

I am not Lucas, Rowling, or Disney.

Hey all. ***Magic of the Force*** won the medium story poll this month, so here we are. This is a necessary setup for the clandestine side of the war, the side that is really going to hurt Sidious where it hurts. So I will apologize for the lack of major events within. But small issues can make big changes...

In other news, I noticed that several reviewers mentioned detail mistakes in the previous chapter. I have hopefully corrected those now, and will mention the corrections going forward.

This chapter has been edited by me using Grammarly and **Delphinous**. Thank him as he noticed a few other detail mistakes I missed.

Chapter 20: Burning The Web

Harry chuckled while many of the other Jedi on the *Tyrant's Bane's* bridge smiled, and Ahsoka's giggle rose from behind him as a drawling, almost lazy sounding voice sounded out from the intercom in response to their sending the ship's IFF. "Roger that *Tyrant's Bane*, you are cleared to enter holding area X-C-03 over Primus, please follow the trajectory accompanying this message. Please be aware that we are extremely busy at the moment. Any deviations will probably have you be running into several other ships. And when I say run into, I mean run over in your case."

The Jaderin native wasn't actually lazy, but for some reason, many of the space stations situated in the outer reaches of the highly advanced system where humans made up the majority of the population attempted to assume that tone. It was such a strange, affected tone that even Jedi had to snicker at it.

"The order is understood Jaderin Control. Tell me, is the shipment of gas ready to go?" Harry inquired.

"One *Bane*-sized order, yes, Sir. I've also been asked to pass on a message that the Oligarchs wish to speak with you."

Harry frowned at that, looking over at Aayla. "*Any ideas, Aayla?*"

Aayla frowned, thinking, then shook her head slightly. "*Not a one. Whatever they want, it's something new since the last time we were here.*"

It turned out that it wasn't anything unusual or time-consuming. Indeed it was a major positive. Since Harry and Aayla had begun to bring in the necessary hyperspace coils to build ships that could move between the stars, trade within the Ruusan sector had gone up at an exponential rate, and with that had come communication and trade with a few other planets that had retained the technological level they had when contact with the outside universe was lost.

That had created some acrimony between Jaderin and those other planets initially, who felt Jaderin had just gotten lucky being the first system to make full-time contact with an outside power, but they'd been able to hammer that out without Jedi intervention, thankfully. How they'd done so, Harry wasn't certain, but now, he was looking at a committee of twenty faces, the planets within the sector able to contribute having sent two representatives each.

Behind him, he could feel Ahsoka twitch a bit and had to hide a faint smile. One of the representatives was a human, but one who had taken considerable steps down the so-called techno-sentient path and looked to be at least two-thirds robotic. Several races had a negative reaction to seeing other people like that, and Togrutans were among them. Gentlemen, ladies, we are pleased to see a true ruling body being created for Ruusan. But I have to ask, what do you want with us?"

"We would like to purchase the destroyer and frigate torpedo designs, as well as any starfighter designs you have," the techno-sentient said, his three mechanical arms moving this way and that while his original organic ones were calmly crossed on the table in front of him. "We imagine they are better than anything we have designed, and if we build all the ships except for the hyperspace coils, we can then ship them out to other planets within the GDL for the work to be finished, speeding up construction considerably."

"I was under the impression that the Ruusan Sector no longer wanted to be part of the Republic," Aayla began, her eyes narrowing. "And that Jaderin was the only world which had decided to join the Galactic Defense League."

Several other representatives stared at the two locals, a human female and a Verpine, the two representatives from the Oligarchs. Those looks were not very friendly, but they weren't too bitter either. "We might not be... happy... that another system has become the first among equals. But none of us are willing to unilaterally do away with the goods and services Jaderin can provide us as the inner hatch of the pathway that leads to the rest of the Republic," Another sentient announced, the words coming out rasping from his large breathing apparatus which he wore over bulbous eyes. The rest of his body and face was hidden by a long coat.

"That one doesn't represent any planet we've been to, Harry," Aayla sent, having taken the time to step into their shared mental space to go through their memories for a second. *"Jaderin must still be expanding their trade network."*

As Harry sent back an acknowledgment, another human took over. "We would like to deal directly with the GDL at some point, but at the moment, we understand that we still don't have enough internal transport capacity for that to be viable. And there is the war to consider, of course. However, we have already begun to train crews and military personnel. All of us brought a little under ten thousand trained fleet personnel of various types that we wish for you to transport out into the rest of the galaxy to take part in the war."

Harry frowned a bit at that. "The secret of the Ruusan sector is one of our greatest assets. While space battles don't... lend themselves to survivors, you realize that you are asking us to take a large risk. For a decent-sized boost, true, but..."

"We understand, and we are more than willing to have those troops be slowly filtered in, broken up and put on different ships, obviously. They're not full crews, just groups of technicians, sensor specialists, weapons officers and so forth," another representative said. "That way, there is even less chance of them being captured and questioned."

This sentient was from a lizard-like species, who looked almost like a Sluisi. But local conditions had changed them so much in the past thousand years that they had far lighter and smaller bodies. Whether or not that was natural or something they had bred for to better deal with local conditions, Harry and Aayla had no idea, although both recognized the race from their travels through the sector.

"And there's a faint chance of that happening anyway, love," Aayla murmured. *"Remember, the Confederacy isn't willing to take many prisoners. At least not in space battles."*

"True," Harry sent sadly, remembering the videos they had seen about the Confederacy ships destroying escape pods and civilian ships. *"That is a problem with having a mostly droid military. Atrocities become so much easier if all you have to do is give the order and not worry about the morale of your troops."*

"And what besides the plans and so forth would you want in return?" Aayla asked aloud, sharing a mental moment of commiseration with Harry. "After all, that kind of thing is a positive for the GDL as well, not just you all."

"We wish the Jedi to oversee a general election throughout Ruusan," the Verpine Saas announced briskly. "As my companions said, they don't mind Jaderin being first among equals. But they want a democratically elected official to oversee sector-wide policy. That representative will be part of the GDL and will, after being elected, speak for us in those matters."

Harry nodded, going through the list of Jedi still aboard the *Tyrant's Bane*. Aayla did the same, with Harry looking at the list from the eye of someone or someone who had already espoused a desire for one type of job or another, and Aayla looking at it from the perspective of looking for someone who had the temperament for such an assignment. After a few moments,

they nodded as one, showing the eerie synchronicity that sometimes crept into their interaction with the rest of the universe.

Watching them from behind, Ahsoka rolled her eyes at it, more than grateful for the time she spent with master Fay to help her connection with her master. That connection was stronger than ever, but it was also much less invasive from her perspective, something she knew her master had... tested... back on Ruusan.

“We agree. I will leave two Jedi with you to help oversee the organization and ballot-taking. However, I would like to redirect some of your crews in return. I want you all to go through them and create three crews. Mixed races are perfectly acceptable, but they must be trustworthy, and should also be experienced and understand they won’t be able to talk about where they come from.”

“You want us to pick three full crews put them together as some kind of cream of the crop kind of thing?” The techno-sentient asked, confused.

However, the gas breather had grasped the rest of what Aayla had just said. “You want these crews to be capable of acting clandestinely,” he stated.

“Exactly. Master Fay has been doing some interesting experiments, and she made several requests of us that we want to follow up on posthaste. I was afraid that putting together crews that could come and go from Ruusan would be difficult or pull already existing ships away from the logistics aspect of the war effort. This way that doesn’t happen,” Harry explained.

There were some murmurs of interest at that, and Harry decided they needed to elaborate, with Aayla stepping forward before he had even formed thought as she began to explain.

The idea of the ‘potions’ was fascinating, and after a few moments, the techno-sentient nodded, saying he had three people already in mind that he could trust to captain a long-term mission such as this. “They’re not the most warlike, but they are fiercely loyal to our home planet and are excellent traders.”

Harry and Aayla, unfortunately, had to stay in the Jaderin for four days as things on this score got organized. But by the end of it, they were bringing out eighty-four thousand trained personnel, along with three full crews. Enough people that even the Tyrant’s Bane felt crowded (not so much in terms of space as in bed areas), and they had to subcontract with six of Jaderin’s ships to help them move the crews.

Three of their trading vessels would remain under the current crew, seconded entirely to the ingredient-gathering operation. They would be assigned to procure both further ingredients for the existing potions and to search out new material that could be used to create still more varieties.

Less than a day later, Harry and Aayla stood, watching shuttles come and go from the Tyrant's Bane into Freedom's Fence while the smaller ships simply docked with the space station elsewhere. "Do you have room for them all here, Master Gallia?" Harry inquired, looking over at the station master. "I'd prefer them to be shipped slowly towards Dac from here rather than remain with us."

"You're not going to take them directly to Corellia? That would've been the logical idea."

Harry shook his head, and Aayla replied for them. "No, we're not going to go directly to Corellia yet, and won't for another month. The instant we go there, whatever else is going to happen, we'll get bogged down with the political scene and the ongoing congressional construction issues."

"That was a nice turn of phrase," Adi mused, snorting. "Still, I can see that. The work of constructing a whole new intergalactic government hasn't been seen in the galaxy for thousands of years. But why not take them to Serenno?"

"Serenno can't hide eighty-thousand plus new inductees into the GDL coming out of nowhere. Dac doesn't either, but we know the Mon Calamari aren't dealing with as much espionage as Serenno," Harry added dryly. "Their importance is still being missed by the Confederacy and the hidden Sith, thank the Force, and the fact the Quarrians and Mon Cal are both happy to be involved in the GDL have neatly cut out any local aid such agents could find there."

"Hmmm...Well, I have enough space. Food will be more of an issue, but we can lean on the Ruusan sector for that, and I will need to bring in a lot more bedding, toiletries and so forth."

"It won't be for long," Aayla soothed. "You can turn the next few Corellian freighters around to Dac as they arrive, so there will be a steady trickle of them leaving."

"Will you want Jedi as part of your procurement team?" Gallia asked, frowning faintly. "There are eleven Green Jedi Knights who have professed to not having the temperament to be willing to stay here any longer. And you also brought more astromech units, which I was very happy, if surprised, to see."

"We bought and had them shipped in from other worlds to Jaderin. Make certain you go through their programming, though, as they are a different type than the normal R-series that Jaderin copied," Harry warned. "But yes, I would like two Jedi per procurement vessel. Sentinels for preference."

"Hmm... that is doable, though that removes all the Sentinels we have here on Freedom's Fence." Gallia's lips twisted into a wry smile. "Shockingly, neither Sentinels nor Guardians have the right temperament to stay here and help the war effort in such a passive manner."

The three of them exchanged a chuckle while Ahsoka jolted a bit, suddenly wondering how Ruusan would treat the three sects in the future. *I know that Master Yoda tried hard to make certain all three were represented among the training cadre, and they were already running into issues for the Sentinel training... and general tech stuff*, the young Padawan mused, snickering a bit internally. *Regardless, I have to wonder how Master Fay and Lily's training will impact the teachings of the sects.*

For her part, Ahsoka knew she would become either a Guardian or a Sentinel. While her master had tempered her emotions, increasing her control of them to a significant degree and was currently teaching her laws and other mental disciplines of the Force, Ahsoka knew she would never find joy in the softer side of a Jedi's duties.

Moments later, Aayla and Harry took Ahsoka to check on the work on the Lucrehulk that had been left behind, noting absently that it had been renamed from the Dauntless for some reason. "The Tyrant's Sorrow... huh."

"I suppose Master Gallia and the others decided we should keep to a specific naming nomenclature," Aayla suggested, shrugging her shoulders.

"So, what do you think the names of the two ships sent to Corellia will be?"

"Downfall and Death," Aayla answered promptly, causing Harry to blink at how quickly she had come up with them.

"Don't worry, Harry," she cooed internally, "so long as I'm around, you won't have to strain your mind to come up with names or any such nasty th..."

That was as far as she got before Harry sent a Force tickle her way, causing Aayla to convulse in her chair. She had sensed his intent but had been unable to do anything, strapped into the shuttle's chairs as they all were.

"Are you all right, Master Aayla?" Ahsoka gasped, leaning over her chair to look at the twitching Twi'lek.

"She's just paying for a bit of ill-chosen humor, padawan. Pay her no mind," Harry replied loftily.

"My vengeance will be swift and debauched!" Aayla growled after pushing through the tickling feeling to negate Harry's Force technique.

"There you go again, promising me a good time," Harry quipped.

Ahsoka grumbled, pushing at the back of their chairs. "All right, that's enough! I might not feel the bond between the two of you any longer, but that doesn't make me any more comfortable with you two flirting. Keep it to your mental plane, you two."

At that, Aayla turned in her chair and gave Ahsoka a very speaking glance, and the younger girl had the grace to blush a bit, looking away. After all, many of their conversations had been about flirting, emotional attachments and so forth, so turning around and being uncomfortable with a few flirtatious lines was a bit silly.

The shuttle touched down in the renamed Tyrant's Sorrow and entered quickly. The two older Jedi looked over the work on the first runic array, which was nearly finished by this point. Having a single enlarged area in the ship would allow the Jedi and their teams to bring in the start of the internal infrastructure that would be added to the ship. This would include a full starfighter assembly line and a resource extraction system, just like on the Tyrant's Bane. Both of which Jaderin could supply and would, at an exorbitant cost in Corellian-made hyperspace coils.

Work on the rest of the ship's runic arrays had also started, although the other expansion and the durability arrays were not as far along as the hanger bay. Two of the rune expanded frigates that Freedom's Fence had been working on had been close to finishing, so Gallia had decided to finish them up before transferring the rune-crews to the Lucre Hulk. Still, with Jaderin supplying the ship's logistics, the Tyrant's Sorrow would be ready to fight in as little as two months. The work on the runic side of things would be done in three.

Even better to Harry and Aayla's mind, Rafael and Harrington had already created an operating doctrine for the stealth frigates. The moment work was done on the Tyrant's Sorrow, work would shift to placing the cloaking array on the rest of the frigates assigned to Freedom's Fence.

They would then be replaced by Ruusan-made frigates as the six frigates left on the first stealth mission, and more came in from elsewhere. Once the larger destroyer class could replace the frigates in the GDL's main combat fleets, more frigates would be sent here, and after that, well, it would be time to take the war to the Confederacy. While the destroyers became part of the GDL's main combat fleets, the frigates would be let loose on the Confederacy's shipping.

A few hours later, Aayla was on the ship's bridge, captaining the Tyrant's Bane as they entered hyperspace. Meanwhile, Harry began to run Ahsoka through the runes they had seen earlier that day. With Master Fay's approval of the defense of her mind, it was now time to step up her training in the more secret arts of the Force that Harry and company had begun to develop, and this also showed Harry how good her mind's internal organization was.

However, Harry was back on the bridge when they arrived in Serenno. As the ship moved deeper in-system, they contacted the high command, at which point an information dump about events in the wider universe since they had entered communication blackout was sent their way.

With the rest of the bridge crew dealing with moving the ship deeper into the system, both Aayla and Harry frowned as they read over the information showing that the war had picked up in their absence. Not to the same intensity as it had in the initial phase, but it was clearly ratcheting up to that point. Further, the Confederacy had committed more atrocities against the Republic and the GDL, and cries for that kind of thing to be answered when they took the offensive were growing.

From where she was also skimming the information, Ahsoka hissed at the videos of some of those atrocities, shaking her head. "What was it you said, Master? It's all too easy to commit atrocities when you only have to give an order."

"True enough," Harry said with a sigh, having told Ahsoka about his conversation with Aayla on that score. "But I will **not** allow the GDL to go down that route. I would sooner resign than be a part of that. Destroying their shipping or industrial capacity are legitimate targets of war. Civilian centers space stations devoted to housing are not. We must keep the moral high ground here. The moral is to the physical as ten is to one."

Aayla and Ahsoka both nodded, as did the few other Jedi on the bridge after a few silent, contemplative moments. Aayla sensed one or two of them had some concerns on that score, perhaps believing that it was better to destroy the Dark Side no matter what weapons you had to use. But that kind of thinking fed the Dark Side, created hatred and fear, and could not be allowed.

However, she hissed in shock a second later and pointed out one particular portion of the data dump. "*That ship! Harry, it's one of the special expanded freighters!*"

"*Kriff!*" For a moment, Harry hoped she was wrong, but going through their joined memories, he found out she was right, whereupon he began to curse aloud. While the ship's name changed, the ship's appearance and the ship's captain's name were known to them.

"I didn't know you had such a mastery of vocabulary, Master," Ahsoka joked lightly. "Whatever would Master Yoda think about you teaching such words to an impressionable young padawan like me."

"This is not the time for jokes, Ahsoka," Harry growled.

"Since I just sensed a spike of anger and fear from you, Master, I think is the perfect time for a joke," Ahsoka retorted.

"*She is right, love,*" Aayla sent via their link, squeezing Harry's hand. "*Look at the rest of the report. They weren't able to capture the ship. Although the fact they tried is still very worrisome.*"

"*True. But we have to assume that this was a full Sith operation, not something from the Confederacy based on military goals. The Sith have figured out how we're moving the war material around. We'll need to meet with Garm and master Yaddle.*"

However, while Garm answered that he was more than willing to meet with them, he informed them that Yaddle was off-planet. The grand marshal was extremely grim as he spoke into the pickup, his face stern, yet his eyes were twinkling madly, the twinkle of a man who knew something you didn't. But he refused to say more until the three Jedi joined him in the command center.

There he looked between the two of them, his earlier delight having been tempered with what Aayla could tell was annoyance, but it wasn't connected to the current problem. "We still don't know who it is, but the Sith were just a bit too quick to act on this information, a bit too smooth. Thanks to that and the speed with which word of the attack reached us, we were able to take advantage of a new resource, so to speak." With that, Garm nodded over to a communications officer.

Harry instantly noted that he was seated at a specially segregated console, and Aayla cocked her head to one side, moving forward and examining the station keenly. Of the two, she had the greater mechanical know-how. "Why isn't this console connected to the rest of the internal and external communications gear?"

"You'll see. And just remember we have you to thank for this, Aayla," Garm answered tartly.

"Wait, what?" Aayla blinked, but a hologram popped up on the console's screen before Garm could answer. But it wasn't of a person or a place. Instead, it looked like some kind of 3-D image of a cartoon character.

"Is that a rabbit," Ahsoka laughed incredulously, cocking her head to one side.

"No, I've seen them in real life. That's some kind of caricature," Harry mused while watching Garm twitch and gnash his teeth.

"That's right, I'm the Wascally Wabbit," the image announced, dancing in place before suddenly holding a top hat, bowing grandly towards the ladies. "And might I say, it is always lovely to meet such lovelies?"

To Garm's surprise, Harry made no sign of being annoyed at someone trying to flirt with Aayla. Indeed, it barely registered, given how fake it seemed to Harry, and he just chuckled. "That's actually a decent play on words. Well done, Rabbit Man. But you're timing needs work. And I find that women always prefer to flirt with people rather than a cartoon."

The rabbit creature nodded towards him before looking past him at Bel Iblis. "What am I doing here, Garmy Warmy?"

"GAAA!!" Garm growled, but Harry held up a calming hand while Aayla touched his shoulder, amused at how the man responded to what must have been a running taunt. "He's trying to get under your skin. Pay it no mind. But can I ask, who is precisely behind that image?"

But Aayla understood and reminded Harry of a little discussion she'd had with the help of padawan Orel before saying aloud, "This is a slicer, correct? Representing the slicer clans I talked to."

The image changed, becoming an extremely erudite-looking Shistavanen, with tiny spectacle perched on an overlong nose. "That's right, I'm a slicer, and I represent the slicer clans of Corellia and several dozen other clans. Normally, we wouldn't take sides, but you reached out to us and proposed a fascinating puzzle! And all slicers, clan or rogue, enjoy a challenge."

"*Well done, Aayla!*" Harry sent enthusiastically. He hadn't honestly thought the Slicers would work out so quickly, but now he was willing to admit to being very pleasantly surprised. "And I take it, Garm, that the slicers were able to help us with this current issue?"

"Master Yaddle and I narrowed down the number of planets that could have figured out where Clarkson's ship was going to go, and then well," Garm suddenly barked a laugh, humor replacing annoyance as he gestured to the wolf-man image. "Released the hounds."

"Hahaha!" The image also laughed, much like a barking dog. "Indeed. Luckily one of our brethren was nearby, and he could hack into the local Hypercom. From there, we looked for anything unusual in the set timeframe and eventually found a set of communications protocols which were just a bit too good, too buried underneath the grey wave."

"I'm sorry, but grey wave?" Harry asked while Aayla cocked her head in confusion.

"That is the portion of the underlying signal that the Hypercom runs on that is basically about, well, keeping it running, local orders and bits of broken data. Or it's supposed to be. But many governments, both the Reps and locals and now the Confederacy, sometimes use it. But this was a GDL world, and these were not GDL codes, and the transfer was being sent directly to an Uplink center outside the GDL."

Harry and Aayla both stilled before leaning forward like a pair of predator hounds as Aayla barred her daggerlike teeth. But Garm was already shaking his head. "I know what you're thinking, but I already asked. There would have been no way to sift through all the outgoing data from the Uplink Center unless we had a slicer right there. "

"Right," the Shistavanen's image nodded. "There's only so much we can do without being at the source of the code we're slicing. Plus, the code attached to this communique is why it's part of the grey wave. It deletes itself after a copy is re-encrypted and passed on by the nearest Uplink Center. There wouldn't even be a record of it, and we haven't cracked that second layer of the relay. We couldn't even connect the first segment to the second."

The image suddenly changed to another cartoon, although Harry would hesitate to call it such, as there was something kind of... off about it. "*Aayla, is it just me or is that image a little too adult to be called a cartoon?*"

Aayla snickered internally, looking over the image of a young woman with an inordinately large chest, wide eyes, thin waist and a cocktail dress. *"I rather think that would depend on what kind of cartoon you're talking about."*

With the change in the image, the voice changed to a sultry-sounding femme fatale. "But you should concentrate on what we did for you, darlings. Because we were able to isolate that code and trail it back to the planet of origin. We aren't able to discover who sent the actual message but that we will leave in the tiny green hands of Master What's-her-face."

"Yaddle," Ahsoka said, scowling just a tad as her tone turned censorious. "I kind of like Master Yaddle, and I think she's deserving of some respect, Mystery Teen," she announced, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"Good for you," the image intoned dryly, turning back into the rascally rabbit image and turning around to present his cottontail to Ahsoka. She growled but remembered her training and kept herself from trying to reach forward to strangle the little hologram.

"Are you telling me," Harry said, his words slow but intense, "And I want to be clear on this, are you telling me that Master Yaddle is not here because she is chasing an extremely good chance at breaking the enemy's intelligence network?"

"We can't say that." Garm shrugged. "Remember, this'll just be one individual or a team, but even if that's the case, we're positive that the Sith use a cell structure, so he probably won't be able to tell us much beyond himself."

"I wouldn't bet on that," the slicer interjected. The image shook from side to side, setting bits to bouncing before turning back to the Shistavanen image without any warning. Now it was the voice of a middle-aged man, strong, confident, almost arrogant sounding rather than the more erudite, elderly professor voice as before. In fact, Harry thought for a moment that it was Garm's own voice run through a very slight filter.

"What do you mean?" Aayla asked. "I confess, neither of us," he gestured to Harry and herself, "understand much about slicing. So you might have to use simple terms."

A new pair of glasses appeared on the old Shistavanen's face, and a hand appeared, pushing them up his nose as he began to pontificate. For several moments, he went through dozens of what he called unknown facts about programming, but what it boiled down to in the Jedi's mind was that every race had a distinct set of underlying assumptions when encrypting something, some kernel that they tended to stick to. Moreover, most individuals didn't realize that it was even there and built upon that foundation. So once that one code had been cracked, the slicer clans knew the underlying structure they were looking for.

Or at least, that was what Harry and Aayla understood. They could be wrong. A great deal of the slicer's explanation went over their heads.

At any rate, Garm allowed them to look at the data coming from Serenno. They found more examples of it in various places within the GDL's outgoing communications.

"...General..." Harry slowly murmured, looking over to Garm, gripping Aayla's hand as the Twi'lek began to literally vibrate in place in excitement.

Garm chuckled wryly, looking at the image with none of his earlier annoyance. "I don't understand much of it either, and I was kind of leery about all of this. But master Yaddle was not. She was on the first ship out of Serenno that she could procure, the destroyer Argent, the new prototype of the revamped Archer class."

Aayla blinked in shock. "Wait, we haven't been gone that long, but Serenno has already built one of the destroyer-sized Archers?"

"The yards were so certain you'd okay the design that they'd already begun to build one in the new slip Serenno opened several weeks before you arrived here the last time," Garm shrugged. "The ship's a little rough around the edges, and a few of the shield deflectors don't work quite right, but it certainly proved the design."

"Focus, love," Harry soothed, but he was also impressed. The frigates of the archer classes had done extremely well in the war so far, but they were just too small to really survive if they were brought to battle beyond their own extremely long range. Simply enlarging the design as they had meant that A, the new destroyers would be deadly, and B, they could survive. And as they had been since the start of the war, Harry was very clear that was a priority. They needed their crews to survive, gain experience, and build up their numbers.

"Well, in any event," Garm dragged the conversation back to the main point, "I've given the Slicers access to all of our data here on Serenno, where we know we had a small information leak before, and they ran with it. I was wrong. And now we might have at least ten, maybe fifteen other spy cells to round up once Master Yaddle returns."

"Tell me," Ahsoka said, suddenly leaning forward. "You said earlier that not only was this encryption built on a known algorithm, but that codes have fingerprints, right? Do you recognize the fingerprint? Is it someone you could point us towards?"

"No," the slicer answered instantly, shaking his head, once more back into the Shistavanen image after having been in the rabbit image while it listened to them talk. Harry decided that the slicer used that image for the more serious talk, the Bugs Bunny symbol for downtime and the extremely overdone female caricature to tease and taunt. "*Fingerprints indeed*," he mused to Aayla, who concurred with his analysis.

"While we can pick out this encryption set from the hash, we really don't know who is behind it. It's not one we've ever run into before. We think it's also kind of ancient. Although the key for the encryption has obviously changed over time, the underlying algorithm doesn't seem to have, but even that is a kind of guess, really."

“Still, this is a major windfall for us. And we’re certain that the Sith weren’t able to capture the ship?” Harry asked, looking over at Garm.

He knew how long it would take the Sith to try to fully understand what the runes were, but if they had a working copy of the arrays on one of the freighters, they could simply copy it. That would be a deadly blow not only on the war front but also against the Sith in general.

Aayla was thinking, narrowing her eyes. Harry caught a snippet of her thoughts and looked at her in delight. *“That’s really ingenious, love.”*

“Thank you, Harry,” she murmured, taking his hand and leaning forward to look into the pickup towards the slicer, waving Garm to silence for a second. “I have a question. We have a friend on the Coruscant. We routinely use a code. We would like to use it to see if we can maybe trap some more of these people, a bluff, so to speak. Yet on top of that, we also want to make that communication so solid it can’t be cracked. Can you write up a cypher for us that is impossible to break?”

“Nothing is impossible to break,” the image scoffed, turning back to the busty woman image, the slicer’s audio changing in turn. “I can make you an encryption that is really, really hard to break, but any cipher is only as good as the equipment on the other end.”

“Do so,” Aayla murmured, still thinking. “I think, I think we need to do more on the security front, and I also think we should release the hounds even further, to use the same analogy Garm used.”

The image changed to the erudite-looking Shistavanen, one eyebrow rising behind the glasses. “And what exactly does that mean?”

“We were told at one point it would be extremely hard to break into the programming and command signals of the droid army. What about the Confederacy’s communication systems?”

“Hah! That works’ already started,” the Shistavanen answered with a nod. “Now that we have this Line of communication setup, the General will know the moment we have anything.”

Garm nodded, and Harry leaned back thinking, looking over at the others to see if they had any other questions. None of them did, and he smiled faintly. “In that case, gentlemen, I think we’re done with you, Mr...” he trailed off, then apologized for not having asked sooner. “But what can we actually call you?”

“Call me Riddler,” the man said, changing back into the image of the woman and the voice turning from masculine to feminine. “It fits as well as any.”

Snorting at that, Harry nodded. “In that case, Riddler, we’ll be in touch, or you will. And thank you for your help.”

“We’re not on your side, Jedi,” the voice warned, although it didn’t change back from its current image or audio. “Remember that. We like you well enough, and we like peace more than war. The only reason most of the slicer clans are on your side is that you’ve given us challenges. Keep it up, and we’ll get along just fine. And treat my boy right,” the voice said, dropping an octave but still being noticeably feminine. “Or else we really will have trouble.”

With that, the image disappeared, and Aayla chuckled ruefully. “The female of the species is often the deadliest, especially when their young are involved. I believe that the clan of young Orel is the major drive behind the slicer clans’ willingness to work with us. I quite approve, frankly.”

“So do I,” Harry chuckled, sending her a wave of affection through their link before pulling the babble Juice that Master Fay and his mom had developed from a small bag he’d brought down from the *Tyrant’s Bane*. “Although I do hope to get an opportunity to use this on the individual who was able to figure out where Captain Prescott’s ship would be. Still, we’ll have to wait for Master Yaddle to get back for that.”

“And what is that?” Garm asked, causing all three Force users to smile as it became their turn to explain something to him.

OOOOOOO

Sitting in his chair on the second floor of the vast, if congested, room, Dominus allowed a smile to cross his patented stern grandfather as he looked at the giant projected holo-sphere in the center of the room. Below him, hundreds of men and women of various species moved, chattered quietly and worked their systems, updating the information on the main projection and a dozen smaller ones scattered around the room or upon moving hover-chairs.

None of those rose to where Dominus sat. Instead, they moved around the room, with officers them looking at their own holo-spheres, going over information from this battlefield or that star system.

This was the SCC or Strategic Command Center of the Confederacy of Independent Systems. It was the pulsing, beating mind directing the war against the Republic and League.

It wasn’t as a home to Dominus as his own personal flagship. But as the war grew, the need for Dominus to have his hand on the pulse of things meant that even the time it took to relay important data to his ship could be too long.

That ship was now being outfitted with its own SCC, and when that was done, the men and women currently working all around Dominus would transfer to his ship, the first of the specially made super dreadnoughts, the *Malevolence*. Dominus was looking forward to getting back aboard it. His personal meditation room and quarters called to him, as did the looks of obeisance Dominus was given as he moved around the ship.

Still, Dominus reflected, being here like this is quite exhilarating, if in a different way. Here, while the people around him were too busy to truly give him the attention that he should have been given as a superior Force user, they did look in his direction with awe and respect. It is almost as if I am a god come down to speak to lesser beings, which is precisely how it should be.

Before joining the Sith, Master Dominus firmly believed that Force users were inherently superior to the mundanes. That it should be Force users who ruled, who commanded not because he wished to be idolized, so much as the fact that he simply thought that Force users would be able to do a better job. That changed somewhat when he became a Sith, and he began to enjoy the trappings of power. But in his heart, Master Dominus knew that those trappings were just that, window-dressing on the reality.

I find it ironic that our staunchest foe has come to the same conclusion: that the Force makes us better leaders than others, Dominus reflected. But of course, he has not fully realized that political and social power is nothing compared to the power the Force can give him over the people around him.

With that thought, Dominus spent a brief second reaching out with the Force to a few sentients around him, gently caressing their minds. All four of his targets became filled with a feeling of exaltation as they went about their business, their shoulders straightening, pride shining from their eyes. Not because they were suddenly taking greater pride in their duties. No, they were proud, and they felt joy because they served Dominus. *That is the way it should be. The lesser serve us, and we reward them.*

However, those four had been chosen purposefully because the information they had just updated into the main hologram was the information Dominus was most interested in. He had another man scurrying to pull up the information and transfer it to Dominus' screen with a single sentence.

As he studied the information, Dominus nodded thoughtfully. It was taking a little longer than hoped to pull together the disparate Forces necessary to attack Corellia. One reason for this was that they would have to train up to work together. Even with droids making up the vast amount of the manpower of the Confederacy's armed forces, most of its officers were sentients: captains, bridge officers and so forth. They needed time to work together to form a cohesive unit.

Dominus understood that. That kind of cohesion was something else the Force could give. Now, thanks to all the work he'd been doing on them, if Dominus reached out to the Force, he could sense the minds of the various sector fleet admirals, feel what they were doing and direct them in certain actions from afar. Distance made it difficult, as Dominus was not the Veil of the Dark Side's master (not yet anyway), but it was still possible.

Of course, some of my officers don't need that oversight to be effective, Dominus thought ruefully, thinking of Grievous and the Harch Admiral, Trench. Of all of the Fleet Admirals, those two had proven the best by far at this point. Currently, Grievous was being somewhat hamstrung by the orders, which kept the buildup he was in charge of secret, but Trench was not and had already proven his worth.

Just the day before, Trench had finished the first full campaign the Confederacy had launched after their concerns about the droid control system had finally been put to rest. In doing so, Trench had mousetrapped a Republic Ord System Fleet, destroying it utterly. This had slain five Jedi, and then Trench had gone on, wrecking the logistics of that Ord world and wrecking the infrastructure of several other planets, including several sources of Tibanna gas.

That last was the most important. The lack of tibanna gas would hurt the Republic in the long run and would have major ramifications for the war. This was a concept that Dominus knew he was barely feeling his way towards now that the war had begun. The Republic did have strategic reserves of tibanna gas, but Dominus' spies were searching for them, unknown to Sidious.

Whereas the League doesn't seem to have a long-term strategic supply, but their own distribution network is insanely hard to get a handle on, and their source is entirely unknown. Dominus grimaced, remembering the conversation he had with Trench about the long-term logistics ramifications of the war. The Harch had changed his orders, and Dominus and the Separatist Council had demanded an explanation. But Trench had been unrepentant.

"While I do not have the numbers to truly explain this, just looking at the overall industrial capacity of the two sides that can be found on the Hypercom tells me that the longer the war goes, the worse it is going to be for the Confederacy," Trench had stated.

He waited for a moment then went on, gesturing to one side where a massive hologram of the whole of known space appeared. "I predict that we can run roughshod across the Republic and even, to a certain extent, the League for a year. Against the League, we will have trouble doing true damage given the number of planetary shields and how they structured their military. Their main industrial capacity is also hidden behind defenses so large it would take completely turning our full military against them to get through."

The Harch smacked all of his hands down on the console in front of him, leaning forward into the pickup to stare at Dominus and the other members of the Confederacy's executive branch. "That would be a mistake! Unlike the Republic, the league lack logistical, material and industrial depth! My analysts do not have the computational capacity to run the numbers, but I urge the command center and the Techno Union to do so."

Wat Tambor nodded firmly, and looking between Trench and the Skakoan, Dominus knew they had talked about this before the meeting. Looking back, Dominus thought he should

have been angry about that, but the points they raised at the time had been too good for him to quibble.

“Even with *FZZT* the hidden shipyards destroyed on our first strike, the *FZZT* Republic manpower and industrial capacity is simply huge, *FZZT* far vaster than the Confederacy,” Wat had said, his words badly mangled by his full-body exo-suit. “We are *FZZT* more streamlined, more organized and *FZZT* directed, but we cannot match the numbers. Essentially, *FZZT* the League is a giant thorn in our side *FZZT* now. But if we allow *FZZT* the Republic any kind of momentum, *FZZT* or if we slide into a stalemate, it is the Republic that *FZZT* will be the true threat.”

“This has all been said before, and I agree with you now as I did then, but Admiral Trench, that does not explain your changing your orders,” Dominus had said in his patented sad grandfather tone while inwardly scowling. Such long-term thinking was good, but he was thankful that Trench showed no sign of having drawn that idea to its logical conclusion.

After all, the Confederacy could not win the war without changing its parameters so much that it would bring Dominus into direct contact with Sidious. In fact, the entire war had been designed to be won by the Republic. But only after several years of unrelenting warfare, harsh enough to allow Sidious to make the changes he needed to kill freedom and democracy within the Republic. *And I am not ready for the confrontation. Not yet.*

“It has everything to do with it, Master C’baoth. Tibanna gas is a rare element desperately needed for the army and navy of every side in this war. If we can cut down on the number of planets serving the Republic’s needs in that area, we need to do so, no matter the means we use to do it,” Trench had explained.

That won some noises of interest from the rest of the council, and Dominus had nodded, his thoughts whirling. *Sidious wants the war to be as deadly as possible, so this serves both his goals and my own personal ones, so let us see where it goes.* “Very well, I agree with that, but it sounds as if you have strategic suggestions to make. Name them.”

“We need to take several pages from the League’s playbook,” Trench supplied instantly. “See fleets themselves as strategic targets. The majority of planets do not matter, but industrial capacity does. I don’t know enough about the logistics side to truly understand where the Republic can be hurt. I was only able to launch my attacks because I am intimately familiar with the Lambda sector and its neighbors thanks to my people’s home residing within. But surely, we can calculate further such targets and strike them before the Republic realizes our strategic doctrine has changed.”

“Agreed!” the President of the Commerce Guild, Shu Mai, said instantly. “After all, war, like business, is about numbers. We have fought this war long enough to build the data needed to discover those weaknesses. We just have to analyze it.”

That had yet to occur, as the analysis team had decided to see if they could find further soft targets, which was going to take weeks of data-sifting. Meanwhile, the Confederacy continued to hammer their fleets into hard targets throughout the Republic, causing death and destruction as much as possible while also taking growing losses. Because of this, the Republic was still reeling, and it would do so for quite some time.

And as for the League? Dominus thought, returning his mind to the here and now. *As busy as the League is in defending their territory, in mousetrapping our own attacks, and so forth, they have missed the fact that we have been building up an entirely new fleet near Corellia.* “Do I read this right, three weeks before Admiral Kul’Teska is ready to attack Corellia?”

“Two weeks before his fleet is fully formed, a week to train up while the Leaguer fleets nearby are continually pulled in other directions as if we are leery of challenging Corellia but want to isolate it,” one of the nearby officers answered instantly. The pleasure centers of his brain flared as he was helpful to the Jedi so much he actually shuddered in delight, but Dominus didn’t even notice.

Excellent. And then, while that is going on, Grievous will have started his own campaign. As he thought that, Dominus fought the urge to laugh. It would not do his stern grandfatherly persona any good if he began to chortle in front of so many witnesses. Instead, Dominus simply nodded his head in plate thanks to the man and turned back, shifting his attention to that segment of space. *After all, Shu Mai was correct. War is all about numbers, and Bacta easily represents the Republic’s scarcest resource...*

OOOOOOO

While Dominus was gloating, elsewhere, Master Yaddle was on a mission to follow up on a simple mistake that, oddly enough, proved that war wasn’t about numbers but about people too. And that often, it was mistakes rather than successes that allowed one side or another to win the day.

Yaddle was meditating as the Argent came out of hyperspace but was already opening her eyes when the communications to her suite pinged at her, and the voice of the Argent’s captain came through. “Master Yaddle, we’re here. I’ve communicated with the locals, and although they were a little surprised by my ship, they’ve authenticated our IFF and that you are aboard. The lockdown is still in place, although they’ve had a few ships who have tried to leave and argue they should be allowed to leave, given their being Republic-registered ships. Thankfully the communications blackout seems to have also held. This move is not making us many friends among the Republic captains.”

“Friends, the move was not supposed to make. An enemy, it was meant to unmask.” Yaddle answered crisply, hopping to her feet and making her swift trek to the door. “On the bridge, soon I will be. Send a message to the soldiers. Their aid, I might need.”

Yaddle was indeed on the bridge a moment later, accompanied by an infantry officer. Warrant Officer Murphy was a Corellian, although most of his men were not. Murphy had been pulled from Corsec, the systemwide police force that had acted both as security on the planets of that system and Corellia's space-based anti-pirate military.

Murphy saluted crisply, hand coming up to his forehead in a chopping sort of motion that Yaddle was still somewhat getting used to. "I've got four ships that are acting suspiciously, sir," he said without preamble. "Three of them are registered under Republican flags. The last is a Confederacy ship that claims to have gone rogue, its Captain unwilling to follow the Commerce Guild into war. Not certain what to make about that one."

"Commerce Guild, a pleasant entity to work with, is not. Names of the ships you have?" Yaddle asked.

"There are two other ships I'd like to add as possible," the Captain of the Argent interjected, gesturing Master Yaddle over to a nearby console. "The locals have flagged them as being the ones who are most insistent on leaving. They haven't tried to make a run for it like the three Murphy mentioned, but they are certainly screaming to the stars about it."

With that, Yaddle began to work, looking over the ships' manifests and everything else about them the locals had discovered. One, ironically, the ex-Commerce Guild ship, he discounted almost instantly. Their Captain had been extremely willing to work with the local authorities. He also had been in-system for nearly the entire time the war had been going on, and for a very human reason. He'd married one of the locals.

Now with the war on, the man had put himself at the service of the local civilian government and with his new wife's company, who apparently dealt in heavy-duty hover trucks and construction equipment. With the war on, that kind of material would be extremely profitable, and being able to ship it themselves would make it even more so.

All of this was explained in the handout, and master Yaddle decided that a simple inspection would allow him to give the okay for this ship to leave. He made a note, though. The captain could be an interesting contact, and he decided to ask for a tracker to be placed on the ship.

The other ships were harder to pin down. Eventually, though, two more ships, both heavy cargo trawlers, were cleared. They wouldn't be allowed to leave until Yaddle found her target, but she didn't think either was important. Similarly, one of the ships shrieking to the stars was a personal yacht that had only been in the system a few hours before the lockdown was ordered.

That left two more ships, one that had been screaming about leaving and the other which had tried to run, only to have been shot at by the local starfighters. They were both civilian transports, shifting men and women from one system to another. Just the kind of crowd a spy could disappear into.

With the job narrowed down, Yaddle decided to resort to the Force, but after fifteen minutes attempting to meditate on this, Yaddle sighed as she couldn't pick up any direction from it. The Veil blocked her sight, pressing into her mind from every direction.

Try my new technique, I must, she thought, then began to gather herself in an entirely new way. Yaddle had long specialized in learning esoteric, often forgotten techniques and had learned all the Clan Saa techniques as they were introduced. Now it was time to try out her newest skill.

Yaddle concentrated on emotions, happiness, joy, the need to defend others. But those came to her extremely slowly. This kind of mental process wasn't normal for a Jedi who had been trained as she had, nor was it normal for Yaddle's species to be so emotional. But when she talked to them, Aayla and Harry had been certain that it was the power of the emotions just as much as the power of the individual calling upon this technique that allowed it to work.

They had also said something about combating the Dark Side's hate with love, anger with joy, fear with the need to defend others. But that smacked a little too much justification rather than fact in Yaddle's mind. Still, she could not deny the efficacy of the technique.

Twenty arduous minutes later, a tiny glowing blob appeared in front of her. It was a tiny spirit animal from her youth, a creature she had drawn and imagined going on adventures with numerous times. That had been centuries ago, but even so, she remembered what it looked like and chortled a bit at seeing it now before concentrating on the Force once more.

With the Force Construct in front of her, pushing back against the Veil, Yaddle once more reached into the Force, grimacing as she felt the strain on her mind and being. But her people's natural affinity with the Force helped, and she quickly narrowed her choice down to the Republic registered ship that hadn't run. Then, grimacing, she began to push further, looking for the calm but worried mind within.

That, alas, took some time because there were many guilty people on that ship and some whose violent thoughts she could feel. Coming out of her trance, Yaddle stared at the blob, trying to remember what its name had been and feeling somewhat saddened when she could not remember it. Still, she banished the creature once more and left her room to meet Murphy.

Moments later, Murphy looked around at his crew, mostly human men and women from Serenno, but with a smattering of other species. A full squad prepped for combat work. Their gear was military, but hopefully, they wouldn't need to go lethal on this mission.

"Remember, we want our target alive. I want everyone to check and make certain your blasters are set on stun. According to Master Yaddle, we will face some violence since we can't exactly sneak up on them, but whatever they throw at us, we are nonlethal until me or Master Yaddle says go."

He was answered by a rumble of agreement, and Murphy barked, "I didn't hear you!" The men shouted their next response, and he smiled grimly before looking over at Master Yaddle, who was sitting with her eyes closed beside him. Seeing she had nothing more to add, he hopped to his feet and prepared to lead his men out.

Moments later, the shuttle docked with the transport ship. The infantrymen pushed out into the ship, and at first, it looked like it was going to be a false alarm. But the second the troops entered the area of the ship where the passengers were kept, they came under fire.

Two of Murphy's men were hit by blaster bolts and fell back, cursing luridly, thus indicating they were still alive. The armor had absorbed the shots to a certain degree. Seeing that, Murphy was thankful that the GDL was willing to spend on armor, giving them far greater protection than the clone armies that he'd heard so much about apparently had to deal with. Then again, there are hundreds of millions of clones. *The land force of the GDL is by far the smallest portion of its military.*

Shaking his head from that errand thought, Murphy flicked the charge on his gun to wide dispersal, shooting into the ship. "Spread out your fire," he ordered. "Stunners! Remember, most of these people are civilians, and I will shoot any son of a bitch who turns his gun from stun."

"They seem awfully well-armed for civilians, Sir," muttered of voice

Murphy smirked. "I didn't hear that, but if I did, I agree with it. But that's not why we're here for gentlemen, remember that."

"Sir yes sir," came the answer, and Murphy smiled grimly.

His soldiers returned fire at anyone armed, even as Yaddle, who had moved to the bridge, came over the intercom, asking the defenders to surrender. No one answered the Jedi Master's request, but eventually, the numbers of Murphy's men and their rate of fire told, and the belligerents among the passengers fell.

Moments later, Yaddle arrived on the scene, looking around her at the rows upon rows of passengers, most of whom had moved well away from the entrance. Already the men and women who had been trying to fight against their entrance were being trussed up. They would be turned over to the locals and questioned why they thought firing back against a GDL boarding crew was a good idea.

With the combatants being dealt with, that left it to Yaddle to deal with the rest of the passengers and oust their actual target. As she closed, those passengers began to let loose with their own grievances, discounting the respect normally given a Jedi.

"You can't do this to us. We're Republic citizens!" shouted several.

"Damn Leaguers, you're just as bad as the Feder-rats!" shouted another voice.

“No,” Yaddle announced, her calm voice cutting across the tumult with only a tiny bit of the Force needed. “Confederacy we are not. Droids my men would have been. Ordered to kill you all they would have been.”

That shut all of them up, and she continued forward, looking around her thoughtfully. Luckily the idea of taking a hostage hadn’t occurred to any of the criminals, so none of the civilians were injured. With that seen to and a few smiles sent towards the few families among the passengers, Yaddle moved forward, looking at each face thoughtfully until she eventually found her target.

He wasn’t very physically imposing. Indeed, although human, he was almost the size of a Sullustan. Seeing the even shorter Jedi stop in front of him, the little man looked up in shock, from where his hands had been working nervously on the handle of an old-fashioned briefcase, his eyes narrowing slightly behind mousy glasses.

Yaddle smiled pleasantly at him. “Robert Bruce?”

The man gulped, then nodded shakily.

“Come with me, you will,” Yaddle ordered.

“I, I’ve done nothing wrong! I, I didn’t even... why are you interested in me? Surely those, those criminals who fought you were your targets!” Robert protested.

“Explain to you it will be soon. For now...” Yaddle gestured.

The man hesitated before shaking his head and burrowing deeper into his chair. “I know my rights. I’m a Republican citizen, and...”

Yaddle’s voice cut across his like a knife, no longer calm and resolute or friendly but cold and certain. “Evidence we have, spying for the Confederacy you have been. Able to fight the accusation you can. More protestations and attempts to flee, an admission of guilt they will be.”

The man froze once more, and Yaddle waved a hand airily. “Check agreements between Republic and League you may. Crime, a local matter, it is. Espionage, a galactic one, it is. Authority, I have for this.”

At that, the man stood up. “Very well, if, if going with you is the only way I can clear my good name, I suppose I will have to do so. But I will be reading through the agreements between the League and the True Republic. Looking at it from a law perspective, I have to wonder if any agreements with the GDL would matter. After all, seceding is, regardless of how it’s accomplished is an unlawful act, meaning the entire GDL is an illegal body.”

“An interesting thought, that is. Discuss it further, we should,” Yaddle answered pleasantly, gesturing the short human to join her.

Yaddle left Sgt. Murphy and his men in charge of processing the criminals who had attempted to stop the boarding action, heading back into the shuttle, which seemed quite echoing almost with just herself and Robert within.

There she moved to the hatch, leaning her head in to speak into the cockpit of the shuttle. She looked altogether off-balance and defenseless. Which was rather the point. And as the Force flashed a warning, Yaddle sighed, shaking her head at how predictable people could be at times.

“Pilot, return to the destroyer we shall,” she announced, as a Force Shield flashed out from behind her a second before two impacts crashed into it. One of them sounded like a blaster bolt, a familiar sound to Yaddle thanks to all the training she had put into mastering the Force Shield to a point she needed barely a second to raise it, something few masters could say. The other was an actual solid-state impact on the shield, something Yaddle hadn’t heard before. Regardless, the Force Shield stopped it.

Turning, Yaddle saw a tiny slug dropping to the floor of the shuttle. Beyond that, Yaddle saw the little man had pulled up his suitcase, aiming one side of it toward the Jedi’s back. His expression had also changed, meekness shifting into a near snarl of fury. His eyes behind his large glasses were now manic, but they were slowly widening in shock as they registered what had happened.

With a wave of his hand, Yaddle used the Force to pull the case out of the man’s hand and towards her, while her other hand rose, sending a Force Stunner towards the man. With nowhere to take cover, Robert couldn’t dodge, and the wave of red-tinted energy crashed over Robert, hurling head over heels for a few seconds to crash into the back wall of the shuttle’s cargo area.

Sighing, Yaddle handed the suitcase to the copilot, who gulped, taking it gently. Neither he nor the pilot was armed, something that Yaddle noted. They didn’t want all of their sailors to go around armed, obviously. But on a mission like this, they should have been issued some weapons. “Keep this you should. Open it, you will not.”

With that, Yaddle headed towards the man and buckled him into one of the couches before returning. “Radio the destroyer once more, you shall. Request a doctor, you will. Full body examination, I wish to let this man have.”

“Right Sir, er that is, Master Jedi, sir,” the shuttle pilot stammered before slowly unbuckling the boarding ramp from the passenger ship’s outer lock, flying them away towards the distant Argent.

Several hours later, after Robert Bruce (which was no doubt an alias) Yaddle trekked down to the destroyer’s engineering room. The case had indeed proved interesting.

“What we have here is a very neat little setup,” the ship’s chief mechanic began. He was a Corellian, an almost foregone conclusion, Yaddle ruefully reflected. Some stereotypes really were true.

He pointed at some of the readouts they were getting as if expecting Yaddle to follow him. “What we have here are teeny tiny batteries, which read as if they’re coming from separate datapads. But they really aren’t. They’re part of the suitcase. They wouldn’t be enough to fire more than a few shots, and here we’ve got two small packages of superheated gas. It wouldn’t be as condensed as a normal blaster’s, but they would be enough to kill someone without body armor. And here is a solid-state shooter, powered again by the hidden power cells. It’s a fascinating little setup.”

“Truth you speak,” Yaddle murmured thoughtfully. “Trace the designer, you could?”

“HAH! No, no chance of that,” the Corellian guffawed. “Hell, I could point to a dozen shops in Coronet City alone that would love to do a job like this. It’s the kind of finicky, tough work any gunsmith would take a lot of pride, in you know?”

“Tell me,” the Captain murmured, “How much would something like this cost?”

“Quite a bit, around the prize of a hoverbike or a skimmer. It’s not mass-produced for certain. That solid-state shooter is a nasty little piece of work.” The man reached to the side of the case underneath the handle and pulled at a small, now-open patch, revealing what looked like a small empty magazine, out what looked like another bullet. Laid out nearby were what Yaddle recognized as bullets. “The bullets are made of a really heat-resistant alloy and were encased in the blaster’s bolt. From what I understand, Master Jedi, I don’t think you’re lightsaber would have deflected it.”

“Enough to save my life it would not have,” Yaddle agreed with a nod. “Still,” she shrugged. “Solid, plasma. Whichever, it matters not to a Force Shield.”

“Jealousy is rising from deep within me,” Murphy responded instantly, causing Yaddle to chuckle before the Captain could remonstrate with the man. “What did you find when you opened the case?” he asked instead.

“Quite a lot, Sir. There are various specialized hacking gear, a very sweet little communication device, and an auto scrambler. Several datapads with their memory cells removed. A few data sticks, each of them marked by a different color. Two were viruses, nasty pieces of work. The other was some kind of retinal override program. Connected to a scanner, it could copy a person’s retina enough to display it and bypass retina-based security. This guy was a real spy cap’n, and I’d wager he was just as well trained as he was equipped.”

“Hrhrhrhm,” Yaddle grumbled, making the same noise Yoda did whenever he was annoyed or thinking. “Most impressive this is. Thank you, officer.” *The implications, fascinating they are.*

“Happy to help, Ma’am.”

The next day, Yaddle returned to Serenno, reporting to Aayla, Harry and Garm. “So, the man we have, question him, we will. The equipment we have examined, useful it will prove on many levels. Now know the encryption setup using, we do.”

“Encryption programs,” the slicer stated quickly. He or she was taking part once more, the image that of the bizarrely sexual-seeming cartoon. “It’s not a single encryption. It’s an entire system of them. Really, extremely paranoid stuff. Every encryption would be different, almost impossible to find without knowing the key. Just not quite paranoid enough now that the slicer clans are looking for the underlying system, and we don’t need to actually crack the encryptions.”

“Do you have teams ready to move on the targets we’ve already been able to identify?” Harry questioned. With all the data in their hands and spread out as they were, the Slicer clans had found several planets within the GDL where a Sith spy was operating. In several instances, the local slicer had narrowed it down further to a city or space station within those systems. Anything more would take Jedi, the Force or simply locals who were competent enough to trace the signal further.

Garm grimaced. “Yes and no. I’m presuming we want to capture as many of them alive, so I want to use Jedi and our own Specter teams rather than the locals as often as possible. In fact, I don’t even want the locals to even know about our interest until our teams are on-planet and demanding they shut down all exiting traffic. That’s going to cause some issues.”

“I’ll help soothe ruffled feathers,” Aayla said, reaching out to gently pat the general’s arm. “We have what, another four days before the kickoff of the mission to Ord Cestus?”

This was something that Harry and Garm talked about while waiting for Yaddle to return. Ord Cestus was the only planet within the D’Astan sector that had gone over to the Confederacy. Home of Cestus Cybernetics, it was not a typical Ord planet in that it hadn’t been home to a large fleet presence. Instead, it was a penal planet, with the only local industry being that of CC. Regardless, the planet could be used to launch attacks elsewhere into the sector and was a direct threat to several other systems.

The important thing was the lack of a fleet presence, though. Garm estimated they could remove the system with only a small flotilla if they did it right. It wouldn’t be a great offensive blow, but it would be important locally and show the GDL as a whole that the military wasn’t afraid to strike back, something that was becoming a necessary consideration to morale. They weren’t going to stay on the defensive the entire war and hope the Republic could take the fight to the Confederacy, a thought he had heard over the past few days.

“Good. You and Aayla can coordinate these capture missions with the locals while master Yaddle and I question the prisoner.

“Know when he will lie we do, but concerned I am,” Yaddle confessed. “Extremely smart, almost unassuming he was, yet fanatical he became when cornered. Hates the Jedi, I feel. Can refuse to answer, he will. And stronger interrogation methods, allow I will not.”

“Of course not, Master Yaddle. Not only does pain-based interrogation not give you reliable information, but we also have ways to make certain he talks. It’s going to be sifting his words for actual meaning that might prove hard,” Harry responded, lips quirking wryly.

Looking over at the general, Harry held out a hand, and the man pulled out the sample of Babble Juice Harry had given him a few days ago. Harry took it and explained its properties to Yaddle, whose ears began to flick this way and that as she rocked in place. *“Well, I’ll be. She really does look like a child when shown some new kind of candy,”* Harry quipped to Aayla, who, while composed on the outside, giggled in their shared minds so much it almost set Harry off in turn.

“Fascinating this is!” Yaddle declared, almost hopping in place. “Most fascinating. Entirely new, this idea of potions it is. Like Sith alchemy, yet no fear of that do I have. Master Fay, the last person to fall to the Dark, would be. Positive enhancement to the plants, beyond interesting it is. Learn more of this, I would.”

“That’s for the future. We have a limited amount of babble Juice and will only see a trickle of it in the near future. But I think that this use of it is completely justified. I will warn you, though. While directly lying is hard with the babble Juice in your system, obfuscating the truth is possible, and if this Robert character is smart, he may attempt to do so.”

Yaddle nodded, although her mind was still on the overall implications of the experiments Fay and Lily were running on Ruusan. “Alive I am when this war ends, travel to Ruusan, I would wish to do. Fascinating it could be.”

“Truly,” Aayla agreed fervently, squeezing Harry’s hands. “We might spend a few years there once all this is over. If we can get away, anyway.”

“Don’t set that in stone,” Garm announced, on the heels of Ahsoka’s bark of laughter. “Whatever happens in this war, I rather doubt the universe will let two people such as the pair of you disappear into obscurity like that.”

Harry grimaced while Aayla scowled, but neither could think of anything to say to that, so they simply promised some form of retribution to young Ahsoka and got on with business.

Hours later, Robert looked up as the door opened, about to snarl about his rights once more, only to freeze as he saw Yaddle there. His carefully controlled anger slid into real fear and fury at sight, and he barely got himself under control enough to try and defend his actions. “I, I am sorry, I was panicking. You Jedi, when you take someone away, they disappear!”

“See, I do, public perception of the Order needs work it does. A problem for another day, that is.” Yaddle slowly shook her head. “Guilty you are. Depth of guilt yet to be determined it is.”

Harry entered behind Yaddle, and the man’s eyes widened before becoming like two closed shutters as Robert gathered his self-control, clamming up entirely. Seeing this, Harry smiled thinly. “Good, no prevarication needed then, you know me, and you know why I’m here.”

Gently setting the small vial down on the table in front of the chained prisoner, Harry went on. “Now, this is Babble Juice. It is a serum that will force you to talk and make it very difficult to lie. Our own Force-given abilities will do the rest. I am obligated by my own sense of right and wrong and what will soon become law to inform you that we will be administering this serum to you. You have one chance to come clean now. Do you wish to do so?”

“Y, you can’t do this to me! That, that’s not...” Robert stammered, his self-control having disappeared under the impact of what Harry was implying.

“We are in a time of war,” Harry reminded the man sadly, having spent that morning going over the recent death toll from a series of battles around the GDL’s Hypercom Relay Centers. The names and faces on the spreadsheet had melded together in his mind, but Harry refused to let the dead become mere statistics, no matter how many of them there were. “Peacetime laws do not apply, and you have proven both a traitor to the Republic and a spy in GDL lands for a third power.”

“That’s, that’s not... I...” The man stumbled to a halt, realizing he really didn’t have a leg to stand on, legally speaking. The moment he had tried to kill Yaddle and his bag of tricks had been found, any attempt to lie about his real job had gone out the window.

Harry smiled thinly. “I rather doubt that you could produce any kind of paperwork that says your orders come from the Senate. And if you did, I would be very interested to see it.” He waited a moment, but Robert did nothing, simply staring at the babble Juice with horror.

A repeat of the offer to come clean elicited no response, and finally, Harry sighed. “Very well.” A gesture sent out a Force Push, holding the man still while opening his mouth. “This is not how I wanted to do this, but you leave me no choice.”

Moments later, Yaddle began the questioning. “Your real name, Robert Bruce, it is not. Introduce yourself properly, you should.”

The man opened his mouth, and a torrent came out. “Why, why, how was I caught!? My name isn’t Robert Bruce true, but come on, I thought it was way cooler than Zachary Blarghelshile. You, you Jedi, are just bullies, bullies. Why did you rule against my family? Why did we get caught? That’s the only point...”

From there, the words poured out like a babbling brook and didn’t stop for some time...

OOOOOOO

Hours later, Yaddle and Harry explained what they had learned to Riddler, Garm, and a half dozen of his advisors. "So we have a lot of insight now into the Sith's hidden network. It won't be easy, but shutting down each agent as we find them will give us more information about a few more. Some of these I think we need to act on now."

The spy with the unfortunate last name had proven to be a most forthcoming individual once the Babble Juice was in his system, something that had the leader of the Specters, Sena Midanyl, to begin to giggle most disturbingly. Although young for the post, she was a highly analytical individual with a memory almost equal to that of a Jedi. She also could be trusted at that position and wasn't needed elsewhere, two important considerations.

"Bas Ketchaf for certain. Though how to go about it, is going to be tricky," Sena mused. "That bastard is too dangerous where he is to let him continue acting freely."

"Leave that to us," Aayla opined, with Harry nodding firm agreement. "We have a plan there. Otherwise, we need to start moving on these names."

"How much Babble Juice do you have," Sena questioned eagerly.

"Not enough for every agent we might capture, that is certain," Harry answered regretfully. "But enough. We'll question them the normal way, unless the individual is in a position of importance, then break out the Babble Juice only as needed."

The leader of the Specters nodded. "I'll go over the names, see which ones we can leave in place, watch and maybe feed some false information to. I also think we need to start moving agents into the Confederacy. We can't rely on the crumbs Republic Intelligence is sending us. I realize we have plans going forward to build up a spy fleet, but boots on the ground can make a big difference."

The conversation shifted at that point to what they could do to further muddy the waters when it came to the various arms shipments or if they could assign greater forces to them without tipping their hand. This segued into a general talk about the war and how the Specters had begun to use the influx of formerly Agri-corps workers so far. Several type three planets had been conquered within the GDL, but the blockades over them leaked like sieves, and many teams of Jedi had been snuck in to cause trouble. No overt battles, but espionage was the name of the day on those planets. Infiltration and sabotage. Jedi, it turned out, were very good at making things go boom and getting away with it.

Eventually, the meeting broke up, and Harry and Aayla moved on to have a necessary talk and plant a trap.

OOOOOOO

On Coruscant, Padme grumbled sighed as she cleaned up after dinner. A dinner, moreover, that she had eaten with only Sabe for company before Sabe rushed off to another date with her current flavor of the week. Occasionally, Padme worried about her maid's gadfly attitude regarding relationships given the secrets Sabe knew. But since Sabe never actually went past a few dates and drinks, she thought it was all right.

Mind you, my romantic side still wants Eirtae to open her eyes to Sabe's interest in her. But considering how Sabe is here on Coruscant with me, and Eirtae is back on Naboo and unlikely to be allowed to leave so long as this war is going on, that particular ship has probably sailed.

Of the others that normally would share her table, Chewbacca and his wife had been called to some kind of ceremony by the Wookiee ambassador. Apparently, it would be an all-night affair mirrored by something going on back on Kashyyyk.

And her Jedi companion, Zule, was over in the temple for the evening. She had stayed over there the past few evenings giving lectures on some of Harry's Force techniques to a few Jedi Knights and Masters who had yet to perfect them.

Finishing the task in front of her, Padme entered her main sitting room, debating between a good book or a vid. *A night where I don't have to stay up reading reports or preparing a speech despite the constant turmoil of the war and what it is doing to the political scene is something to be treasured.*

Padme's face shifted into a scowl for all of three seconds before the fact that she was looking at Harry and Aayla registered and her face slowly shifted. "Harry, Aayla."

"Padme," Harry said with a smile, "have we done something to offend you lately?"

"Yes, what is with the resting rancor face?" Aayla teased.

Padme snorted, biting her lip and staring from Harry's expressive eyes to Aayla's, almost shivering at the love she saw in those emerald and blue orbs. How the two of them could project that kind of emotion through a hologram, Padme would never know but reveled in it all the same. "Harry, no, you haven't done anything to annoy me, at least not to my knowledge. Although since you asked, perhaps you are speaking with a guilty conscience?" She teased before switching to glaring over at Aayla, carefully not noticing how Harry started. "And I do not have a resting rancor face! Wherever did you even hear such a phrase?"

"I've spent time with some of the lower-ranking officers here in the GDL's strategic command center, and you would be astonished at the turn of phrase those young men and women use among themselves. More importantly, how are you, Padme?" Aayla asked, frowning faintly. "You look somewhat at peace yet also haggard."

"Hmm... that sounds about right. I've had meetings nearly every night, and every three days, there's a full war report given to the Senate, and then there's the work on the Military

Oversight Committee and the feeling as if I am trying to hold the Peace Party together with cobwebs and dreams,” Padme sighed before shaking her head and straightening his shoulders a bit.

“I shouldn’t say that. The Peace Party is staying together mostly, but I have been astonished time and again at the amount of distaste and contempt for us there is among the centrists now that war has been declared. Our wish to mitigate the damage and keep a line of communication with the Confederacy open has made it worse. I realize that is far easier to say than do and that there is a tremendous amount of hatred building up between the Confederacy and Republic, but even so, personal attacks should not be part of politics unless they are against the policy of the individual. Some of the things said about myself...well, I’ve had to restrain Chewbacca from taking offense on my behalf.”

“Proof that it isn’t always easy at the top, regardless of whatever is going on at the time,” Harry commiserated, before sending, “*Do you think we should ask her opinion about the Hapan Princess now?*”

“No. Let’s wait until the end of the conversation for that. That way, we can switch over to our new encryption without our little trap seeming too forced. Remember, we don’t want the whole Hapan issue to become known,” Aayla suggested, although she understood that Harry wanted to get that awkward portion of the conversation over. But awkward and personal were not the same as important in this case. They had several objectives for this conversation, and it would be best to line up most efficiently.

Sending an accepting feeling back, Harry turned his full attention to Padme. “But now that the hellos are over, it’s time for serious talk. I’m going to switch to encryption number 90453, code EA9.”

Nodding, Padme inputted the appropriate commands into her com-system, watching as the holographic image in the middle of the table flickered for a few moments. Then the background was replaced by blackness, leaving only Harry and Aayla’s faces hanging in the air, while Padme’s did the same on her end.

I wonder if they’ve ever tried to take advantage of moments like this. After all, Harry and Aayla are Jedi, trained to control their facial expressions no matter what they’re doing, much like we senators, and I can’t see anything below the ... Padme cut off that thought before internally snickering at herself. *It’s only been what, three months since they left, you’ve dealt with far longer between assignments than that. You can’t be missing them so badly or so horny that you let your fantasies get away from you.*

“So we’re back,” Harry announced as the encryption took hold. “We’ve been back in communication range for two days, but we’ve been so busy we haven’t actually had time to call you that wouldn’t wake you up in the middle of the night. And both of us figured that you

needed your sleep too much to do that to you just to tell you we were in communication once more.”

“Thank you. I do need my sleep. We’ve been trying to get the Senate to agree to create a hospital ship system that would serve both sides of the conflict, but the Senate isn’t willing to devote many resources to the project, especially if it’s supposed to treat both sides of the conflict as I said. We’ve since shifted our priorities to simply building more hospitals and getting as many doctors as we can to agree to serve either in those hospitals near the front line or with the Republic Army.”

“With the clone armies?” Aayla questioned, her face twisted into distaste. “And how is that going?”

“Since the clones themselves and the Jedi make up the vast majority of the officers of our land-based military, the clones are being treated as well as can be contrived,” Padme answered, understanding what Aayla meant. “Although many of the clone commanders seem to think that the objective matters more than their own soldier's well-being, and that’s a sentiment that many other non-Jedi also still seem to think. But your speech in front of the Senate impacted the Senate itself and the Jedi Order, so it isn’t universal. The issue of their futures has been made into an amendment of the original Grand Army Article of Rearmament at least.”

“Good. With our last Senator leaving Coruscant a few weeks back, we lack any observers there. I wasn’t happy when the Senate didn’t approve of allowing observers from the League to watch your debates,” Harry grumbled. “Especially since we offered to allow observers to watch the proceedings as we create our Congress, and the offer was accepted.”

While Harry and Aayla had been busy on their various projects and with the League, the Senators who had previously represented GDL planets or sectors in the Senate had left in ones and twos. The reason for their slowness in doing so was that as senators, many of them served on committees and had to appoint successors, were involved in local administrative and bureaucratic posts, or in some very rare cases, came from a planet that had joined the GDL, while Senator had originally represented a sector which had not.

But even now, there was still a slow trickle of Senators and planets shifting allegiances from the Republic to the GDL. Padme pointed that out, wagging her finger so that it could be picked up despite the encryption system. “So you don’t really need observers. What you’re missing is spies, and I’m not about to commiserate with you on that.”

“Maybe, although having a dedicated observer would be the same as having an ambassador, wouldn’t it?” Aayla asked cocking an eyebrow in return. “Which could only be a good thing in terms of the GDL’s continuing relationship with the Republic.”

Padme shrugged, indicating that her own opinion would be yes, but that it really didn’t matter. The request had not been accepted, nor would it as long as the war went on. She then

blinked, looking down at her system. However, when she opened her mouth, Harry held up a hand, holding it over his mouth to indicate she shouldn't speak. "Are you certain you won't be able to get away?"

"Positive. I'm stuck here on Coruscant for the next month, and then I'm going to go out to a meeting in the Chommell Sector, and then from there to another meeting on Thyferra." Padme shook her head with a sigh to Aayla's question. "And because I'll be a senator leaving Coruscant, I will be accompanied by a small fleet of ships for defense. That fact is actually somewhat harder for me to visualize than the restrictions on my movements I've had to deal with for years now."

"Understandable, but necessary," Harry admonished. "Although... have you ever had starfighter pilot training?"

Padme shook her head and answered that she didn't have the spatial recognition necessary to really be a good pilot. She could pilot a shuttle well enough, although she routinely turned that over to Chewbacca, who was actually quite a skilled pilot. Padme certainly wouldn't be able to pilot something in active combat. Then she turned back to the previous conversation, naming a few names of Senators who she had been surprised to see had, "To quote the Centrists, jumped ship when the going got tough for their planets personally."

"The Centrist Senators seem to forget that they were not elected to their positions to serve the entirety of the Republic alone, but both that and the needs of their own people. If one comes to supersede the other, then it is up to the individual Senator to decide where his true duty lies," Aayla answered with a faint frown.

"Duty or loyalty, both are powerful motivators," Padme nodded to Aayla's words. "I'm just worried because there are a few laws... well, they're just rumors at this point, and I don't know where the rumors are coming from, but it's still worrisome."

She heard Harry make interrogative noise but waved him off. "I'm not going to share anything just yet. Not until those rumors have turned into some kind of action in the Senate. Suffice to say that the GDL is not popular still, even though we now have a shared enemy in the Confederacy. But until those rumors solidify, I can't do anything to combat them."

"All right, but on that note, about having some kind of actionable intelligence, I mean, we have recently developed a windfall. We have a few that we would like you to pass on to Zule and the Jedi for them to investigate on Coruscant," Harry changed the subject. "Two of them may just be corporate espionage types, illegal, but nothing we need to concern ourselves personally over. But the other name is definitely a spy for the Confederacy. More importantly, we believe he is part of the Sith Lord's intelligence apparatus."

Padme's eyes widened, and she leaned forward, although her eyes narrow slightly, as Aayla gave her the actual names. She wrote them out but looked back at her lovers, one eyebrow rising in question. They'd had evidence before that some of their encrypted

communications had been broken. Since the war had begun, they'd been shifting their encryptions randomly, so this code shouldn't have been broken yet, but even so...

Aayla slowly nodded to Padme, her mouth widening into a grin that showed her pointed teeth as she nodded. Padme nodded back, understanding there was more to this than just the names as Harry held up a note. While they'd had proof that someone was listening in on their conversations, they had yet to have any evidence that the holographic aspect of their discussions had been seen. According to both Anakin and Chewbacca, recording the audio portion of a Hypercom call was far easier than recording the visual aspect. Especially with the war on, everyone encrypting everything, and specialized encryptions on both sides like this.

The note read: If they act to try and warn the names of the people we've given you that they're under suspicion, we will know that they've broken this encryption. Which will allow you on Coruscant to backtrack on your end, and us on ours through the Hypercom Network. It will also prove that you are still being watched, which we could also act on, Padme.

Padme had to hold back a chortle at the idea, very happy about anything that could make trouble for the Sith, which this multi-pronged attack would. She couldn't forget that the Sith were out there, even if the Order and Harry believed that they shouldn't be so open with the idea that there was another Sith beyond Dominus.

"I have noted them down, and I already have my systems searching for information via the Senate computer systems. I'll set up a meeting with some of the Jedi tomorrow, as well as Senate Security. Do you think this is something we should look to investigate, wiretap, or simply arrest?"

"You'll want to arrest at least one of them," Aayla answered with a nod, while Harry held up another note with a single name written on it into the hologram's pick up.

"He was one of the contacts of the source of our little windfall," Aayla went on, smirking slightly. "And no, we are not going to tell you the nature of that windfall. Suffice to say, if I wish to expand that euphemism, in terms of a windfall, this like a hurricane on Dorin."

"I am very happy to hear it. While I am uncertain of how the overall war is going, we have been behind the eight ball on the espionage side of things for far too damn long!" Padme growled, not really commenting on the Confederacy of even C'baoth, but the Sith in general.

"Agreed," both her lovers stated firmly. "We've got numerous plans moving that can hopefully deal with that in the long term, but the universe is so vast, and the Sith have had practically a thousand years to plan for this, make contact, devise spyware and so forth. It's only by luck, the Force, or mistakes on their part that we've made any headway. Now, well, we've only begun to follow up on this hurricane, as Aayla put it, but it could be huge."

"I imagine that C'baoth is going to start to feel it shortly, as will the rest of the Confederacy," Aayla announced confidently.

Watching them, Padme realized that her lovers were playing for a possible audience once more. Looking into their faces, they weren't entirely as certain about what they were saying as Harry and Aayla wanted to appear, although she felt that they were actually closer to telling the truth than she first thought. *A double bluff, then?*

As Aayla continued to talk, shifting the conversation over to how the public in the League and the Republic viewed one another, Padme didn't say anything because Harry had just held up another note.

This note read, "We just had an agent send you another encryption program that you can install on your system. You'll have to open it by providing an answer to a simple question. Get it right the first time, or else..."

Rolling her eyes at her lover's theatrics but understanding the need for it, Padme pulled up a separate screen and opened her mail. There she noticed a sender whose identity was pure gibberish. Looking at Harry, she cocked an eyebrow, but she opened the email when he nodded. Within was a single data file, and when she made to un-compress it, she was indeed asked a simple question. "What dish did Harry Potter make on Kashyyyk to help the humans deal with the spicy Wookiee food?"

Even now, almost a decade after that event, Padme could still remember her time on Kashyyyk with her friends and bit back a laugh as she typed the answer in while interrupting Aayla as she tossed off a comment on blue-skinned sentients. The two of them taunted and teased one another for several seconds as the new encryption program installed itself onto her system, something that made her eyes widen for a second. And then the image fuzzed out in front of Padme for a few seconds again. When it reformed, Harry and Padme were back, grinning at her.

"That is quite a good idea," she announced. "Well done. Although why the mail has now erased itself from my system or even how is a little worrisome."

"It is, yes. Slicer clans are very worrisome in general. But this encryption should be impossible for the Sith to crack fast enough for them to act on anything we say," Harry answered. "Now, to answer the questions I could see building up in your face, yes, our confidence is something of a double bluff. We assume that acting in such a way will convince the hidden Sith that we don't actually have as much of a lead on his espionage network. But we **do**, although it will take some time to take advantage of it in the League, to say nothing of the rest of the Republic."

"We captured and have begun to question a man who was selling information to someone who later acted upon it in such a manner as to prove that he has connected to either the Confederacy or the Sith. We assume the Sith at this point, although they used Confederacy assets," Aayla continued, making Padme smile at how they went back and forth like that. "He didn't know anything about the Sith, but even silencing someone like this is extremely

important. And questioning him has led to us being able to discover several others, including the three names we gave you, and **more.**”

“I won’t go into detail but suffice to say that master Yaddle has called in several Sentinels among the Jedi, and they are working closely with the League security Force to bring in as many of these people as we can,” Harry went on. “That started about five hours ago, and we’ve already heard back from a few people. With each agent we capture, we build a better idea of the entirety of the Sith’s information network.”

“And that web won’t just be about passing on information, but about acquiring influence and perhaps even money,” Padme answered thoughtfully, nodding her head. “Excellent. A true victory over the Sith on that particular battlefield, and one of the first offensive wins we’ve scored.”

“Yes,” Harry answered, letting his elation show. “One that is going to have an immediate impact on their plans going forward.”

“But you will want to move on the name we gave you on Coruscant,” Aayla announced. “From what our own intelligence services say, he’s part of the training cadre for Republic intelligence spies. If he’s involved with the Sith, however unknowingly, that is a big deal.”

“And could lead to still further information on who the Sith is, even if the man himself didn’t realize he was being used!” Padme exclaimed, nodding her head. “I’ll hand that over to Zule and see who she brings in among the Jedi.”

“Not Master Yoda?” Harry quipped. “When it comes to questioning the prisoner, I’d wager he could do it just by looking at him with those ancient, wise eyes of his.”

Padme giggled. “Heh, well, while Master Yoda is here on Coruscant once more, but he’s not as free to act at this point. Master Yoda is hip-deep in the strategic intelligence committee and the Admiralty directing the war effort.”

For several moments, the three of them talked about the war in general and in specifics, with Harry and Aayla passing on information from the league side of things to Padme, who did the same in a summarized but still more thorough manner than the Senate or Republic Intelligence would probably have been happy about.

However, that conversation soon petered out, and Padme looked at her two lovers shrewdly. “And now that the impersonal but important stuff has been dealt with, you can tell me why Harry looked a little guilty at the start of this conversation,” she practically ordered.

“Actually, that would be both of us in a way. Although it did start with me,” Harry admitted, not backing down from being called out on that. “But it requires a bit of background. Do you know about the Hapan Consortium and how it is ruled by a matriarchal society?”

“Yes...” Padme said slowly, her head cocked to one side as she thought. “They are a matriarchy, aren’t they? The Hapes Cluster is so closed off that it is almost an entirely different galaxy for all we know about them, but I think I read that somewhere.”

“It is indeed that closed off. The Hapans Shield Worlds are tough nuts to crack despite the fact their turbolaser technology isn’t as advanced. They make up for it in other ways. But recently, the Consortium reached out to us in the form of the Consortium’s Princess, who, in some strange twist of the Force I had met while we were younger. It was during my time with Master Fay before I found Aayla once more on Tatooine and met you for the first time. I was on Vena and...”

From there, Harry briefly explained how that meeting had gone about, as well as how the Hapes Cluster had sent military units into the Vena System to arrange a conversation between the Princess and Harry. As he finished, Padme’s lips pursed, and she reached up to run a finger from her ear down to her jaw thoughtfully. “Why do I think that this has more to do with the personal rather than the military and societal side of things?”

“Because it might. Chume dropped several hints that she would like a personal assignation with Harry as part of the ongoing talks with them for their alliance,” Aayla supplied.

Hearing this, Padme felt a flash of anger and hurt, but it faded slightly as Harry explained how that conversation had gone. It seemed that Harry and Aayla hadn’t done anything to encourage this woman’s interest in Harry. *But neither did they shut her down*, Padme thought, scowling and not even trying to hide it. *Indeed, some of the things they said in return might indicate they were willing to continue the discussion on this score.*

“I understand what has occurred and that it was a subtle thing. But I am still very hurt that you didn’t shut Chume down, Harry. Nor can I understand why you wouldn’t, Aayla!” Padme nearly shouted before regaining her self-control.

Aayla grimaced. “To be truthful, Padme, it didn’t seem that big a deal to me.”

“N. not a big deal?” Padme’s words stumbled to a halt for a second before gaining momentum and volume. “If that is just because Chume was being subtle, I could perhaps give you the benefit of the doubt. But if it was that, you wouldn’t be bringing it up with me in the first place. So why have you? Because I will tell you flatly, I am **not** comfortable with this at all! What I thought we shared is, I thought it was special, and now...”

“That is precisely why we’re asking. We wanted your opinion on it,” Aayla interjected, holding up a hand in a calming motion, her blue eyes soulful as she stared through the pickup at Padme. On it and on Zule, too, admittedly, but Aayla had no intention of bringing that up now, seeing how badly Padme was reacting to just Ta’a’s hints.

“From our perspective, the Hapes Cluster is far more interesting than Ta’a Chume, and we wanted to know your perspective of things. You see, Jedi such as us, we don’t.. we struggle

to see a connection between the purely physical side of a relationship and the emotional. You, Harry and I have an emotional relationship, just as much as a physical one,” Aayla went on instead.

“Far more than a physical one,” Harry added, the two lovers in sync to an even greater degree than normal as they tried to get across their own feelings on this point. “We have built our friendship over a little under a decade of discussion, jokes, laughs, and remembered memories of moments that, while not sexual, were certainly intimate. We love you, Padme, and that’s not going to change.”

Padme began to breathe once more, her shoulders slumping as she understood now that she was running into some strange Jedi-Force thing. *It isn’t that they’re asking me for permission. They are asking me for my perspective.* That was a different thing entirely, and it meant she could shut this idea down and educate these two lovable idiots a bit. “I think I understand what you are saying, although your perspective is extremely odd. Normal people equate physical love to emotional love, or they do if they are mentally stable or aren’t in a profession that requires that kind of separation.”

Both of her Jedi lovers winced at that, but Padme felt that was fair enough. They’d caused her some hurt too. “If you’re asking me for my perspective, my perspective is simply that this is **not** something I would be willing to allow to happen. I see why the Hapes Cluster matters, but on a personal level, I cannot separate that from the fact this royal hussy is after my man!!”

Harry shivered, murmuring, “Is it odd I find that rather hot?”

“Nope,” Aayla murmured, also aloud so that Padme could hear them. Both of them watched as she blushed and lost some of her anger, enjoying the reaction before Aayla went on.

“In that case, would you be willing to meet with her with us? You were a queen at one point. She’ll have to respect you on that score, as well as the fact that you have something of a reputation even though your part of the Peace Party,” Aayla questioned. “That way, we can turn her down in such a way that we can still maybe make a deal with the Cluster.”

“Yes, I would love to have words with this bitch,” Padme answered instantly, then bared her teeth, banishing the flush on her face for a second as a thought occurred to her. “However, I am uncertain if you’ve thought all of this through, Harry. Remember that she is a dynast, so Ta’a is not looking just for an assignation. She’s looking to secure her line with your progeny. If she wants a daughter from you, would you be willing to look the other way as she is raised entirely by Chume? In that society?”

Harry’s started, his eyes widening. It had not been very long since he and Aayla had been forced to think about having children thanks to the Counts of Serenno, and both were still more than a little leery of the idea given their time-consuming duties. But the idea of having

one, having him or her be raised separate from him? That was disturbing on a much deeper level. "Okay, that is certainly a point. And a very telling one. In no way would I be willing to let anyone raise a child of mine without my input, and having a child with anyone outside a formal relationship is just not going to happen."

"Understatement," Aayla agreed, her own eyes wide. "We never thought of that."

Padme huffed, then turned her attention back to the fact the two of them hadn't seen any intrinsic issue to Chume's subtle proposal. "Regardless of what happens with this Ta'a girl, you two need to realize that your way of looking at things is not the same way that I do. If you want this thing between us to work, it will take commitment, normal person-style commitment. And normal people equate physical closeness with emotional. Me perhaps more than most, but regardless, I will not be happy to, to welcome someone else into this relationship of ours."

Sobering still further, Harry bowed his head so deeply that Padme could see the back of his neck past his hair. "I am sorry, Padme. If I had known that at the time, I would have shut down Ta'a no matter how subtle she was."

"I have to apologize too, Padme," Aayla said, while she and Harry decided to forever shelve any ideas of Zule joining their relationship. Despite the fact a part of Aayla still thought that was a natural next step in their long friendship with the other Knight, their relationship with Padme was far too important to both of them to risk.

Harry agreed, even though he still remembered the odd Force vision they'd had that had included Zule. Perhaps it hadn't been meant to imply anything romantic? Or perhaps that future wasn't certain. What was certain, was that they loved Padme, and that wasn't going to change. So if she was unhappy with the idea of reaching out to others, then it wasn't going to happen.

"On top of our bond and the tenants of the Jedi coloring our feelings on this point, Padme, my people aren't really big on equal male-female relationships," Aayla explained. "More often than not, the woman is a slave to the man. Even if they are happy, there is no doubt who is in charge. Other times, the woman is a slave to someone else but still loves her husband. Sometimes that knowledge, and my own mental bond to Harry, colors my thoughts about the importance of the physical side of things."

"I can't say the same thing, only that I've let our bond color my thoughts on the physical side of relationships. That, and the Jedi's own recent changes to that kind of thing." Harry sighed, but before Padme could say anything, he went on, staring at her soulfully, trying to do everything he could to convey his words. "The two of us and you, Padme, built up our friendships our connection for years. That connection is different in form from my connection to Aayla but not in substance or depth."

As he saw the last bit of anger living Padme's face and a slight blush suffused her features, Harry assayed a bit of a tease. "Certainly, it's far deeper than our physical connection. Though not for lack of trying on that point."

"If we had just stayed on Coruscant for another week..." Aayla added, her hazel eyes blazing in the pickup with her desire for Padme, as Harry's did the same as he looked at her.

Padme was no virgin, but even so, she found herself blushing again under the dual impact of those eyes. But she shook her head, wagging a finger in the pickup. "I'm still angry about this Chume woman and her flirtations. And if this ever comes up again and turns a real debate between us, be advised I will filibuster it so hard it will make your head spin! I will overwhelm your minds with sheer volume and verbiage." She warned, causing both of her lovers to laugh.

With that, the drama was over. It was not forgotten, and Aayla and Harry both knew it and promised Padme in many different ways over the next few moments that when they met up in person once more, she would be in for the pampering of her life. But it was over, and their relationship was still as strong as ever.

That, Padme reflected as she laughed at a joke from Harry, was enough for her.

OOOOOO

Several hours after he had been given the report of what Amidala, Potter and his Twi'lek whore had been talking about outside of the new encryption, Sidious was not laughing. He wasn't screaming either. Other Sith might have been raging and screaming or even lashing out with the Force. They might even have stabbed the robotic messenger who had brought this information and hacked it to pieces in a fit of rage.

Sidious did not. Instead, he was in the training area of the temple below the senatorial district. This temple was the hidden heart of the darkness that was the order of the Sith under the rule of two. And here, Sidious was lashing out with deliberate fury at the entirety of the training droids stored within the temple. By the time he was finished, not a single one remained intact, and most had been hacked into pieces.

I wish I could afford to take the risk of transporting living people down here. Their screams would have been much more in keeping with my present mood than the shrieks of tortured metal and the hum of my lightsaber, Sidious grumbled internally, wincing a bit at the unused-to exercise.

By the time he had taken a shower, Sidious's body had recovered, while his mind was still caught in the grips of his fury. For decades, the Sith Order had a vast leg up on the Jedi: their intelligence gathering ability. And now, this move from the Jedi indicated that that might no longer be the case.

The Sith had long organized their intelligence apparatus into three very different parts. The first layer, type three, were simply individuals who sold information. The information was bought through so many cutouts that they could never know who was buying the information. Their information was rarely important on its own, and the Sith knew any information shared was the next best thing to public knowledge.

Type two agents were individuals who hated the Jedi or were in locally important positions of power. These people sold their information to only the Sith, again through various electronic channels and physical cutouts, but they sold that information only to the Sith and were true spies rather than local brokers or agents. They had no knowledge of the Sith, but their intelligence could be trusted to a far higher degree than type three agents. They were part of a wider network of agents, exchanging information and passing it on more directly to the Sith if still through hundreds of material and technical cutouts.

And then there was the type one agents. Agents who knew about the Sith or were loyal to their cause in some way they were trusted to not only report what they discovered but act out on orders to various degrees. They were easily the most limited in their numbers but could have a massive impact.

All three of the names Potter had shared with Amidala were important type two agents. The type two agent on Coruscant was important thanks to his position as a trainer for Republic Intelligence Field Agents. The other two worked for intergalactic corporations and moved about the Republic. They were also all middlemen in the Sith intelligence apparatus, with other agents passing information along through them.

The loss of the two mobile agents would be extremely difficult to replace. But it would be possible.

Ketchaf, however? He was one of the most important type-two agents out there, a man who was almost a type-one agent, simply lacking the knowledge of his serving the Sith to make that jump. A large portion of Sidious's plans for the field agents of Republic Intelligence had been planned to go through the man.

This included gathering young Force Sensitives to turn over to the Brotherhood for training before they could be found by the Jedi. That would set back his hopes of creating a group of Hands for himself in the future. It would also set back Sidious' clandestine activities to bring a few recalcitrant Senators to heel and create his own assassination squads later on in the war.

The Jedi will want to be more deeply involved in Republic Intelligence even more now, and Isard won't be able to come up with a reason to refuse them. Worse, if they follow up on who hired Ketchaf, it may eventually be linked back to Pestage and Isard. I can remove some of that information, but not if the man is taken alive. He will have to die one way or the other. And

of course, any attempt to defend any of them will prove that Potter's previous level of security wasn't adequate enough, which means they will continue to use this new one.

Sidious grimaced. He had seen an estimate from his computerized minions on how long it might take them on their own to break that encryption, and two years was the bare minimum unless they subsidized the work. *Which isn't going to happen. The GDL seem to have brought in some dedicated slicer teams of... considerable acumen. That concerns me. I've had to order an upgrade to my own defenses already. If they continue to do the same on communication across the board, the League will turn into an even worse intelligence blackhole than it is now. I've already lost hundreds of type three agents to their Jedi-assisted counterintelligence teams. I need to have that glimpse into their communication to at least have some information on what they are doing militarily!*

But even worse than the problem about what to do on that score was the fact that Potter and Secura had been able to give Padme those names meant that some portion of Sidious's information network had been broken. And broken badly.

That was the true source of his fury. Small back steps, small changes to the Great Plan he could afford. But a complete intelligence breakdown? That was dangerous. Extremely so. If he could no longer use his intelligence apparatus to counter his enemy's moves, he would have to fall back to the Force, and on its own, even with the Veil, that was not enough.

None of my type two agents have gone silent recently without an understandable reason, yet it must be one of the ones who has. Luckily, I use the cell system, so no single break will allow the GDL to roll up more than a few others, and it will be a slow process, Dark Side will it so. But... how would they even be able to force the answers out of them? The Jedi will not resort to drugs, and my type-two agents hate the Jedi and would not answer them if they were asked to pass the silverware!

By the time he reached the passage leading up into his Chancellor's suite, Sidious was in control once more, and yet, he was still furious. For the first time since the original destruction of the Banking Guild and it's being split in two, the Jedi had scored a clear and extremely dangerous victory on the espionage front. *We need to make up for that on the war front somehow. Or the societal. Somewhere!*

Even as he once more tried to game the system and see if he could use this somehow to his advantage, Sidious could not help but feel something through the Force. The same something he had felt when he learned of the younglings' departure. The same he had felt when he realized Potter was the true source of the Force techniques. The same he had felt when he learned of the oddities aboard the destroyed GDL freighter.

That feeling was like the sound of a little pebble falling down the mountain.

Only that pebble was no longer small. It had grown quite a bit larger since the last time Sidious had heard that noise. And it had been joined by others, as they all continued down the mountain...

OOOOOOO

Over the next few days, Harry and Aayla found themselves busy, taking up duties in the strategic command center. While they worked on the military side of things with Garm, they split their workload into societal and political sectors. Harry handled the political side of things, soothing feathers in places, allaying worries, making certain the work of the GDL continued smoothly on that front. Meanwhile, Aayla handled the social and business side of things. There were numerous government programs the GDL planets no longer had access to and which needed to be restarted despite the war.

And, of course, Harry and Aayla took turns training Ahsoka. With the world of Serenno open to them, Aayla took Ahsoka with her on a trip into the less respectable areas, training her in how to use the Force to notice dangers. In turn, Harry took her on a camping trip, teaching her several new techniques.

While Harry and Aayla were busy on the strategic and logistical side of things, elsewhere, the dominos of 'Robert Bruce's' impromptu attempt to contact his employers kept falling. The first domino in question came in the form of other spies being discovered and taken into custody across the GDL who had communicated with the mousy man.

"Are we sure this is the place, master?" A young Padawan named Haila asked, looking up at the exceedingly generic office building in front of them. There were probably thousands of buildings on a planet like Burma just like this one.

"This is where the signal is coming from. Admittedly, we're uncertain if the signal is bouncing from this building to another, but the locals are checking in on that for us. Patience, my young padawan. And remember, we want him alive," Jedi Guardian Lightfoot responded, glancing up at her far taller padawan. Haila was a human, whereas Lightfoot was a Bith. "I don't even want you reaching for your lightsaber."

"No worries, Master. I'm fully ready to lay down some stunning cover fire," Haila quipped, and Lightfoot groaned lightly. If there was one part about being a master that she had come to dislike, it was the fact that Haila, a youngling of Clan Saa, enjoyed wordplay like that. Puns as well, which Lightfoot always felt was the lowest form of humor.

She wasn't one of those Jedi who believed that emotions were unnecessary and a distraction to a Jedi, hence why the Bith had taken on a padawan from that oddest of youngling clans. But even so, puns? *At least it isn't knock-knock jokes.*

Nearby, she could feel the presence of three other Jedi, waiting to be called in at need. Thanks to the exigencies of the war, bringing five Jedi together like this had been somewhat difficult, but the high Council's orders on that score were clear. When at all possible, Jedi were to be fielded in teams of five. If not, at least one Jedi needed to be a Guardian.

Here, Lightfoot and her Padawan had been pulled back from a recent battle to rest and recover and had been seconded to a team of three Consulars for this mission. This brought the group up to the necessary five members and added a Guardian in for good measure.

The Consulars had led the investigation up to this point, but now that it came to actually apprehend the suspect, they had willingly allowed Lightfoot and her padawan to take the lead. *Quite uncommonly intelligent of them*, Lightfoot thought to herself, allowing a touch of disdain to color her thoughts where she would never have allowed it to color her contact with the Force or her voice. Like many Guardians, Lightfoot had long bemoaned how more prevalent the Consulars were within the Order and had greatly enjoyed seeing that trend reversed over the last seven years.

A Consular came up to them from behind, nodding politely to the two Guardians as he joined them watching the building. "The locals have shut down all air traffic and a cordon around the area. I'm rather afraid that doing so might have alerted our quarry, but no one is coming in or out of the building as yet, and the Force is silent on the matter."

"As is happening all too often," Haila muttered, but neither of the older Jedi corrected her. It was true, after all.

"And we are positive this building doesn't have a connection to the sewers?" Lightfoot asked quickly. Many cities like this had large underground networks, be it simple sewers, habitations for the poor, or entire cities built over in ancient days.

"We are not, but my fellows have both headed down there with a group of the local tactical police unit." At Haila's interrogative look, the consular chuckled dryly. "I'm not going to use their actual name, padawan. They call themselves the True Republican Tactical Brigade for some reason."

"What? Just... what?" Haila asked, her eyes going dead as she looked at the Master.

"Yes, that was my reaction as well. I'm truly uncertain why, but apparently, that's been their name for several decades now," the older Jedi Master replied dryly before looking at Lightfoot. "Do you require me to go in with you?"

"I would rather that you mark out the emergency exits and guard the one you feel most likely that our quarry might use," Lightfoot answered diplomatically.

Whatever answer the older Master might have given was interrupted by a voice speaking to their earbuds. "Master Jedi, there's just been a spike on the local Hypernet, correlating with the target building. Whoever's in there now knows that the police have shut down local air traffic."

Reaching out to the Force, Lightfoot pondered whether or not the spy would try to stay put or make a run for it. "Our target is going to run," she announced after a second, looking over at her padawan, who had already stood up from where they had been hiding behind the protective wall around the roof of the building they were using as their observation point. "Let's go."

For all their preparation, the actual showdown would prove anticlimactic.

The two Jedi leaped down from where they had been hiding, landing on the road below, racing towards the building. Entering, Lightfoot pulled out a warrant. "By the power of the Executor, the GDL, and the Jedi Order, you are to shut power in this building down."

The man at the desk had barely a second to gape at them when someone burst out from one of the elevators. The Zabrak male took a brief second to look towards them, stumbling to a halt at the sight of the Jedi.

"Freeze! Nicos Ves, you are wanted for questioning on suspicion of espionage," Lightfoot began, but before she finished, the man had pulled out a blaster from under his suit. He opened fire, but Lightfoot already had her lightsaber in hand and flicked it on, battering aside the bolts to crack harmlessly into the floor. Meanwhile, her padawan had raised her hands and now thrust them forward, filling the area around their target with a red blast of Force energy. The man was flung backward, unconscious, his blaster going in a different direction as he tumbled to the ground.

"I think you overdid it, my padawan," Lightfoot shook her head approvingly.

"Maybe master, but at least we know he's not going anywhere," Haila answered with a shrug. "Besides, you know what the clone troopers say. There is no kill like overkill."

Rolling her eyes at that and wondering now how much an impact this war would have on the younger members of the Order, Lightfoot moved forward and then gestured with a hand, bringing the man up into the air with a Force Grab. "Contact the local police. They will want to search his apartment and his workstation. Our part in this is done, for now."

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, other attempts to bring in the spies did not go nearly as fluidly...

"I want to make a deal!" A young woman shouted, holding a vibro-dagger to the throat of an older man. Both of them were dressed similarly, spacesuits over coveralls, and large work belts around their waists, while around them, men and women of the same type watched from around corners or from the hatchways into various private quarters aboard a space station set over Vretish Alpha.

The planet was one of the main suppliers of sensor equipment and turbolaser gyroscopes within the League, and it had begun to put together its own local shipyard to produce ships up to the size of a destroyer. Most of the people around this little tableau were not locals but had been brought in to work on that project.

Of course, only one of them not coming just to work on that project, but rather to spy on the League and its ongoing industrialization efforts. "Don't come any closer Jedi, or I'll kill him!"

For once, the Quarren Knight Toros bemoaned the fact that he had never really mastered the Stunning Technique that had gone around the Order. He was an old-school Sentinel and had never really spent all that much time in the temple, being far too busy with his various undercover operations. Indeed, he rarely even communicated with the rest of the Order, too busy going from one planet to another being a thorn in the side of big businesses, bringing to light corporate espionage attempts, attempts to bribe local government officials, and so forth. *Still bemoaning my lack of knowledge in the new techniques will not help me now.*

"You know you're not going to get away. Why make it worse for yourself? We only wanted to bring you in for questioning but your taking a hostage is a blatant admission of guilt," he said calmly.

"Hah, I know how you Jedi work! The moment you have me in your clutches, you'll use that Force kriff to make talk! Well, I'm not going to give up my clients, and I'm not going to jail! So here's the deal. In the house behind me, I left my computers intact. They are connected to a bomb, which is set to go off at either a signal, or at a set time," the woman was interrupted by her captive gurgling, trying to say something, and she pressed the vibro-dagger into the woman's throat, muttering, "shut up!"

Turning her attention back to the Jedi, she twitched as she noticed he had covered at least five paces in that brief second. "Back off! Get back to where you were. I'll cut her! I swear I will."

"I have no doubt you would," Toros soothed, holding up his hand. "However, there is something you need to know about us, Jedi. We can be quite tricky when we put our minds to it."

At that point, a stunning bolt crashed into hostage and spy, knocking them both out, while Toros used the Force to flick the off switch on the vibro-dagger, pulling it out from the

woman's grip downward. The blade passed through her hand, cutting it badly before the vibrating blade stopped moving. But pulling it away in such a manner kept it from hurting the man that their target had been threatening.

The next second, two other Jedi were there, grabbing both members of this tableau. The tall Chistori set the man down as his padawan hefted their unconscious quarry onto his shoulders in a fireman's carry. "Well, that was worrisome."

"Indeed. I am grateful that I could keep our quarry's attention on me until you two were in position. It could have been far worse."

The other two Jedi nodded and woke up the former hostage, ensuring he was all right, while Toros took possession of their quarry. Another Jedi, the local sector Warden, rushed into the building with a team of forensic and demolition experts following him.

But taking a hostage was not anywhere near the worst response the various spies reporting to the Sith exhibited...

OOOOOOO

"At what point," *FXXCRACK* "did we" *FXXCRACK* "lose control here?" Grunted master Nejaa Halcyon of the green Temple of Corellia.

"At around the point where we informed the locals that we were here to investigate someone in the governmental district," grunted another Green Jedi, ducking behind a nearby doorway, using a Force Shield rather than his lightsaber. A Consular, Vin had gone through the retraining program but still didn't have the instincts of a Blade Master like Halcyon.

"How were we supposed to know it was the local star force commander?" Another Jedi said, as he too used his lightsaber to batter aside incoming fire from the defenders while using the local term for the head of the local space control director.

"True enough, but that doesn't bring us any closer to a solution," Halcyon rejoined.

"I have a suggestion, Master," a nearby young Padawan said, holding out up her one hand. Aubrie Wyn had lost her other arm in a campaign against the Confederacy within the Republic before being seconded into the League by the Jedi Order to rest and recover. She had lost her Master in that same battle but had been quickly reassigned to Halcyon.

Too quickly, in his opinion. The young girl's world had been shattered, and the Order hadn't let her have any time to get her mind back together. Yet she seemed to be doing alright for now. Still, Nejaa was keeping a close eye on her.

"Speak up, Aubrie, please. You should know now any suggestions you have will be listened to," Halcyon replied.

Without another word, the padawan raised her hand, and a brilliant blast of orange light erupted up into the air. Like a firework, it exploded, shocking and blinding everyone who had been unprepared for it. Unfortunately, that included one of the Jedi Masters, and so it was only Halcyon, one other, Riou, and his padawan who raced forward.

Blaster bolts continued to come towards them as they came, along with some heavier weapons, forcing the Knight aside to use a Force Shield, creating a wall of energy to block the incoming bolts. Halcyon raced on, using his lightsaber to slice into the protective wall over which their target's security guards fired. As the segment of the wall collapsed, he moved forward, his padawan beside him.

"Stunners only!" Halcyon barked, his free hand flashing out this way and that, sending out short Force Stun bolts of Force energy into each of the individuals nearby, knocking them out and to the ground as he flew through them. "These people are just doing their jobs."

Both the Padawan and Jedi Knight Riou had to stop themselves from using their lightsabers to cut the men and women around them down. But they obeyed his orders and moved on quickly.

"Master Halcyon, we have two shuttles attempting to lift off. What should we do?"

Halcyon paused, waving his padawan to a halt, scowling as he raised his wrist to his mouth, speaking into the communicator there, connected to the calm bead in his ear. "Can you stop them without killing them?"

"Probably not both of them," the man on the other end answered, scowling.

"Are the locals still refusing to help us?"

"Master, they're so incensed about us investigating our quarry that it was all we could do to stop them from joining his personal security force in fighting you all off," the other Jedi reported wryly.

"Try to keep their ships intact, but do not let them go," Halcyon ordered, then, reaching out with the Force, he found several minds still within the residence. "There are still people here. We're going to move in and take them into custody."

Inside the building, the Jedi ran into further defenses, automated gun turrets popping out of the floor while gas leaked out from various apertures. Two security droids also moved in and began to fire at them even as they shouted, "you are entering private property, surrender, or you will be subject to lethal measures."

While Roiu scoffed, Halcyon paused, one step in front of the other, his eyes widening as he felt the Force scream a warning to him. And it had nothing to do with the already present and visible threats. "Force Shields now!" He shouted, bringing up his own.

Halcyon's new padawan leaped to the side, rolling into place behind him. There Aubrie thrust out her hands, and a blazing Force Shield rose around them. But Roiu was too far away and too slow to respond to the threat they had all felt through the Force.

With a shattering *BOOOM!!!* an explosion went off, blasting through the building and over the Jedi with the energy of several hundred pounds of concussion energy.

Staring at the fireball in front of him, Master Vin, the Consular who had fallen back earlier, felt one of the Jedi within die but was gratified to only feel one Jedi passing after that kind of trap. As the roiling explosion began to die down into little spurts of fire here and there, he reached forward with the Force, pulling the wind away from the fires to slowly dampen the area down until nearby disaster relief teams began to move. They brought along a firefighting hover-truck which dumped several hundred tons of water down into the fire, and Vin let the air go gratefully.

The steam and sizzling slowly subsided, and Halcyon and his Padawan walked slowly out of the steam. Both of them were nearly dead on their feet from the exertion of keeping their Force Shields up in the center of an explosion like that.

Seeing this, Vin moved forward, catching the padawan as she slumped and hooking in arm around Halcyon's shoulders, dragging him along. "Well done."

"Nothing about this was well done. The locals, why didn't they issue a standdown order to those troopers," Halcyon scowled, gesturing to the edge of the property, where the security personnel who had previously been holding the Jedi off had been burned to death by the edge of the explosion caused by their boss' final defense. "If they had, we could have perhaps surprised him in his lair!"

That was a problem for later, however.

Luckily, getting out of the gravity well wasn't a quick operation for any starship beyond the size of a starfighter. The two small ships, personal yachts that tried to lift off went in two different directions, but not fast enough to escape the proton torpedo that the Jedi starfighters and towards one. That one exploded as the proton torpedo hit, overloading its shields easily, the explosion of hitting the shields bursting inward to wash over the rest of the ship. This rained debris down onto the city below, unfortunately.

The other yacht the Jedi Knight had gone after, sensing the panic and fear as well as the hatred of the individual piloting it. Moments later, a series of laser blasts pummeled the ship's

minimal shielding down before gutting its engines. The ship tumbled through space, out of control, until a nearby gunboat moved to use a tractor on it, halting its tumble.

That was, as Vin put it, very good. Both the locals and the Jedi had many questions for the individual within.

OOOOOOO

As bad as that mission had turned out, it was a victory. Others were not. Few of the spies so identified by the slicers escaped, but a little over half of them died while being apprehended. None of them attempted to commit suicide, but all of them had prepared surprises and often, those surprises backfired.

Few of them, thankfully, were connected to the local governments. Most were itinerant workers of one sort or another, the type of spacer or computer technician that could move anywhere throughout the Republic without drawing notice. That was worrisome, as was the fact that all of them to a man professed to hate the Jedi and didn't know now care who they were selling their information to. Indeed, several of them passed their information on to several others. This would eventually allow the Specters time to roll up larger portions of the network.

But this was a slow process, and it had only just begun. It would be the work of months to discover the true extent of this network, let alone shut it down, if they could before word got out that the League was on to them. This included another idea Yaddle had: piggybacking a signal onto the communication packet of one of the targeted spies rather than bringing him in. But Yaddle and the slicers were the only ones who believed that aspect would go anywhere.

The rest felt that the Hypercom Network was simply too huge. And their intelligence teams would have to work with their Republic counterparts to track the signals leaving the galactic Defense League.

Meanwhile, Harry and Aayla were finished their work on Serenno for now. On the military side of things, everything was running smoothly for now, even though the war was beginning to grind hard on their starfighter corps, and they had begun to lose more Archers. Aayla had everything running on the societal level that she could. The governmental issues would keep until the first Congressional Meeting on Corellia.

But it would soon turn out that Harry and Aayla would have to do their part to shut down the Sith spy ring.

Once more, the *Tyrant's Bane* left Serenno orbit with Aayla in charge. Harry and Ahsoka were busy below, training Ahsoka further in using her chosen element, Fire, and practicing various telekinetic techniques.

By this point, traveling through the D'Astan sector via hyperspace was quite dangerous. Both League and Confederacy had begun to mess with hyperspace lanes by moving asteroids into them in various places. Of course, most of these changes in the D'Astan Sector had been made by the League and Republic, but the forces out of Ord Cestus had also made some changes. Most of these hyperspace traps were accompanied by mines, ambush forces, and other things of that nature. And given the frosty relationship between Serenno and Naz Peron, the Republic wasn't as forthcoming about the changes they made.

All of this meant that the ships of the assault force had to go slowly, with each hyperspace jump carefully calculated, both to take in the changes made to the area by the League and because the longer the jump, the more dangerous it was to suddenly come out of hyperspace unawares. Of the ships in the assault fleet, only the Tyrant's Bane was built to take the punishment of being booted out of hyperspace like that.

The closer they came to Ord Cestus, the worse this would be. But if they took out that system, the Confederacy wouldn't have any planets within the D'Astan Sector to use as a forward base. They would have to come in through other sectors, allowing Serenno and its neighbors to attack their supply routes and cut them to pieces thanks to the aforementioned work on the hyperspace lanes.

"Harry, we're coming up on the jump point to head to Valahari," Aayla sent. "I'm not detecting anything unusual, so should we continue on with the attack lead to Ord Cestus or divert?"

The two of them conferred on this point quietly for several minutes before reaching a consensus. They would head on, but they would let the attack fleet do most of the fighting. *"We need to start working out a tactical doctrine for our Allied starfighters to fight alongside our Vultures anyway. The only fighter jocks that have done that are aboard the Tyrant's Bane, and we need to make certain that the IFF signals work. So a minor battle like this is a good idea."*

"Besides, so long as the bane itself doesn't engage in capital ship style combat, we can simply stay behind and use our 'official' weapons loadout to defend our allies," Aayla agreed, and when the attack fleet jumped next, the Tyrant's Bane went with them, instead of splitting off.

A little under an hour later, Harry sat with Ahsoka, shaking his head at her. "No, I am not going to allow you to take a starfighter out. While you are well enough trained on starfighters for that, I want to put you through some more real-life exercises."

When Ahsoka opened her mouth to protest, Harry held up a hand. "You're close, Ahsoka. Your ability to concentrate on multiple avenues of attack is pretty good. But concentrating on a dozen objects while fighting a single opponent is one thing. Piloting a starfighter in a dogfight with several hundred starfighters, many of whom are your allies but

look exactly like your enemies, is an entirely different thing. After we move to Valahari, we will probably be taking on new starfighter crews, and you can work up to speed with them and our organic vulture force."

"Organic?" Ahsoka asked, confused for a moment.

"Military nomenclature which I might have used incorrectly," Harry admitted. "I think it's supposed to mean internal, coming solely from the specific vessel in question. Don't try to change the subject. You will be on the bridge with myself and Aayla, so your thoughts of sneaking out and joining the Falcon fighters is not going to happen."

"You know, Master, this Master-Padawan bond seems to have a few downsides," Ahsoka grumbled. "Above and beyond the specifics of ours anyway."

"If life was so easy, the universe would not need Jedi," Harry quipped back, reaching forward to poke Ahsoka the nose. "Behave."

Ahsoka sighed, then looked up at a beeping noise as Harry got to his feet heading into the kitchenette. As he did, the door opened to reveal Aayla and several of the other Jedi still aboard the ship, all of whom began to sit down around the area as Harry pulled out a grilled chicken and rice dish. *On the other hand, there are many more positives than negatives to being Master Harry's Padawan*, Ahsoka thought excitedly.

To her astonishment, the battle for Ord Cestus was actually quite anticlimactic. While the locals had nearly thirty wings of starfighters to defend them, the largest ship in orbit was a single Munificent class. To deal with the waves of starfighters, Force Serenno had brought forty Arrowhead-equipped starfighter squadrons, the *Tyrant's Bane* vultures, and eighty gunboats of various types to go along with the *Argent* and twenty-four Archer-class frigates. While only a few of them were the Braha'tok gunboats that had already gained fame in this war, they still could target multiple starfighters at once.

The defending starfighters attacked the incoming fleet, their wings spaced out in waves, the closest striking alone instead of pulling back. On the bridge, Ahsoka saw this and shook her head slightly. "They should've pulled back and hit us all at once, shouldn't they?"

"True." Harry frowned, then directed his words to the sensors specialists. "Order to the fleet. I want everyone's sensors looking for trouble. Minefields powered down, defensive satellites, anything."

It turned out that it was powered-down defensive satellites. As the second wave of starfighters and gunboats began to exchange fire, dozens of defense satellites suddenly powered up, coming online and firing out ion cannon blasts towards the incoming capital ships.

While Harry's warning had prevented the fleet from stumbling into the trap too far, two of the frigates were still knocked out, reeling away with all their systems dead as the ion cannons overrode shields and impacted their hulls. But the Tyrant's Bane shifted to the side slightly, then downward, putting its shields between many of the smaller ships in the attack fleet and the incoming fire. Even powered down to what a normal Lucre Hulk could take, the ship was able to take the punishment with ease, and directed fire destroyed the satellites even as they powered up.

However, the damage had been done, as while many of the satellites fired on the capital ships, others had been quad lasers. These opened up on the allied vultures and their starfighters.

"Pull the manned starfighters back for now," Aayla ordered while Harry directed the capital ships. "Let the vultures and gunboats tuck in-close, forming a multi-sided wedge with the Tyrant's Bane at the point."

"All other capital ships to fall back into the wedge. Shift torpedo fire to defensive, knock out those vultures. And Look for incoming trouble," Harry added, both of them relaying their orders via the communication specialists. "I don't trust the fact that this place doesn't have many capital ships here."

At that point, the remnants of the first two attack waves of vultures reformed along with the last remaining vultures. This even larger wave, launched from the various defensive platforms and the Munificent, came forward with the capital ship. Behind that disciplined hammer, hundreds of disorganized groups of Vultures rose from the planet's surface.

The fight continued, but it quickly became apparent that the defender's surprise with the automated satellites had been their only real surprise. The sheer number of starfighters that rose from the planet was astonishing, but not enough on their own. More than half of the Bane's vultures were destroyed, But soon enough, the Munificent class exploded, and the manned starfighters flashed forward, engaging the various space stations in orbit.

None of those were true defensive stations like the Golan type. However, most of their weapons were anti-starfighters, which worked decently well in defense mode against proton torpedoes. But far too many of them came in, with the missile frigates in the assault fleet launching at each station in squadrons of six.

Even so, thanks to the number of defending vultures, the whole fight had taken two hours, and Ahsoka shook her head, leaning back in her chair, suddenly realizing that she was tired just from trying to watch everything at once. *Maybe Master is right about me needing more experience. This is a small skirmish in comparison to some of the battles we've seen reports about, after all.*

Ahsoka felt someone looking at her and looked over to see your Master looking at her, one eyebrow rising in question as he did. Sighing, she nodded her head to indicate he had had a point, and Harry nodded back, his smile shifting into a warmer one as he whispered to her, "don't worry, Ahsoka. Eventually, you'll get there."

For the rest of the day, they watched as the missile frigates smashed the orbitals of Ord Cestus. The *Tyrant's Bane* then launched their reformed starfighter squadrons down into the atmosphere, where strategic bombings hit several hundred scattered factories worldwide, taking still more losses to defensive fire. They had given the defenders enough time to evacuate those factories, and with modern targeting and decision weaponry, such targets could be taken out without doing too much damage to the surrounding area, but it still took time.

Nothing of Cestus Cybernetics remained intact when they were done, and the orbitals were entirely smashed. The various landing areas on the ground below and military facilities were also destroyed.

Eventually, the work was finished, and the *Tyrant's Bane* broke off from the rest of the attack fleet. That fleet would return to Serenno to rearm and then be reassigned among its nearby allies to bolster their defenses. The job was done, and the D'Astan sector now stood free of Confederacy influence.

Early the next morning, Ahsoka was surprised to find that Harry and Aayla hadn't woken her up that morning for practice. Instead, she found a small note waiting on her datapad, telling her to report to the surface and meet with her Master when she woke up.

Soon she was in her Falcon flying down to the surface of Valahari. The planet was famous for its starfighter designs and various starfighter-related races and other competitions. So it didn't surprise the young Togrutan much to see the shuttle's scanners dotted with hundreds of them. However, the sheer variety was surprising, as there didn't seem to be many mass-produced starfighters out there.

Instead, most of them looked to be one-off designs, and Aayla shook her head at the very idea of trying to field such a diverse starfighter wing. The logistics alone would be a nightmare, and how would you know if the combat specs of all of those ships were actually anywhere near to parity?

As she descended into the atmosphere, she still saw the occasional starfighter in the distance or pick them up on her sensors. Some that flew close to her Falcon looked purely designed for looks, and Ahsoka snorted, patting the controls. "I bet we could drive rings around them, my girl." She knew that Jedi shouldn't get attached to objects or personal property, but she couldn't help a grin of delight as she trailed her fingers along the controls. Her Master had given her this ship before they left Russan, and she spent at least an hour a day either in the cockpit on a simulator or out in space practicing her piloting.

Moments later, Ahsoka was directed by the local space control officer to a specific area, touching down within what looked like a separate landing area for the government, and as she did, Ahsoka winced. *Oh, I hope they don't ask me any questions about the local government or what have you. I haven't researched any of that! Kriff!*

Luckily for Ahsoka, that was not the task Harry had set for the two of them. While Aayla spoke with the locals and organized a discussion with the Council of Counts back on Serenno, the Verpine techs on the Tyrant's Bane and young Orel had spotted something. "We did a routine check of the local communication network and found an example of that underlying encryption program that we were told to look out for. Hopefully, this individual doesn't know everything about our reason for being here, but finding the spy is both a necessity and will be a good exercise for you, Ahsoka."

"That sounds interesting, Master. Tell me more," Ahsoka nearly purred, eager for some action, and Harry chuckled, gesturing that she should walk beside him. Moments later, they were away from the governmental district, walking through the streets, their Jedi robes billowing in the wind as Harry followed up on an earlier instruction from Aayla and began to test out his Padawan's Force Cloak in a real-world environment.

Thanks to Orel and the Verpine, narrowing the search for the spy to a specific apartment complex was easy. It was an extended-stay kind of place, the sort that attracted workers or businessmen who would be moving on after a certain, albeit lengthy, amount of time.

There, Harry stopped, gesturing for Ahsoka to do the same. "Reach out with the Force. Tell me what you sense."

Dutifully, Ahsoka reached out with the Force, keeping her eyes on the apartment complex as Harry pointed at each floor in turn. At first, she was confused by the number of minds she was sensing, but she continued to sift through them, trying to figure out if any of them were feeling guilty, concerned, or frightened. Once Ahsoka had a false alarm and had been about to tell her Master that their quarry was on the third floor, but paused, the sense of guilt shifting into a feeling of mixed excitement and fear.

Pulling back, Ahsoka reported this to Harry, who chuckled a bit. "I believe that might be pair of young people on a date. Watching a horror film is supposedly something of a ritual. Aayla and I have never gotten into that kind of thing, though."

"Horror movies and such are a little weird anyway, Master," Allison answered before reaching out with the Force again. Eventually, she found what she thought was their target. "I think I found him, but he's not feeling any fear, just a bit of anxiety and concern, Master. He's... I don't know, poised, I suppose, is the best word I can think of, and... I just felt a major spike of anxiety. Huh."

"Very good." With that, Harry pulled out a small headset, handing it over to Ahsoka, as he pulled out a second, putting it on his head. "Microphone check. Officer R'agtha, do you hear me?"

"The voice on the other side of that communication was gravelly, very much not human-sounding, although it also sounded brisk and efficient. "Here, Count Potter. We've shut down the local airspace, which was not easy, let me tell you, and have tagged a few starfighters who moved out of that area right before we did. We've ordered them to head to one of the space stations on pain of being fired upon. Your quarry isn't getting away."

"Rule number one of an investigation padawan. Always be willing to work with the locals, unless the Force is telling you that they are corrupt," Harry murmured after giving a grateful thanks to the being on the other end. "Shall we?"

Ahsoka smiled and led the way to the building while Harry waited, both his reflexes and the Force at the ready, as he reminded her that they wanted this man alive. Her hand, which had been twitching towards her lightsaber, halted instantly at that, and Ahsoka nodded, putting her hands back into the long sleeves of her Jedi robe.

After passing the check-in station, the two Jedi headed up to the fourteenth floor of the building. There, Ahsoka paused again and felt out the minds of the individuals on the level. "There are only three of them, two of them to one side of the elevator that carried them up, and one to the other."

"That one is the one feeling anxiety, and I believe he's on the move, Ahsoka. Best we hurry," Harry ordered, and the pair moved in that direction purposefully.

As Ahsoka moved ahead of her Master, Harry reached out and apparated Ahsoka back several paces just as the Force started to blare a warning. Arriving back with her Master once more, Ahsoka took to her emergency apparition much better than the first time and quickly concentrated, creating a Force Shield around them both.

It was well she had, as a second later, an explosion went off from small concussion grenades set into flowerpots on either side of the hallway. The wave of fire flashed out but did nothing to Ahsoka's shield.

A door banged open at the far end of the hall, and movement could be seen through the smoke. Yet, at the same time, a wail of pain went up from one apartment. The explosions from the grenade had taken out segments of the hallway wall and blasted into the apartments beyond.

"Go!" Harry ordered. With a wave of his hand, he created a massive gust of wind through the area, pulling it away from the few fires and pushing the smoke out towards the window that had just been broken at the far end. Someone coughing could be heard, but their

quarry still moved through the smoke. Seeing that, Ahsoka obeyed her Master's orders charging forward as Harry did the same behind her, moving to help the wounded.

At the far end, the man had escaped through the broken window. Ashoka leaped after him, her lightsaber twitching into her hand, and a second later, she blocked two blaster bolts from the man below, who grimaced and tossed up a concussion grenade.

Ahsoka grabbed it with the Force, but the man hit a detonator, and she was forced to fling the grenade upward as it exploded. Only her faster reflexes and the Force warning her of the danger saved her, but by the time she landed, the man was running away once more. Ahsoka gestured and tried to fire a Force Stunner at the man, but he was around the corner before it struck. "Dammit!"

Grumbling to herself, Ahsoka chased after the man, lightsaber turned off for the moment until the rumble of an engine reached her. She barely got back around the corner before a hovercar flew past her, fast enough to have flattened her.

A force jump brought her to the back of the machine, and she shouted, "Surrender! You're not going to get away from..."

Her voice ended in a shriek as the man twisted around a corner, nearly flinging her off the back. It was only thanks to a grip on the back of the hovercar's canopy that let her stay in place. "Well, I tried. I hope this hovercar wasn't a rental."

With that, her lightsaber was once more in her hand, and she chopped down, slicing through a segment of the hovercar's back.

The repulsors within failed, and the car descended quickly, crashing down into the street as Ahsoka leaped clear. She landed lightly on her feet, then turned and moved back towards the crash, only to see the human male they were after push himself out of the car. However, before he could, a Force Stunner caught him, and Ahsoka breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, that was an interesting way to start my day!"

Moments later, as she finished pulling the man out of the wreckage and checked him over for injuries, Harry joined her, reporting that the injured civilian had been taken care of. "Well done, padawan. Another thread to lead us further into the spider web."

OOOOOO

It had taken Padme three days for the SSF, the Senate Security Force, to subtly check on the information that Harry had passed on about the three names.

The information had all proven accurate, but getting teams into position to capture the two roving individuals was somewhat difficult, as was convincing the SSF of the need for

complete and utter information lockdown when dealing with the local, whose name was Bas Ketchaf. The man's position in Republic intelligence was such that any move against him had to be very carefully organized and meticulously documented while also remaining completely hidden from Republic intelligence itself lest someone accidentally leaked the information to where he could acquire it somehow.

Eventually, they were ready to move. While the SSF was not as certain of the man's guilt, the number of encrypted Hypercom messages he had sent, several of which matched a similar code the two roving corporate officials used, was enough to bring him in for questioning. The problem then was where to grab him, and eventually, it was decided to take Bas while he was home.

They might run into surprises, but there weren't nearly as many breakable things around, nor should there be any locals who might take his side. Bas was a trainer for RI field operatives, after all.

"Padme, you do know you don't have to be here for this, right? You're a senator. Why in the world do you want to be part of this attack?"

Padme smirked slightly at Anakin, shaking her head and gesturing to Chewbacca and Zule. In all honesty, she could have preferred that another pair of Jedi had been assigned to help her team with this, but with the war effort going on, she couldn't be picky. The other Jedi on the planet had their own duties to see to, were here to rest from combat missions, or were simply unsuited for this operation.

Although, one of those Jedi who was unsuited to the actual arrest was part of the ongoing efforts to discern where the man they were hopefully about to capture sent his information over at the Hypercom uplink center. *And I do not envy their task. That must be rather like trying to find a needle in an entire universe of haystacks.*

"Two reasons. One, I am the one that supplied this information from one of my own sources. I need to be involved in finishing this. Two, I believe that as the person who is accusing Ketchaf of being a traitor, I need to look him in the face when we arrest him."

"And three, Padme here likes to be very hands-on, and dealing with the Senate day after day is boring despite all of her various duties therein. She's going a bit stir crazy and needs some excitement," Zule intoned.

"I will neither confirm nor deny that statement on account of possibly perjuring myself," Padme answered, smacking her shoulder against Zule's.

Mace raised an eyebrow as the younger Jedi Knight grinned back at her charge, shaking his head internally. Friendships like that between a Jedi and an outsider was rarer than even friendships within the Order. *But Padme's personality and presence seems to evoke such in*

many of those with the Force. Certainly, her friendship with Potter and Secura has been well documented, and Anakin's own response concerned me. But he seems to have gotten it under control. There is no longer sign of the blind infatuation with Padme that Anakin had previously.

"Still, you're a senator! And you're the leader of the Peace Party," Anakin worried. "What if something were to happen to you?"

He grunted as Chewbacca laid a meaty hand on his shoulder, shaking the young Jedi companionably. "Do not worry, young Anakin! Padme has promised me that she will stay at the back of the group when we enter the hab-block. She will only come forward when we have made the arrest to explain to this dishonorable one whose name sounds like a condiment why we are doing so. Is that not so, Padme?"

As the translator's words faded out, Chewbacca turned a gimlet gaze on Padme, while next to her, Zule snickered a bit. The Wookiee took his duty to protect Padme quite seriously, and while Chewie and Mala were extremely pleased that she could look after herself, and indeed had encouraged that from the very beginning, there was a big difference between that and letting Padme put herself in avoidable danger.

But it was the care for her as a person rather than as a simple senator that had forced Padme to go along with Chewbacca's demand. "Yes, I will stay at the back."

"In that case, let us move." With that, Mace turned, nodded his head to the head of the squad of Senate Security men, who nodded brusquely to one of his officers. "Officer Lowell."

That worthy, another human, moved to key the security pad to the hab block. The man lived on what was called the third level of Coruscant, which put it down two levels from the senatorial district on the surface of the ecumenopolis. The sector of the planet was also nearly on the other side from the Senate's. Sunlight did reach down this far, and there weren't too many streets directly above them, but you could still see the effect of living so far down from the current surface of the planet.

As she thought of that, Zule shook her head, knowing why several Jedi of her acquaintance always felt confined, confused and out of sorts on ecumenopolis like Coruscant. They simply were not natural. But her thoughts broke off as the man who had been inputting commands into the door frowned. "Sirs, we have a problem. I can get us in, but there seems to be a secondary code working on this door to tell someone else in the building whenever it's activated."

"It is not a simple security feature for the hab block?" His commander asked quickly.

"No, sir. I isolated that portion of the computer's instructions easily enough, but if I try to do that to this new program, a secondary warning will go off at the attempt. I could use a mechanical override, but we'll have to open the door manually."

"Do it," Anakin ordered, moving forward with his Master to one side of the pedestrian-sized hatchway leading into the massive tower of ferrocrete from the parking area. "We'll get it open."

Moments later, the light of the hatchway's controls dimmed, and the man nodded. "Done, sir, but if you can go slowly, just in case there's any tripwires or anything else?"

"I would say we are being paranoid here, but considering this man is a trainer for Republic intelligence field operatives..." With that, Padme backed away quickly, and Chewbacca did the same while Zule stepped forward, placing herself between the rest of the team and the three men near the doorway.

Without even speaking to one another, Mace and Anakin nodded in turn. Anakin stepped to the side, readying the Force to open the door while Mace raised a Force Shield. It was well they had because when they forced open the door manually, some prepared explosive device went off above the hatchway's ceiling. It was blocked by the Force Shield from Mace, who grunted slightly as the impact hit his shield, holding his hands up equal to his head before he thrust outwards, the shield pushing forward and carrying the explosion away from them further.

"That is very slick work! It's hard to set up something that will go off only when the doors opened manually rather than electronically," the electronics expert muttered, while Anakin simply nodded in agreement. The two of them exchanged ideas on how it had been done even as Anakin ignited his lightsaber and moved forward to step beside his Master.

The rest of the team moved forward behind the two Jedi, with Padme now walking in the center of the cordon as they moved and holding a large blaster. It almost looked as if she should have trouble lifting it given how small Padme was, but that was only if you didn't realize that Padme was in incredibly good shape, something that was not readily apparent if you saw her in her senatorial garb. Indeed, the blaster was the same one she had been practicing with when the humano-centric terrorists had attempted to attack her.

Padme was also wearing a body glove with armor covering her chest and thighs with a helmet now clamped in place over her head. Anakin both approved of the armor she was wearing and, well... how formfitting it was. Watching her pull the chest armor on over the body glove earlier had been a treat, although Anakin had been careful to not be seen noticing.

Soon they were at the area where they could head further upwards via stairs or elevators towards their target, and as one, Anakin and the electronics expert stared at the elevators and shook their heads. "No."

"Nope, those would be death traps," Anakin agreed, looking over at the man whose helmet was a good size larger than the others, the visor equipped with a full HUD display. "Is the target on the move?"

"Yes. I'm trailing the target. I'm also spoofing what I can of Ketchaf's overrides," Lowell answered, fingers clicking quickly over a set of keyboards that were wrapped around his middle. The security force officer used Senate Security overrides to shut down all of the elevators and issue a further override and close internal security bulkheads within the building. But as he did, Lowell froze, staring at the security camera footage for the floor their target was on. "He's stopped and is retreating back to his normal apartment. I think he spotted the bulkheads I've been closing. He's trying something..."

"Sergeant, your team should stay here with your electronics expert, follow up as soon as he's able to walk and work at the same time. Anakin, Zule, Chewbacca with me," Master Windu ordered, turning and racing to the nearest stairwell leading upwards.

Two floors later, Anakin realized that Padme had come with them rather than stay with the rest of the security team as was sensible. But before he could open his mouth and demand Padme turn back, the Force blared a warning to him, and he turned like a striking cobra, lightsaber activating with a hiss before he hacked into the wall as a security gun suddenly popped out of a small hatch.

"Master Jedi!" The voice of the computer specialist barked into their communications headsets. "A new virus has developed, messing with the hab security. Its Identify Friend/Foe program is completely messed up right now, and it's designating anything that moves beyond Bas as under-hab gangsters! Lethal Force is authorized. Dammit, I didn't even know that level three hab blocks were allowed to **have** lethal force authorizations! I'm trying to get through the programming, but it'll take a while."

"They're not supposed to have such authorization," Mace murmured, even as he too struck a security gun from the wall with his lightsaber. "Yet again, something to investigate later."

The security guns nearby were dealt with quickly, but others from higher up the stairwell fired down at them. Anakin's lightsaber shifted around in a wide arc, blocking the plasma balls as they came towards them, while Zule shifted to the rear of their group, using a Force Shield to defend them from behind while Mace moved up to stand alongside his padawan.

Padme and Chewbacca began to fire past them into some of the security lasers, and the group slowly made their way up the stairs towards their target. "Officer Lowell, is the target still on the floor he was originally?" Padme asked, having taken the time to close her helmet visor, her voice coming to all the others over their own headsets.

"No," came the instant reply. "Kerchaf's now three floors further down than he should be, although I can't tell how he did it. He's also moving along with... hold on..." Lowell paused and then came back, the scowl in the officer's voice very obvious. "Positively ID'd. The Black

Maws mercenary company, comprised entirely of Trandoshans. Heavily armed, blasters, vibro-weapons, heavy armor. I see at least fifteen of them! How the hell..."

Mace cut in swiftly. "Ask how they are here on Coruscant with no one knowing later. Work on apprehending them now."

"You're nearly at the floor where they're moving. the targets are out in the open now moving down the hallway rather than however they were moving between floors." Officer Lowell went on before his superior cut in, saying they were moving to support.

"Are you positive that the target is still with the Trandoshans?" Zule asked quickly, as her lightsaber flashed back into her hand, the guns below them having been cut to ribbons by it a second ago as she hurled it forward, controlling its movements with the Force even as she maintained the Force Shield between the incoming fire from them. "We don't want this man to get away."

"Agreed..." Came several voices. At that, the Senate Security Forces left several small scanning behind them to make certain that the man couldn't somehow double back along his route and then keep going down without being seen before moving to back up the Jedi.

Thinking about it, Padme supposed simple explosives would allow him to do that and hoped fervently that the people living below him weren't at home at the moment. *But there is nothing I can do about it now.*

Mace and Anakin opened the door leading onto the floor where their quarry was moving, stepping out and instantly raising their lightsabers to block incoming blaster fire. Lots of it. Ahead of them, the Trandoshans were moving, giving each other cover fire as they shifted down the corridor, using the doorways to either side as cover, while other pairs charged forward, halting now at the sight of the Jedi.

"Bas Ketchaf, you are wanted to answer allegations of espionage and acts against the Republic. Come quietly, or you and your companions will be subject to lethal measures," Mace toned calmly, his voice showing none of the strain of blocking so many blaster bolts coming towards them moving forward and allowing the others behind him to exit the doorway, with Anakin first stepping to one side of him, their lightsabers now moving in tandem, covering the entire hallway in a flashing defense of purple and blue, the sounds of the blaster bolts hitting the ignited plasma blade's of the two Jedi filling the room, creating a cacophony of noise.

Bas didn't reply to Mace's words, simply shouting out orders unheard by the Jedi and their fellows over the sounds of battle. Instead of moving forward, the Trandoshans began to shift backward and away from the Jedi, but watching them go, Anakin saw them placing small plastic explosives against the walls to either side. "Oh, kriff no!"

With that, Anakin ducked low, shouting out, "Zule!" The other Jedi stepped forward, taking his position, while Anakin reached forward with the Force. He grabbed the plastic explosives, tearing them from the wall, tossing them further down the hallway.

The explosives were of a type used in prepared explosions, which would detonate either on command or at a much harsher impact than could be made just by tossing the substance around. Experienced mercs, the Trandoshans had just a moment to realize that and start breathing again when Chewbacca smashed one of the prepared explosions out of the air with a well-timed shot from his bow-caster.

Being hit like that was a little too much, and an explosion rocked the building. Six of the Trandoshan were turned into offal, blood and bits of scale covering their fellows the walls and ceiling.

Standing behind the Jedi, Chewbacca roared his challenge, his translation software not working on the noise, perhaps purposefully, or perhaps because this roar was not a word even in his guttural language. Rather, it was simply a snarl of fury and hate directed at his people's most violent foes, the aliens who hunted Wookies for their meat.

Seeing the Wookiee seemed to break whatever discipline the Black Maw mercenaries had been operating under. Even as the smoke of the explosion began to dissipate, they dug in, smashing down doors, ignoring the cries and shouts of a few people within them, pulling the metallic doors down to use them as barricades. Firing from their new positions, the Trandoshans hissed out their own war cries.

And as the Jedi shifted forward out of the stairwell, the security guns situated in the ceiling popped out, blasting out red darts of energy toward them. Unfortunately, whatever Bas had done to designate the Senate security forces and the Jedi as criminals was still working.

Behind the flashing blades of the Jedi, the rest of the security team had arrived, slowed by needing to destroy some of the security guns below where Anakin and the others had been when they activated under Bas's control. Now they added their fire to Padme and Chewbacca, aiming their heavier guns at the security gun hatches, destroying them as the group pushed forward.

Yet even as the fight between them and their quarry began to reach her crescendo, Mace could sense Bas attempting to get away by retreating from the area of combat back the way they had come and into a room there. "He is going to attempt to escape on his own. Zule, pull back, head down one level and try to cut Ketchaf off."

Zule, who had been about to launch a Force Stun down the corridor, nodded, pulling back to the stairs and heading down a floor. Padme moved with her, reckoning that there was nothing that she could do to add to the firefight going on up there at the moment with all the

others in the way. After a last roaring insult at the Trandoshans, Chewie also fell back, unwilling to let his desire to slay his people's old foes get in the way of his duty.

By the time they reached the floor below Anakin and the others, their quarry was already out of the suite he had come down into and moving along the hallway away from the stairwell. From the entrance to the Stairwell, Zule let loose with her readied Force Stun. But somehow, the man saw it coming and ducked into a doorway, barely dodging the red blast of Force energy.

He returned fire, but Zule almost lazily batted his blaster bolts to the side, right up until further security guns popped out. "Force kriff it. This is getting annoying!"

Padme didn't say anything, instead firing past her friend at the man, hoping to hit them in the legs. However, her bolts missed, and a second later, he released two smoke grenades. The smoke quickly filled up the hallway, blocking Bas from her fire, so she shifted to destroy a few of the security guns, along with Chewie, who had just arrived behind her.

"Stay behind me," Zule ordered, one hand thrusting forward as she erected a Force Shield before hurling her lightsaber up and over, intent on using the same trick she had done in the stairwell. Concentrating on her lightsaber, Zule used the Force to send it twisting and cutting into the security guns, only to gasp as Ketchaf fired accurately at the hilt of her lightsaber. She tried to pull the lightsaber back and was able to move it out of the way while the smoke cleared.

A shot rang out from behind her, and Ketchaf cried out, going to one knee as a blaster bolt hammered into his leg. He tried to raise his gun again, but Zule still controlled her lightsaber and sent it swooping back in, cutting into Ketchaf's blaster right above his hand.

To her surprise, Ketchaf then pulled out two more handguns and began to fire them one after another towards the Jedi. But Zule's Force Shield was still up and absorbed the bolts easily.

Another single shot from Padme rang out, impacting the doorway right beside his head. "Surrender, Ketchaf!"

The man didn't reply, continuing to shoot at them sporadically as he slowly retreated, keeping Zule hopping by shifting her lightsaber away from his shots. *Okay, so maybe there's a reason why so few Jedi use this technique...*

A second later, Padme and Zule both heard the voice of officer Lowell. "Senator, Master Jedi, we have Senate security forces moving in. I've radioed them about our mission, and they have agreed to assist. Electronic countermeasures are now authorized for the clear and present danger to civilians. All electronics within this hab block are being shut down, and we have security forces moving in below us as well as above."

Grimacing, Zule acknowledged, sweat beading her brow now as she drew her lightsaber back to her hand. Deactivating it, she waited for the security guns to lose power before gesturing with both hands. The Force Shield in front of her dissipated, and a Force Stun flashed down the corridor towards their target once more.

But Bas had not been idle. Instead of continuing to fire both blasters, Bas had put one down on the floor before pulling out a vibro-knife, cutting into the doorway he was leaning against. Now Bas rolled through the small hole he had cut, dodging Zule's attack. Getting to his feet slowly, Bas tossed two more smoke grenades behind him so that the Jedi couldn't see what he had done for a bit longer.

The family who had been huddling within the sitting room at the sounds of violence outside squawked in terror at him, and Bas emotionlessly raised his blaster, shooting each of them once in the head, before tossing down a shaped charge and stepping into the bathroom using the separating wall as cover.

Zule's lightsaber was cutting into the doorway a second later, but he was already leaping down, a grunt of agony escaping Bas's lips as his legs took the impact.

Above, Zule had paused a brief second to stare at the dead family, shaking her head sadly. *There was no need for that*, she reflected, her face firming even as she moved to the small, neatly seared-out hole in the floor. Two grenades flashed up towards her, but she caught them with the Force and then she grimaced, hastily creating a Force Shield around them to contain the explosions swaying at the effort.

Padme dodged past her, leaping down, rolling as she hit and bringing up her blaster set to stun.

The man she was waiting for dodged to one side, tossing his vibro-dagger at her, following up on it as he lunged forward, one hand reaching for Padme's throat under her helmet.

Whether or not he intended to take her as a hostage or something was unknown and would forever be so. Because Padme dodged the vibro-dagger and kicked out hard, hitting him in the same place where his leg had already been seared by a blaster shot. Instantly his charge halted and he fell, groaning in agony as she rolled away, bringing her blaster up.

But she stopped as Ketchaf stared at her, his teeth clenched unnaturally. Zule and Chewie landed next to her a second later, and both women frantically tried to open his mouth, but it was too late. Ketchaf's body shuddered, spasming in their grip as the poison worked through his body far too fast for them to stop.

Hours later, the Chancellor leaned back in his chair as he looked at the individuals in front of his desk. "Well, this has been something of a disaster. Can I ask why you decided to try

and apprehend him at his home rather than his place of work? Surely it would have been far easier there?"

"We would have, except for the fact that we were uncertain if he had suborned anyone else there, and we would've had to be far more overt in our approach. We were attempting to take Ketchaf quietly. We just had no idea how many electronic defenses he had," Mace answered calmly, while next to him, Anakin winced at the implied rebuke from a man he respected. "Nor about the Black Maw mercenaries he had somehow employed without anyone even knowing they were on-planet."

"Considering his position, he could easily have turned the recent training cadre he's working with against us," Padme agreed. "Maybe calling it a live-fire training exercise, or simply stating that we were traitors to the Republic. You know there is an anti-League sentiment among the Republic intelligence which has washed onto the Jedi despite how they have to work with the League's Specters."

The Chancellor nodded slowly. "I agree with that, I suppose. Still, when I authorized this, I had hoped for a surgical strike against a single spy. Now we have uncovered that the man was part of possibly an entire spy ring, with feelers deep into not only Coruscant Space security but local security in that sector and access to high-end Senate codes or his own slicer to have gotten away with so much preparation. I am pleased with the information and yet also deeply concerned. You realize that with his position, he could well have indoctrinated dozens of our field agents into whatever Sith worshiping cult he is a part of?"

"That is understood, Chancellor. Although I would hesitate to use the word cult in this conversation," Mace cautioned.

"What else would you call it then? He willingly killed himself to not be captured by you, Jedi. Your pardon Senator Padme, but I rather doubt that your own presence really mattered one way or the other once the lightsabers came out despite your being the closest to actually capturing him. Certainly, he could not have made out your identity through your helmet," the Chancellor deadpanned, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"Unless you are telling me that Master C'baoth was able somehow instills that kind of devotion, then religious mania is..." He trailed off, looking at Mace, his face shifting into a one of horror.

"Given what Master C'baoth was able to do to Force users, we cannot say that is outside the realm of impossibility. Given the man's position in Republic intelligence, it is also clear he would have been a priority," Mace answered with a sigh. "Tracing his movements is going to be a very time-consuming task, however, considering we still have no idea how long that kind of programming could exist in a person's mind without renewal."

"That is horrifying," the Chancellor said, shuddering. "And we have no defense against that kind of thing?"

For a moment, Padme's hand gently tapped against her necklace hidden underneath her clothing, recalling its power and the feel of Harry putting it on, the feel of his hands on her neck and Aayla's fingers in her hair causing her to fight back an inappropriate shiver. Padme never took it off, and Zule renewed the energy every week for her. That necklace, and not just what he represented, was a balm to her soul at times, knowing Master C'baoth's abilities.

That, and the hidden Sith. I wish I could say it wasn't one of my fellow Senators. Maybe this investigation will point to someone.

At least I know it isn't the Chancellor. The moves leading up to his becoming Chancellor were beyond anyone's ability to manipulate, and he has done far too much good in the office. Even though he and my beliefs have started to separate recently regarding what is most important, peace and independence, or law and order, I cannot deny Palpatine has proven a rock in this time of turmoil.

"We do. We have developed mental techniques that can clear a mind of such things, both among the Jedi and non-Force users. Although not without cost. But we have not yet become so paranoid that we are using such on every sentient we interact with. Considering how many senators hate the very idea of Jedi doing anything with the Force near them, let alone touching their own minds with it, we would be making further trouble for ourselves," Mace answered.

"And people like this can't be everywhere. That's simply impossible. Master C'baoth is only one person after all, and we've already captured two others that are part of this spy ring, neither of whom were so fanatical as to try and take their own lives. They're still not answering our questions because they hate Jedi, which is probably part of the vetting process or whatever," Zule interjected. "But they will give us answers eventually."

"Ah, that is good to hear. As is the fact that I have already heard back from Republic intelligence about quarantining those intelligence operatives trained by Bas. Republic intelligence will follow up on that aspect with Jedi assistance. However, Master Windu, I am uncertain that you and young Anakin are the best fit for this ongoing assignment."

As Mace cocked his head inquiringly, the Chancellor chuckled dryly, shaking his head. "You are known as one of the best combatants within the Order, and Anakin's abilities have also been well documented. And his lack of subtlety." He jibed good-naturedly, sending the boy a wink.

Anakin chortled, shrugging his shoulders while his Master rolled his eyes. "I am what I am, Chancellor."

"I take it you would prefer us at the front lines then?" Mace said, his tone somewhat repressive as he looked at his padawan.

"Yes. There is a new clone army group finishing its training, the 501st. I believe that the two of you would do magnificently as their general and chief subordinate, whatever rank that is. I have already spoken about this with the high command and Master Yoda, and if you agree, Master Windu, then the two of you will leave Coruscant shortly. Master Yoda has already decided to detail following up on this operation to others among your Order."

Since the original conversation on who would lead the various clone armies, the Jedi had been forced to soften their initial stance on not wishing to be in direct command of the troops. There simply weren't enough experienced commanders out there for the number of battlefields. While there was a decent cadre of fleet officers, large land-based military actions had not been seen in more than six hundred years. This was made worse by the fact there weren't that many clones trained to command beyond the level of Major.

So Yoda and Rancisis had been forced to admit that Jedi could command battlegroups or campaigns. But only those Jedi who had passed lengthy training exams to make certain they could handle the responsibility and understood that the clones were not to be wasted like the droids they faced. The Jedi still served as special forces or advisors, but that was slowly changing as the lack of competent generals became an ever-increasing problem.

Both Mace and Anakin had passed such tests during the time they had been on Coruscant while Mace had forced Anakin to go through his control training once more. Mace had some experience leading troops before this, while Anakin did not, but had proven to have an incredible battle sense thanks to his Force-assisted instincts.

Mace frowned thoughtfully but acknowledged that he had told Yoda earlier that day that he was pleased with Anakin's progress in regaining control of himself. The boy still had a few issues when slaves or his mother came up in conversation, but for the most part, he had regained his self-control to the point where Mace was willing to take them out of the temple once more. He hadn't even responded to Padme more than looking at her as just another attractive young woman, which was major progress.

"You are correct, Chancellor. Neither mine nor my Padawan's strengths lead in the direction of a typical Sentinels. And subtlety is what is needed here to fully delve into the nature of this web of espionage."

"Thank you for agreeing," the Chancellor intoned simply. "I would suggest that you meet with Master Yoda and the rest of the high command. They might have a war zone they want to throw you in the 501st into rapidly. But I'm not part of that discussion loop."

The Chancellor turned to Zule and politely asked if she would join the ongoing investigation. Zule answered in the affirmative, although she stated that she would not be doing so to the extent that it took her away from protecting Padme.

"Given Young Padme's proclivity for finding trouble, I have to say that is a rather good idea," the Chancellor said dryly, shooting his former queen a mock-quelling look. "Regardless, keep me informed. I wish to know how deep this... infiltration goes if you please."

Padme and Zule both nodded before exiting the room with the Jedi. "So, you two were off again to the front lines," Zule remarked. "A very small part of me isn't quite envious of that. At least there, you know where your enemies are."

Anakin snorted at that, then looked at Padme. "Be careful, please. No more running after extremely well-trained intelligence operatives? You got lucky when you jumped down that hole."

"Chewbacca and Zule have both told me several times," Padme answered, her tone mild but her eyes flashing. "As is their right." Anakin flinched a bit but didn't look away, and after a second, Padme went on. "But I did get lucky. At least he wasn't able to get away, which was a concern."

The apartment the man had dropped down into had its own private patio, where a hoverbike would normally have been parked. It hadn't been there at the time, thankfully, but the man could still have repelled down the building disappearing into the darkness below and the unplumbed depths of Coruscant.

"True, but that doesn't mean you should continually look for an opportunity to put yourself in danger," Zule reproved, linking her arm with her friend. Padme rolled her eyes but allowed Zule to tug her along as she continued to speak to Anakin and Mace about what they could expect at the front lines. For now, the investigation into Ketchaf and his contacts both within the government and without would have to be left in the hands of others.

Yet, even so, Padme was gleeful. They had finally begun to make real headway against the hidden Sith and his pawns, and by the Force, did it feel good!

OOOOOO

For a few moments after the door shut behind Amidala and the others, the Chancellor sat there, gripping the edge of his table with both hands as he tried to keep control of his emotions. *Damn it, while this is in no way my worse case scenario, what this will do on my hold of Republic Intelligence is going to be extremely annoying to deal with!*

While he had been able to clear any connection between Ketchaf, Director Issard and Pestage, Ketchaf's own work within the Republic Intelligence Directorate, those agents trained

to be more loyal to the Chancellor and to his orders than the law, would have to be sacrificed. Sidious had already given out orders for those agents to go into hiding or be killed by other agents, thereby removing their utility for him within Republic intelligence. *Thankfully I had the time to emplace the mental command to kill himself with the poison tooth once his capture was certain. If I had not... blast it!!!*

Worse would be the ongoing investigation into the man's contacts here on Coruscant. Those were admittedly few, and none would be traced back to the Senate or the government, but a good deal of the Sith's intelligence network among the people, the network he used to create action teams, diversions, and trouble across the planet, had run through Ketchaf as a second-to-last cut-out. Now, all those resources would be found by the Jedi.

Further, the Jedi would be looking at the Hypercom Uplink Center again. Just when it had been previously cleared of viruses and spyware from the Confederacy after the system shutdown caused by such bugs when Dominus had launched his initial strike. *The Dark Side claim Amidala's whore soul, that is the last thing I want. If not for the fact the Sith's own direct connection to it is so well-hidden, the secret temple itself might have been in danger.*

Overall, the man's removal isn't going to damage my network elsewhere, but here on Coruscant, especially when it comes to Coruscant Space Control, I'm going to lose a lot of my pawns, Sidious admitted to himself. That left him weaker here, at least in terms of intelligence gathering in what should be his place of greatest power.

Thankfully, Sidious's work to suborn the Senate's Security Force was working well enough. Their loyalties to him became firmer and firmer rather than to the Senate as a whole. And that wasn't going to stop, thanks to how compartmentalized everything Sidious was up to was.

But once more, Sidious was faced with several hard, unpalatable facts. The Jedi had most decidedly scored a major victory on the espionage side of things, and there was nothing he could do to reverse that. Not without shutting down his network himself, something he had already begun to order. Nothing the Jedi could find or discover from his type two agents would lead directly back Sidious, but without that espionage network, Sidious would have to rely entirely on Republic intelligence, which would not allow him to react nearly as quickly as he had been able to in the past, nor would he be as well-informed. *And thanks to the suspicion about Ketchaf, my ability to use their reaction teams is gone as well!*

This was just a new addition to a long list of failures that had begun to sprout up of late. Until Sidious figured out how the GDL was finding his spies, the GDL would become even harder to keep tabs on. *Nor am I so foolish as to think Potter will not share how they are doing it with the rest of the Jedi. At least my type one agent will not be affected by this, but I will have to order them to go silent for a few months too!*

Potter!!! It all comes back to Potter. C'baoth can continue to attack him on the military scale, but I need to set into motion something else. Assassination rather than assault. He will be on Corellia for the inauguration of the League's Congress... Yes, that will prove that the most opportune moment, an assassination and a message sent. But how? What kind of tool can I bring to bear that could face a Jedi like him?

He was still contemplating that when the timer he'd said went off, and he shuddered. With difficulty, Sidious began to re-create his Chancellor persona over his face as he stood up, moving with the proper gravity due to his position as he prepared to head to another meeting. Yet the effort was difficult, far more difficult than it had ever been before.

Further cracks were beginning to accumulate. And Sidious could feel once again that feeling of pebbles turning into boulders falling down the mountainside.

OOOOOO

"While the last of your assigned ships have arrived, you have yet to tell me of the overall target of your mission. As I am in charge of your logistics train, as well as to coordinate any reinforcements you require, this seems counterintuitive, as if someone added instead of subtracted the Fitzrag hyperspatial constant."

Grievous turned away from the report he was reading to look over his shoulder at the local Admiral, who had come onto his flag bridge without calling ahead. Considering that his ship was stationed alongside the man's command station, by military protocol, the Givin was allowed to come and go where he wished. Yet Grievous was once more annoyed that Valta was still insufficiently cowed to avoid coming to him like this. "We are operating on a need to know. You do not need to know as we have explained before," he growled, his robotic voice adding an even deeper measure of danger to it.

"Incorrect. As stated previously, I will be in charge of any reinforcements required on your end. At the very least, I will need to know where to send them at any point during your campaign. While I know you wish to eventually strike at Ord Podera, that is not the true goal of your buildup. If I do not know your plans after that phase, my ability to aid them will become inefficient on an exponential curve with every move you make," the Givin admiral replied tartly. "Even our logistics experts, the local manufacturers who will be supplying the needed parts, proton torpedoes and a few of the Vultures, have not been told. There comes a point where keeping a secret is no longer mathematically feasible. You have reached that point, General Grievous."

Turning, Grievous moved towards the man, his hydraulic legs slowly raising his body up so that he loomed over the Givin, glaring down at him. But Valta looked back, unafraid. And finally, Grievous nodded his head. "Very well. Look." With that, he turned away and used his metallic fingers to type in a few commands to his main tactical holo-sphere.

For a moment, Grievous watched Valta stare into its depths, tracing the root of Grievous' planned campaign. Over the past few weeks as his fleet strength was built up, the cyborg had gotten better at reading Givin body language since their facial expressions were nearly nonexistent. Now he could see the moment when Valta understood what would happen, all his body language shutting down, as the Givin felt shocked for the first time since Grievous had arrived here.

This quickly segued into horror, and he turned rapidly to Grievous. "This is impossible! Mathematically unsupportable! A zero-sum game! You do not intend to take Thyferra and reinforce it, hold it against the Republic. You intend to, to destroy it! impossible, incalculable. Ridiculous!"

"But it is what is going to happen. Think of it," Grievous said, his voice low, almost sibilant despite the continued rasping noise from his mechanical voice box. "The Confederacy uses droids. The League uses troops taken from across their worlds. The Republic, clones. Both of our enemies' militaries require bacta in monstrous quantity. Ours do not. Further, the Commerce Guild has built up a large reserve of bacta for the use of our own citizens."

"And the anger, the mathematically certain fury at our destruction of the source of bacta?! This is a zero-sum game, as I said! Currently, the Republic is still torn, still with internal divisions about how to deal with the Confederacy and the League. If we do this, we will unite that public opinion. It becomes a simple mathematical formula of us versus them to the death!" Valta's words were fired out rapidly but lost some of their cohesion as he spoke.

Grievous snorted, waving that away. The social and moral side of this decision didn't matter to Grievous. The dependence on bacta the Republic had long built was a weakness, and he would target it. "That does not matter to me. Mine is only to do what I have been ordered to. And that is to destroy Thyferra after drawing away their defenders. Your objective is to help me do so while also continuing to defend your homeworld and the other Confederacy planets in the area."

"No! I will not allow..." That was as far as Valta got before one of Grievous's lightsaber activated and then flashed down, cutting the Givin in two.

As the man's body slumped to either side, many of Grievous' people looked up from their jobs, but he turned, staring them down, even as he gestured to the Magna Guard currently assigned to follow him. "Awaken the rest of your brethren. And awaken the Super Tactical Droid we were sent. He will take command here when we leave. The rest of you will join me in speaking to the local government."

By the end of the day, Grievous had removed many of Givin's government officials, although few of them understood why he had taken that measure. The local Confederacy military forces would answer to him come what may, and his chosen representative, the new

version of the old, rather poorly programmed tactical command droid. The new STD would ensure that Grievous' supply chain would keep flowing when he needed it.

With that seen to, Grievous began to work up his fleet, hidden deep within the system, far beyond any prying eyes of the Republic. Within the week, Grievous wanted to be prepared to launch his campaign. After that, it would be another month before they were in position to strike at Thyferra with enough military strength to wipe out the planet.

As he began to prepare full fleet exercises, Grievous allowed himself what amounted to a smile given his body. *If the Republic and the League think they understand the true horrors of war, I will very much enjoy proving them wrong.*

End Chapter

Now, a few of my readers were concerned about the seeming Dues Ex Machina I had the Sith spy network pull to learn about the rune-expanded freighters. Now here, you see why, LOL, as well as some new OCs which I will use for the clandestine side of the war going forward. I needed that too – unknowns that can act on the side and not draw attention. Right now, this victory isn't a big deal, or at least, it doesn't seem so just yet, but it is just one more way the GDL is proving to be a dangerous player. That will cause issues with the Centrists eventually, but at the moment, the Jedi have scored a real victory against the Sith.

As for the discussion between Harry, Aayla and Padme, I had long ago decided that Harry and Aayla's relationship would be based off those between elves in the old graphic novel Elfquest. The elves in that work have pair-bonded lovers (husband and wife) and do not equate physical love with that kind of connection. But they are now involved with Padme who does, and it has finally been shown to them that hey, they need to change their way of thinking.

I will have this work in the small story poll going forward, and keep it there for a while. No more large chapters, but at this point it isn't going to be necessary... I hope.

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, even if the action was kind of dominated by new OCs.

