to talk to the Chancellor at odd hours. But when Admiral Yularen and Admiral Thomas walked into his office, they were surprised to find that they would not be speaking with him alone.



With the Chancellor, staring down at a dejarik board and contemplating the move Sate Pestage had just made, was a blue-skinned alien of undetermined race. Certainly, neither Admiral had ever seen an individual quite like him. He was tall, decently broad-shouldered, wearing a perfectly groomed Republic Navy uniform yet without any rank insignia. His face was immaculately shaved, his hair black and close-cropped to his head.

He looked up as they entered, straightening his shoulders and staring at the two officers with interest, the interest being returned. Both admirals could spot a soldier when they saw one, and this man most definitely was one. His eyes flicked down to their rank marks, but didn't linger, saluting before he came to parade rest, silent but watching.

Yularen returned the salute before looking over at the Chancellor, who had set aside some work he was doing to look back at the two admirals. "Chancellor, you asked to speak with us?"

"I do apologize for pulling you from your duties right before you were due to turn over command to Thomas for the evening, Admiral Yularen. But I feel that at this point, we've gotten a handle on the logistics and strategic aspect of the war enough that you can spend a few hours meeting this young gentleman. He comes **highly** recommended by a few of the few Outer Rim systems which have remained loyal as someone who knows the Outer Rim, the players, the planets, and the various hyperspace lanes there."

"A mercenary then?" Thomas asked, almost dismissively. Yet he was examining the young blue-skinned man with just as much intensity as Admiral Yularen was. And he was coming to the same conclusion that Yularen had already. This was a soldier and a very good one. *And we know for a fact the shipyards that the CIS used to create their fleet are somewhere in the Outer Rim or even farther out, in the Expanse Regions...*

"No. I do not fight for the highest bidder. I instead fight for those who are in the best position to instill order within the galaxy." The blue-skinned alien's Galactic Standard was slow, almost ponderous, marking it out as not his native language.

"Order within the galaxy? So you are not loyal to the Republic itself?" Yularen asked, scowling.

"The Republic has many issues. Those issues, however, can be solved. Further, the Confederacy is but a thin veneer for handing more power to those who believe in the power of the purse rather than order and structure. As such, I am willing to serve the Republic." The man replied, shrugging his shoulders very lightly, his red eyes somewhat disconcerting, never leaving the admirals' own.

Yularen snorted. "Fine for as far as that goes, I suppose. But what is your name?"

"Mitth'raw'nuruodo. But I know that that is hard to say in common. I am willing to answer to Thrawn."

"Can I ask how this man came to be thought of so highly by yourself that you would introduce him to us in this manner, Chancellor?" Thomas inquired respectfully.

The Chancellor smiled amicably, while behind his mask, Sidious sneered. The Strategist, as Sidious had called him ever since discovering his abilities, had come to Sidious's attention via two strong Force Users who came from the same race, called the Chiss. Kinman Doriana had run into them when he was trying to discover what had happened to a particularly brutal band of slavers and pirates called the Vagaari. Sidious had wondered if he could make use of them, only to discover the entire wandering band of them had been wiped out.

Through Kinman, Sidious had steered the two toward C'baoth. Now both served the other Darth as his chief enforcers and bodyguards. But the two of them had told Kinman of the one who had destroyed Vagaari. After having instigated several offensive actions against nearby enemies, he had also been exiled from Chiss space, which was directly anathema to his Chiss's defense-first military mentality.

Because of this, Sidious had sent his true apprentice, Darth Noctis, to convince the man to work for the Republic. They had even engaged in a brief sexual engagement, although, looking at the man now, Sidious doubted that either individual had ever truly given their heart to the other. *No, there is nothing in this young man that speaks of the weakness of the flesh or the need for emotional attachment. There is, however, an almost insane level of devotion to order and discipline. Which is perfectly acceptable for his plans.*

The Chancellor explained how Mitth'raw'nuruodo had come to the aid of a Republic planet when it was being attacked by a reaving band of aliens called the Vagaari, coming to the Chancellor's attention at that point thanks to the Sector Senator. "I kept an eye on him since, and when war was declared, decided he could be a magnificent addition to our Navy."

The Admiral frowned but then began to question Thrawn about his past commands. Thrawn replied easily, not even lying for the most part, simply using names of planets and ship types that the Admirals had no knowledge of. When they tried to question him about the time he had aided a Republic world, the Chancellor interjected, steering the conversation with his normal aplomb away from the subject, while at the same time using the Force to convince the two admirals that Thrawn was indeed extremely competent and knowledgeable.

This was helped by the previous details and information Thrawn had shared. Thomas had written down a few things the young man had told them about the Hyperspace trade routes beyond the Mid Rim where the CIS held sway and where real knowledge of the trade routes was a closely kept secret. This, and more, Sidious had given Thrawn via Noctis. Information like that was power, but in giving it away, Sidious had convinced Thrawn to come to Coruscant.

*Thrawn might eventually have become another weapon that could turn in my hands, as Dominus is slowly doing. But since he arrived on Coruscant...hahaha.* Sidious chuckled internally, keeping his somewhat good humor off his face easily. *Dominus is not the only Master of mental manipulation. While Thrawn says he is only loyal to order, he now believes that the order and organization he craves can only be created through me.*

"You realize that he would be better used as a resource on the Outer Rim than as an officer, Chancellor."

"I do. However, there are two factors here that require that I put Thrawn in harm's way," the Chancellor chuckled wryly, shaking his head. "Young Thrawn himself requests it, and gaining him a commission was the payment he demanded access to his information in the first place."

"I do. I am not a resource to be used in that manner. I am a leader, a soldier. I will serve in battle," Thrawn added, self-assuredness almost roiling off him like a wave.

"And further, you realize that we will not simply hand you any kind of flag rank? The only possible rank we could give you would be Captain or better commander."

"That will suit me. I will prove my abilities as any soldier should, in actual battle."

Sidious allowed a small smile to appear on his face as he watched both admirals nodded in approval at the younger man's attitude, going on about the number of tests and forms he would have to fill out to be given a commission in the Navy. It would take time, months, maybe a year. But eventually, Thrawn would become what Sidious knew him to be, one of the most dangerous strategic minds in the Republic. And that time spent rising in command will solidify the man's position. *And with his loyalties now changed, he will become one of my greatest tools, a tool I can use to blunt Dominus and the GDL both.*

Later that night, as the Senate District slowly shut down, Sidious removed himself from his Chancellor's guise, tossing the Chancellor's robes into his chamber's closer, slipping into the dark robes of his true persona. Sidious slowly made his way down to the Sith temple here on Coruscant from his hidden throne room. A temple that was, in a sign of truly delicious irony, hidden directly underneath the Jedi Temple itself.

There he found Darth Noctis working on her lightsaber and combat skills, slashing and hacking at several training droids. Each of them was larger and much more advanced than the Magna Guards serving as anti-Jedi specialists in the CIS. Watching them fight Noctis, Sidious instantly noticed that two of the training droids were programmed to fight using the Shien and Djem So styles. The last was fighting in a style that made even Sidious's teeth grind, the fully defensive Soresu.

Meanwhile, nozzles in the walls were shooting out bolts of stun bolts, real blaster bolts, and even fire and debilitating gas. And on the wall the door was set into, a large screen showed the limited video footage of the battle between Harry Potter and Darth Maul.

He raised a hand as he entered, and all activity ceased, as he ordered, "Hold."

His apprentice turned to him quickly, then bowed, laying her twin lightsabers on the ground in a mark of obeisance. After the last few meetings he had with Dominus, this was a pleasant change, but Sidious did not allow it to subvert his purpose. Nor did he allow his eyes to linger overlong on the plunging neckline that the woman's choice of garment allowed. While he had occasionally thought of using physical domination to tie Ventress to him further, Sidious had decided against it. While attractive, she was also far too emotional, and that could twist her against Sidious in a moment of jealousy since she already knew that he had other lovers, who Sidious had tied to himself in that manner.

"Well done," he said simply. "You performed your task perfectly. Thrawn is everything I had hoped he would be, and by the time C'baoth believes that he is in a strong enough position to truly defeat the Republic, Thrawn will be in a position to help us turn the war around and thus build our Empire on the bodies of our true foes. Until then, the Confederacy's continued pressure still serves us well, feeding the Veil."

"Thank you, Master, but I have done little to be worthy of it. Thrawn himself is that dangerous. I, I long to be more useful directly against the Jedi!" Darth Noctis hissed the last word like a curse, as a true Darth would.

Her hatred of the Jedi was a bit too personal for Sidious's taste, leery of her occasional lapses in control. *Still, it will serve a purpose.* "Do not worry, Noctis. I have a task for you. Never fear."

"What would you wish of me, my Master?" Noctis bowed even deeper, an eager smile appearing on her face as she stared at the ground of the training room.

"You will take several targets with one mission. First, C'baoth needs to learn that while we cannot strike directly at him, we can still hurt him and that he still must pay for his mistakes. C'baoth has devoted much time to two of his personal followers. The padawan who followed him into the dark side Lorana Jinzler, and Tol Skorr. I want them both dead. They are in charge of the CIS push aimed at Brentaal. You will infiltrate the Confederacy forces there and kill them in such a way that it cannot be traced to you. I trust you can be inventive enough for this."

A bare twitch of Noctis's bald head was his reply for a moment as she remained silent, already making plans. "I see. And the last target master? Is it a Jedi?"

"It is. Once Jinzler and Skorr are dead, you can then operate openly, making a name for yourself by serving as a Dark Sister recruited into the Confederacy. With that position, you will

be part of an attack on the planet. Again, I leave how you do this up to you. There, you will find Coleman Trebor, or where he has gone. He is still hard at work trying to overcome centuries of subtle Anti-Jedi propaganda and has done a somewhat decent job of it. He must die so that work will go unfinished.”

Noctis raised herself from her kowtow, a thoughtful look on her face now. “Is it time for me to step out of the shadows, Master?”

“It is my apprentice. It most certainly is. With Trebor’s death after his two favorites’ deaths, you will gain C’baoth’s attention. He does not know your true abilities, keep it that way, but make certain you serve only against the GDL from then on. They must be hurt, and the Jedi with them must die as often as we can contrive. And when the time comes, you will step forward to replace C’baoth as leader of the CIS...” Sidious said with a smile. He knew that would probably not come to pass now, that Dominus would need to be defeated in open war. But if it did, then Noctis too would serve.

“Yes, Master!” She exclaimed, slapping one hand against her chest in obeisance.

Leaving his apprentice to make her preparations to leave once more, Sidious moved upwards back to his throne room. *I have set things in motion once more. It only stands to see if Potter and the other secrets the Jedi hold will reveal themselves to be even more dangerous than I now suspect. Regardless, they will learn, Dominus, the Order, Potter, the GDL, the CIS. They will all learn that, for all the added actors and plots, this play has only one writer.*

**End Chapter**