

Hey all!

Here is the next chapter of ***Magic of the Force***. Yes, this story is still going, but it hasn't won the large story or small story polls. Beyond that I have been trying to give more priority to ***ATP***. So this probably does not mark the start of more regular updates. Sorry.

This was also supposed to be updated by the end of December, but I had to redo several scenes. Regardless I hope you enjoy this.

I have edited it with Grammarly, and have had a Patron, *Gregory Botting*, go over it for me.

## Chapter 21: War, And War By Other Means

While Harry was turning a counter-espionage mission into a learning experience for his padawan, news of the battle of Ord Cestus and the complete destruction of Cestus Cybernetics spread. Thanks to the Hypercom Network still being used by both sides of the war, with only the CIS trying to curtail what civilians could discover, news quickly spread of the battle, as, unlike when the *Bane* fought the Confederacy fleet sent after it, Harry and the others hadn't jammed the system's communications.

On top of that, Harry had learned the lesson of good propaganda very well over the past few years, something neither Master Fay nor Master Dooku had really considered. So to help along the news of what could be called the first offensive victory of the war for the 'good guys' was quite important across the galaxy, both to the GDL and the Republic, he released the official recording of the battle to several dozen news agencies, both within the GDL and the Republic. One or two of them might even have ties still with the Confederacy. It was hard to tell at this point, given how muddled the issue of communication and who-controlled-what was.

Regardless, the news buoyed spirits on two out of three sides of this war.

And Sidious was not pleased with it, to put it mildly. First was the fact he had never had a single hint that the GDL was preparing even a small-scale attack like this. The target made sense, but it showed Sidious once more that he had no information source on the GDL's military side. Second, the *Tyrant's Bane*, both as a ship and a symbol, was growing in importance. Far more importance than he had ever thought the ship would ever attain.

*I should've looked into the Jedi's acquisition of that ship and everything to do with it more closely, blast it! If I had, perhaps I would have realized the importance of Potter. Who is the major reason to be furious at the ship and all those onboard.*

Like all Sith (and, to be sure, many Jedi), Sidious was not someone who liked to admit he had made mistakes, but he was having his head very firmly rubbed into this one. Ever since the war had begun, that ship had been a plague on his future plans. Worse, he had recently seen reports from a few Type Three spies in Corellia that told him several other Lucrehulks had been seen there. The reports were unclear as to precisely how many, as the ship seemed to be moved around the system randomly to throw off any attempts at observation.

And like in several other places within the GDL, Sidious was losing his Type Two agents in Corellia. He had lost eight hundred of them in the last two weeks alone. Spread out over the GDL, those

losses might have been minuscule, but with every victory, the GDL blinded his spy network further. *The GDL has far too much understanding of spycraft and espionage for my liking! Money still talks, and I still have many Type Three agents throughout the GDL. But my Type Two agents are being discovered far too quickly. Luckily, that process seems to be slowing down the past few days, but even so, I dislike being blind almost as much as I dislike being blindsided. Which is to say nothing of the damage done here on Coruscant to my spy network, or my control of Republic Intelligence, thanks to Ketchaf and his death.*

With a growl, Sidious scowled as he turned his mind back to Potter and the Tyrant's Bane. *What secret weapon does that ship use? Can it be replicated in the ships in GDL space? That ship destroyed a fleet of fifty of its counterparts and their accompanying escort ships. If any captured Lucrehulks could be fitted with a similar weapon...*

Shaking his head, Sidious forced his mind away from that issue now. Until his spies discovered the nature of those weapons - if such a thing was possible - there was little he could do about it. Similarly, the issue with the younglings of the Jedi order had long since left his ability to do anything about. That **infuriated** Sidious even now, but Sidious had long since learned that there were two things as the Sith Lord he could not afford. He could not afford to let his anger get the best of him, turning him into a berserker like Maul or a madman like Skere Kaan, who had lost all ability to think past his own nihilism. And he could not allow himself to get tunnel vision. Sidious needed to think of the big picture, the future, and the revenge of the Sith.

*Consider the Great Plan always. Look at it as if the Great Plan is a plant that needs constant care. Prune here, trim there, more lighting, feed it more nutrients at set intervals, but keep it alive and growing. The younglings are gone, out of my reach. Very well, it will need to be dealt with in the future. At present, I cannot do anything about it, but in the future, I must turn the common citizen even further against the Jedi and erase their history and any good deeds the Order has accomplished even more than I had before. I cannot rely on simply showing*

*Yes, the Tyrant's Bane is a problem. Yes, it is a mystery. But I cannot personally solve either issue. I already have my PR people working on the GDL as a whole and Potter in particular. Public opinion will change slowly, but I will be ready for it when it does, while my enemies must not be, simply assuming it is an issue within the Senate.*

At that, Sidious allowed himself a small smile. The various Hypercom news agencies were towing an extremely neutral line letting the reporters in the war zones direct how the news went. Instead of adding their own slants to things as they normally would. That would come in time, but the Jedi were watching those news feeds too closely for now. But they were not watching local news nearly hard enough. And there, his tools had already begun to paint the GDL in the same light as the Confederacy, only less violent and more subversive. There was even the tiny start of blaming the Jedi for the GDL, something made easy by Harry Potter and his alien lover's relationship with the Jedi Order.

*The vast majority of the communications networks are operated by companies in the Core, and my grip will soon become absolute on them. Militarily, I already have Thrawn slowly rising up the officers' ranks. With him, I will have a tactical and strategic genius that can offset the issues on that score. What I must do now is continue to strengthen my own position, my own popularity, make it clear that Potter is a flash in the pan, while I am the steady voice, the elder statesman with the will of iron that the Republic needs at this point more than ever.*

The thought made Sidious sneer internally, but it was an image he had perfected long since. All he needed to do there was keep it up while pushing his own agenda and show how his own probity, decisions and instincts shone in comparison to others, even on the military side of things. *And in that, I can use the GDL's own successes.*

Sidious took a few moments to compose himself, ironically using a breathing exercise that the Jedi and the Sith had in common. As those thoughts went through his head, he had been walking the short distance from The Chancellor's dedicated tramway through several security checkpoints in the Republic high command's headquarters.

After composing himself, Sidious walked into an amphitheater separated into separate segments. A small sitting area with individual seats was already filling with Senators from the Senate military oversight committee and a few bodyguards. This included the female Jedi, the half-Falleen Zule Siss, who had been permanently assigned to Padme for some reason. That worthy caught his eyes and bowed from the waist with both hands pressed together in her Jedi robes, and Sidious nodded his head in reply, his public smile on his face.

The foolish Jedi had no idea of his real thoughts, of course. Even Yoda had never had any such inkling. Still, her presence annoyed Sidious a bit, as did Padme's. Having the very vocal leader of the peace party as part of the military oversight committee struck him as bizarre. Yet Padme had been nominated for the position and even given some good advice a time or two.

The other segment of the amphitheater was the military segment. This was a full command center, with a hologram linked to the main plot elsewhere in the headquarters, updated almost as quickly, although removed just in case there was an emergency... and so that the high command could censor the information shown the Jedi and the oversight committee at need. *Soon, soon I will be the one deciding that. But not now. Not after Ketchaf's death and how Yssard was forced to run an internal audit of Republic Intelligence, with several Jedi watching over his shoulder. Which has also curtailed my information network further. Dark Side take their souls!*

Several officers were still coming in from their own entrance on the other side as Sidious began to move around the hologram, peering at it thoughtfully as one of his aides, an android, began to rattle out facts and figures of the various battle fronts. This was one of the five droids the Chancellor used for such things, a well-known fact by this point, something Sidious had made certain of since the war began. So much so that those droids could come and go in some very odd places.

Soon Sidious sat down in his own portion of the viewing room along with Master Yoda and Master Rancisis, and High Admiral Yularen began the twice-weekly meeting with the oversight committee. Most of this meeting was taken up by the logistics of the ongoing war, the monetary side obviously, which the oversight committee had a lot of influence on. Then came the strategic picture: how things were going on the various battle fronts, what new fronts had opened up, what battles had been lost or what stalemates had continued, and what battles had been won by either the GDL or the Republic.

Obviously, the high command of the Republic did not have the full peak picture of the GDL front, but the GDL was good about sharing specific battle information with the Republic. So while they didn't

know the numbers involved or the overall dispersal of the GDL's navy, let alone small skirmishes, they knew where major battles had taken place.

It was here where the victory over Ord Cestus was discussed. The strategic ramifications of that, the fact that it would basically remove the forwardmost position that could possibly have been used to threaten Serenno and most of the D'Astan sector was a large consideration, and Sidious smiled benignly as he heard it, while many of the Senators mumbled happy or annoyed noises in the background even as Yularen started to downplay the battle's real importance.

*And just like I had hoped, Yularen started with news from the GDL instead of our own. Predictable. He wished to give us the good news before giving us the bad news on our own side. Well, bad for the Republic as it is now. It certainly served my overarching goals, Sidious thought complacently.*

With that thought in mind, The Chancellor stood up, gesturing for the Admiral to give him the floor for a moment. "Admiral, it pleases me to hear that our allies could strike such a blow, no matter how small it might be. But as you pointed out during our previous discussion on the possibility of any CIS incursion on Serenno, Ord Cestus was not that important on a galactic level. And I believe that the Republic should also be striking back. We are, after all, the stronger of the two, and I believe we have the strength to strike something that is important on the strategic level of things."

In one little speech, Sidious had praised and dismissed the GDL's victory while also highlighting the disparity in their strengths. Now, as his listeners mulled over those realities, Sidious moved forward, gesturing towards the main hologram. "And before you shoot me down on this point for purely military reasons, I think we need to consider that this is the first true offensive victory of the war for the GDL. The impact on the morale of such a thing is tremendous."

Sidious waited a moment for the Senators to think about that, some of them nodding, while Yularen shook his head and the Jedi looked on impassively. And when 'Palpatine' spoke, his voice was almost passionate, almost sharp, the tone perfectly chosen as always. "The Republic started this war on the back foot. We have only survived due to the planning of a select group of Jedi who had seen this problem coming in time to supply us with the clone troopers, as well as the arrogance of our foes. Our people are reeling. They have been reeling since the beginning of the war! Every tale of a valiant defense is measured against a tale of a planet falling into Secessionist hands. And hearing that our ally, an ally that has lost several dozen planets in this war, was able to strike back could perhaps also have a deleterious effect on our own people's morale. If the GDL can do it, why can't we, after all?"

Sidious paused again, pointing towards the hologram. "You said a few weeks back that the Republic would not be able to launch a real offensive for nearly a year, given our continued losses in the field. And while I am no expert in logistics, the numbers you shared were certainly... Thought-provoking." He allowed a wry little smile to appear on his face before wiping it away as he whirled, now glaring almost at the Admiral. "Yet you are a military man, and I am a man of the people. Any politician needs to understand the morale aspect, and that is what I am most concerned with now. We need victories, or else the hearts of our people will turn against this war."

"We **have** had victories!" Yularen growled back, pushed into a corner slightly. "The defense of Ord Zat, Ord Mantel and more. Indeed, the defense of Ord Mantel under Commodore Thrawn was a magnificent victory, costing us far fewer ships and troops than I had expected."

“But all of those are small-scale and matched or exceeded by our losses. Especially the loss of Brentaal IV!” Sidious argued back. “That news hasn’t been disseminated too far thanks to our crackdown on operational security, but it will. And when it gets out, morale will plummet further. We have to show that the Republic has the **ability** to win this war, the drive! Not just the numbers and industry. Those things are cold comfort when placed against the string of losses like that.”

This won Sidious another moment of silence, the background conversations which had begun to grow as he argued with the High Admiral falling silent. Brentaal IV was a Core World of almost vital importance, set on an intersection between the Hydian Way and the Perlemian Trade Route, two of the galaxy's major hyperlanes. Up to this point, the interior of those lanes was under Republic control in the main, but now, with the Brentaal system conquered, both would need to be seeded with the same kind of hyperspace traps that were spreading throughout the front lines between the CIS and Republic. And even more in GDL space.

The Confederacy navy mauled the space-based defenders and quickly moved army forces to claim the planet. While fighting was still being reported on the surface, Brentaal IV had fallen silent the night before this meeting.

It was a harsh blow due to the planet’s importance, as well as the Jedi lost in the battle. The Jedi Order had lost thirty-five Jedi in that one engagement, seven full battle teams, including Master Tambor, one of the Council itself.

When he finally answered, Yularen’s tone was respectful but stubborn. “I understand and respect your point, Chancellor, but I am still leery about making decisions based on something as ephemeral as morale. Especially considering we have the clone army. Our troopers are not as immune to morale as droids, but they come close.”

The Jedi and several of the oversight committee stirred at these callous words, with Master Rancisis speaking up quietly. “They do not break due to morale issues such as fear or panic, but that has nothing to do with their being clones. Rather it is their training. And that does not mean they are immune to morale issues entirely. The clones seem to fight better for their own commanders or proven officers than unproven ones. Further, morale is more than just the troops on the ground. We need people building our ships, manning those ships for the most part so far, to understand they can win.”

At this point, the clone troopers had taken over most positions in the Republic Army. But the naval side of things was taking far longer. It wouldn’t have been if the Republic had retained their secret shipyards and the ships built there, but as it was, the Ord system fleets were being bolstered by homegrown fleets brought into the Republic, much like in the GDL. And few who had yet to face losses were willing to turn their ships over to clone crews, regardless of their own training compared to the clones.

Yularen shook his head stubbornly. “I disagree. Morale on a galactic level does not matter nearly as much as you think. So long as the logistics keep flowing, we will eventually be in a position to fight back effectively. If we do so now, we will whittle away our strength even as we do the enemy, setting us back weeks, if not months. Worse, the Confederacy currently has a far larger strategic reserve. If we are beaten back, they may decide they don’t need so much of those reserves tied up defensively, despite

the GDL's efforts on their shipping. The fleet that hammered Brentaal could be doubled or tripled in size and sent to attack any other Core World."

A gentle tapping of a hand on wood interrupted Sidious before he could launch his counterargument, and he turned, bowing slightly from the head towards Padme so that no one could see him scowl slightly at the interruption. Instead, he made it a small joke to seem just a little more personable to his listeners. "The Senate recognizes the senator for the Chomell Sector."

The other senators laughed, and even a few of the military personnel cracked smiles as Padme stood up, smiling as well. "Thank you, Chancellor. I am also concerned about morale, as well as the moral. However, I am not going to gainsay Admiral Yularen that the Republic is not ready for a long-term, **large-scale** campaign. I simply cannot get my head around the sheer scale of the conflict we are dealing with, and I am certain I am not alone in that. So listening to the voice of experience is simply good sense."

She looked around the room, her eyes challenging, and most of the Senators nodded their heads, although a few looked slightly annoyed at the point she was making. That this kind of war, on this kind of scale, was something all of them were struggling with.

Master Yoda spoke up then, admitting allowed, "Hrhrhrhm, for not agreeing to take command, my reason it was. Old I am, learned I am. Operating on such a large scale, new even to me it is. Generals we are not, even if discern the future, we can occasionally."

"Exactly. So while the Chancellor's point on the morale of our people is well taken, I also think we need to accede to the point that Admiral Yularen is trying to make. Any large-term offensive action is premature. We cannot look to the recent battle that the *Tyrant's Bane* launched as an excuse. Remember what the Admiral began to say earlier. Ord Cestus was in an untenable position. It was too far away from any other Confederacy holding to be reinforced quickly, and while its local defenses were massive, they obviously weren't up to date or deep enough to defend from an intelligent opponent. So perhaps instead of thinking offensively, we need to think about a large-scale defensive victory? Where are the Confederacy forces going to strike next? Where can we perhaps mouse trap them, wipe a few of their fleets out and get a local edge where we can follow up?"

Sidious glowered a bit at that internally. Outwardly he nodded affably, one hand stroking his chin as he considered the point, gazing back at the hologram. "Numbers and symbols, numbers and symbols and glowing lights. You are right, Senator. We often forget what those images and lights pertain to: The trillions of lives and hundreds of parsecs of space. Yet I maintain that we still need to do something. We already hear rumblings from a few Core sectors that perhaps we should accede to the demands of the Confederacy and the Sith leading them. I do not have to paint a picture of what it could mean if such sentiment grows, do I?"

The Admiral and his people talked about it for a few moments. Eventually, it was decided that there would be one large-scale defense of a planet, an Inner Rim world, the Gotal homeworld Antar 4. It wasn't a world, but rather a moon around a gas giant, but it was labeled as a world, regardless.

Republic intelligence had determined that it would be attacked soon because there was a strong local resistance group, a terrorist group really, named the Roshu Sune. They were in a position to

disrupt the current defense of the planet, letting the CIS defeat them easily and with the planet's industry intact.

The Republic would secretly move in troops to defend Antar 4 and crush the assault on it while a team of Jedi, led by a Gotal Jedi, would root out the Roshu Sune. After that, whatever grievances the Gotal had would be investigated. Padme and two other members of the Military Oversight Committee volunteered to lead that investigation and discussion when it became time.

Meanwhile, there would be two small-scale offensives launched nearby. With three victories in the same military zone, further options would open for the Republic so long as they didn't take too many losses themselves.

"I recommend that the Jedi lead both attacks while we use one of our clone admirals to hold the defense. They're good, but most of the clone officers aren't quite quick enough to discard any intelligence we've given them on enemy capability in favor of new data on the ground. Especially on the offensive, that kind of thinking can be a severe detriment," Yularen advised. Despite being the most senior officer in uniform, he understood he was not the one who would make a final decision here.

"Actually, that isn't always the case is it?" Sidious leaped on this opportunity, pulling up a series of reports from Kamino, showing a series of training reports. "Besides the commando corps, there are certain units that were put through a different type of training. Training which forced them to become better at thinking on their feet. The 501<sup>st</sup>, for example, which Master Windu just took command of. He is also one of the Jedi Order's best commanders."

At that, Yoda and master Rancisis looked at one another, communicating silently. Despite the events leading to his needing to take some time off from working in the field, Anakin was too good a combatant to sit on the sidelines for too long, and he had passed their various tests to be assigned to the 501<sup>st</sup> with his Master. He and Mace had arrived on Kamino barely five days ago.

"501<sup>st</sup>, lacking in transport it is. Further, too small it is to take both objectives. Spreading ourselves then, foolish it would be," Yoda said, gesturing to the Admiral, who agreed with him.

"Do we know anything about the local commanders on the Confederate side?" Padme asked, speaking up again and showing that she had been following both her own conversation and the larger one.

One of her fellow senators followed up on this, nodding his head in agreement. "Certain officers are more likely to be able to put up a defense, correct? And you said during our last meeting that we've been starting to build dossiers on the various Confederacy commanders."

A few moments later, it was decided that the 501<sup>st</sup>, with Master Windu in overall command, would be sent at one of the targets the Admiralty wanted to hit in this military theater, the planet of Carratos. Before the war had begun, the planet was supposed to have been creating hovercar and starfighter parts: wings, shield systems, repulsors and cockpits, but sending them off to other planets for final fittings and engines. Since the war started, the planet had shifted its factories to producing Vultures in their thousands. Carratos was one of the primary sources for Vultures for that entire sector and the sectors around it.

But Carratos wasn't as well defended as other heavily industrialized planets within the Confederacy. The local builders simply hadn't bothered to put in the large orbital defense stations Confederacy doctrine demanded, instead relying on military stations on the planet's three moons for defense. And even there, they had cut corners to save money on sensors and shielding. Thus there was a window of opportunity here the Confederacy High Command was unaware of.

That was but one attack, however. Another mainly naval assault would be launched at Bilbringi. The system was a massive military hub for the CIS, home of Bilbringi Shipyards, which served as a central hub for nine of the Confederate's smaller assault flotillas operating around the Namadii Corridor.

This meant it was obviously a very toothsome target that would be extremely hard to crack even if most of the flotillas that used it as their logistics hub were gone. But eventually, with Sidious's very subtle pushing even as he volubly argued against it, the Admiralty decided Bilbringi was too tempting a target once those ships had been pulled away.

All in all, Sidious was pleased with how it had gone. He hadn't gotten everything he had wanted. Even with the Jedi swarming over the Hypercom Uplink Center here on Coruscant, he could still use couriers and drop boxes to get the word out to Confederacy of where one of those two attacks would hit. The Jedi combat team leading the assault on Bilbringi would be wiped out, and the attack would be beaten back with severe losses, which would discredit both the Jedi and the High command.

Meanwhile, The 501<sup>st</sup> and the two Jedi with them would win. After a brutal campaign, no doubt, but they would win. And in so doing, the legend of Anakin Skywalker would start to grow. The puppets in the media whose strings Sidious pulled would see to that. *I might no longer be able to contact him directly, but I can still indirectly influence his ego. And eventually, perhaps, he can be my tool still, my loyal, Republic-aligned Jedi to set against another insurrectionist in the form of Potter.*

*For that must occur, the GDL must become another enemy. I have plans there, but it will take time to set them up. The Great Plan is still viable. It is still workable, so long as I keep my position and control of the media through my hundreds of cutouts.*

This had become something of a mantra for Sidious, one he repeated at least three times a day. While Sidious's self-confidence was still high and the Veil was still in place, there were so many things that had gone wrong recently that even a Sith Lord like Sidious was having trouble rolling with the punches. He wasn't in danger of losing the bubble. He wouldn't so long as he could still play two out of the three sides against one another. Still, it was growing increasingly hard to contain his anger at how things had become so difficult. Thus placing Sidious in the position to need to bolster his own spirits with empty mantras like this.

Alas for the would-be dictator, the rest of his day did not go nearly as well. News quickly began to spread out from the Core Worlds about trouble there, which wasn't good.

Weeks ago, an attack by the Red Blood, a pro-human group, had brought attention to the still-existing human supremacy feelings within the Core Worlds. Sidious had known once that rogue group had attacked that, he would lose a few of his middlemen within the Core Worlds as the Jedi stepped in to try and offset that belief somehow.



What Sidious and the Jedi had both not foreseen was the blowback there might be from this action. The Jedi had not sent in only human Jedi Masters, and once it became known what the Jedi were looking for, the locals responded. Now, dozens of riots had begun scattered across Core Worlds space, the locals protesting against alien intervention in their affairs. Three Jedi had even died, overcome by the local crowds.

In the short term, that was good. Sidious was positively gleeful at the fact that Jedi were dying. He could hear their screams through the Force like a fine wine on his senses. But, in the long term, this action would pull more Jedi from the front lines. Fewer Jedi would obviously die in battling mobs or lower public opinion than on the front lines against the Confederacy droids. Further, the chaos gripping several planets within the Core Worlds would bring more attention to the pro-human movement and local conditions, at a time when Sidious was not ready to either defend the locals from this or manipulate the chaos further.

Worse was a series of small-scale reports he was getting from the analysis droids who were sifting through information from the GDL side of things. Very few Jedi were in positions of command as they were on the Republic side. Instead, the Jedi continued to serve as advisors, counterintelligence agents, or diplomats. Those Guardians or others who were good at combat served as shock troopers in even larger combat teams of fifteen or more, making them far less likely to be overwhelmed. There were also not nearly as many Jedi as there should have been. So where were the others? How else were the GDL using them?

More questions and more variables were mounting, and once more, Sidious had to turn to his mantra to keep his self-control. And if the GDL continued to score victories, no matter how small, that mantra would soon not be enough.

Luckily, Sidious knew that Tyrannus was thinking the same thing. And as he checked a timer, one of several hundred he had on his computer, Sidious smiled with something even he had to acknowledge as relief. *The downfall of the GDL has begun...*

OOOOOOO

Alecto strode onto the bridge of the *Unyielding*, using several Jedi tricks to keep his tiredness at bay, reflecting that he did not know how Harry could juggle his duties as a leader of the GDL and teaching at the same time. *Having my own padawan and being a commanding officer of a single light cruiser division is enough to give me a few sleepless nights. Then again, he has Aayla to help with both tasks.* And despite the amount of time it took, Alecto refused to stint on his young padawan's training. *That would be poor recompense to Master Giiett for all his training and unbecoming of a Jedi.*

"I have the bridge, Commander," he intoned to his first officer, exchanging a salute with the man, still feeling somewhat ridiculous at the moment of military pomp and ceremony. It wasn't as if he was a proper military officer. Still, Alecto knew, and had shown his people, that his training as a Jedi made up for many of his shortcomings regarding paperwork, understanding nomenclature and so forth. *And really, what else was the military mind built on?*

With a slight smile at his internal joke, Alecto slid into the command chair, looking around at the Communications Officer, who connected him to an admiral, whose call was why Alecto had been summoned to the bridge at a time when he should have been sleeping. "Admiral."

Admiral D'Richelu was on his flag bridge, his officers racing around behind him. "Master Alecto, I don't have much time. We're about to jump out of hyperspace. But General Bel Iblis sent a new set of orders for you and your division. You've been redeployed from my command, and several of the other divisions on station with you there. I know that your division rotated out there for a three-day refit schedule, but the news isn't good. Contact high command on frequency..." The Admiral rattled off a series of numbers, which the Coms officer dutifully noted before the Admiral signed off.

Somewhat bemused, but feeling the stirrings of the Force warning him of something big occurring, Alecto waited until Garm's image appeared next. "Alecto, good. I know D'Richelu's got a full plate, and I hate to take you and yours out from under his control. But our analysts are worried. There have been subtle signs of movement on the border between the Corellia sector and the nearby Confederacy worlds of the Quanta Sector. Worse, a lot of the Fourth had been pulled away from the sector. It's been gradual, but one of their analysts noticed the effect an hour ago."

The Quanta sector was a Core Worlds sector of space that had gone over almost entirely to the Confederacy. It had been the site of several of the first outright victories for the Confederates, the few Republic-aligned planets in the sector falling quickly. As a Core World sector, it had a massive industrial capacity and could maintain a significant fleet presence.

"And you think this could signal a move on Corellia." Alecto wasn't surprised by that. It was a move that was somewhat overdue, given the importance of Corellia to the GDL's war efforts. Yet the timing, and the fact that Alecto was being called in, were making his Jedi senses sit up and take notice, the faint tingle he'd felt a moment ago growing.

"Got it in one. And if the CIS try that, they'll be launching a major assault to take the system and smash its nearby allies. A full campaign of conquest, not a smash and grab but a larger version of the first round of attacks they launched at us before they understood the nature of our defensive strategy. Somewhat like Rendili, but if they think they'll be able to get close enough to blockade the system like the GDL have Rendili, they are dreaming," Garm gestured, and the screen split, half still showing his face, the other a map of the Corellia sector. Unlike any sector map that the Republic or Confederacy could access, this one showed the hyperspace lanes as they were **currently**. All the gravitic traps, minefields, and redirected asteroids that littered space were clearly marked.

Like much of GDL's space, such traps littered the sector from one end to the other. And worse for any attacker, the placement of many of those gravitic traps changed on a random rotation. This slowed the attacker's movements considerably, to say nothing of the fact they would be under constant small or large-scale attacks. The Corellia sector had also mostly joined with the GDL long before Rendili had, which meant there were far, far more such gravitic roadblocks. *And far more mines, too.*

"I wonder how long it will take to make the hyperspace lanes usable in the future. We really grabbed on to that aspect of defense with both hands, didn't we, Harry?" Alecto murmured, shaking his head as he remembered one of the initial discussions the budding GDL's officer core had before the start of hostilities. The mines in particular would be a devil to clean up, even from the two main hyperspace lanes through the sector, the Corellian Run and Trade Spine.

The screen updated as Alecto watched, a series of small red arrows joined the scattered other markers moving inward from outside the sector as Garm continued. "A few probing attacks have begun

moving into the sector even now. Most are being stymied, and the mines are undoubtedly taking a toll already. But it's a severe threat. One we need a dedicated fleet to combat. D'Richelu's duties are too large given the tempo of the attacks we've been dealing with, so this move was somewhat overdue."

"Understood," Alecto nodded. "I'll get my division moving within twenty minutes. I will remind you, though, that this is interrupting our maintenance time. Some of our energy lines have been flickering occasionally, and my engineer is a bit worried about the wear and tear on our systems. My people have also fought in twenty-two mid-to-large scale engagements since hostilities began."

"Don't worry, where you're going will have the necessary dock space for the fleet. Indeed, that's part of why you're going there." Alecto tried to parse that out, but Garm went on before he could ask. "Your cruiser division is hereby ordered to head to Duros. Gunboat divisions sixteen and seventeen have also been added to our command, along with destroyer division four and the frigate divisions one-hundred-eight and ninth from Third Fleet."

Alecto frowned, thrown off by the idea of still more responsibility and the mention of his homeworld. Not because it didn't make sense or because he hadn't thought of his homeworld for so long. No, the reminder of Duro had suddenly filled his mind with the vision of his future he'd had years ago while meditating on the future with Harry and Aayla. The sight of him standing on a ship or space station, the view screen filled with the image of Duro as he faced off with someone wielding a red lightsaber. "I presume we'll be reinforced at some point."

"You will. You'll be joined by the next allotment of mothballed ships out of Corellia and four divisions of heavy cruisers the Mon Calamari have recently finished refurbishing."

Each cruiser division was six ships in GDL parlance, and more importantly, Alecto knew how slowly the Mon Calamari worked. That was a significant portion of the repurposed ships their orbital docks would have finished in the last two weeks or more. But... "Sir, if all of these smaller probes are being launched by a different fleet, we know the Confederacy has been slowly ramping up their attacks, and eight of their fleet is built around at least thirty Lucrehulks. If that is the case, what you're giving this new fleet isn't enough to stop them short of Corellia."

"It isn't. It wouldn't be even if the next allotment of ships included an equal number of dreadnaughts it wouldn't be. But it will be enough, along with the mines and gravitic traps, to slow them down tremendously. That's all we need, Alecto. Slow them down. You know why."

Even with the encrypted Hypercom, Garm wasn't about to mention the work being done on the captured Lucrehulks in Corellia and elsewhere. Those projects would yield fruit in the next month at the earliest, and secrecy was paramount.

"Yes, sir, I just wanted to ensure you weren't asking for miracles."

Garm smirked. "No, I wouldn't ask for a Force-sent miracle on this scale. On a smaller scale, yes. And if you pile enough small miracles on top of one another, you might get somewhere."

Alecto chuckled and, as Garm ended the call, turned to his bridge crew. "Commander, bring me up to speed on the divisions already with us. I want to know of any maintenance or personnel issues. Tactical, update the central hologram with the current data from high command." He then breathed in and looked at his XO. "Given these new duties, going forward you will need to take command of the

Unyielding. I will use my padawan as my staff and remain aboard, but once we get to Duro, I will formally turn over command of the ship to you.”

Commander Trennan blinked, then his spine straightened proudly. “I won’t let you down, sir!”

“You deserve it, Trennan,” Alecto replied. “For now, though, we have work to do.”

A moment later, Alecto better understood the forces added to his command and was very thankful that this new fleet built up in Duros wouldn’t be under his command. The forces now under his command would be more than enough to test him.

First were the gunboats. Gunboat divisions were far larger than their heavy cruiser counterparts, being thirty-two instead of six. The Braha’tok class gunboat had proved its worth a thousand times over in this war, a war that wasn’t even half a year old yet, and eight of them could be built in the same amount of time as a light cruiser like the Unyielding had taken to be recommissioned.

Alecto was happy to see them assigned to his command. In the last two battles, the enemy had gotten far better at using his starfighters effectively to try and cut off the inevitable retreat of the GDL forces. They’d lost three capital ships in that battle, all going down to Vulture concussion missiles.

The destroyer division was a group of eight ships, instead of the Corellian set of five, out of one of the Core Worlds systems that had recently joined the GDL. A local design, they were shaped almost like a flattened disk, they were nowhere near as quick as the Audacious class, but they had decent shielding for their size and an okay mix of weapons, ten turbolaser and six ion cannons. *No proton torpedoes or concussion missiles, though, odd. And their armor is much weaker than the Audacious class. Still, they also have good anti-fighter weaponry, with forty-eight laser cannons spread across their hulls.*

The crews on those ships weren’t nearly as experienced as he would have liked, but they knew their ships at least. *I will have to watch them closely, but I cannot sense any lack of courage from their commanders. Some arrogance, but the anvil of war will quickly beat that out of them.*

The frigate divisions weren’t here. Alecto’s force would meet them en route to the Duro System. Those frigates were made of the ubiquitous Archer class, another class of ship that had proven its worth time and again in this war. Alecto knew that the upscaled destroyer variant was being built across the GDL, but it would be months before the frigates could be phased out of the battle line. *And added to the slowly growing espionage or commerce raiding forces, Alecto thought.*

Alecto took the time to call each ship commander one after another as Trennan got the Unyielding ready. Not two hours later, Force Alecto – a name that made Alecto wince but was traditional as the flotilla wasn’t built around a single larger ship - was ready and racing into hyperspace.

Several dozen small-scale jumps later, as they paused for another, Alecto’s communications specialist held up a hand, shouting, “Sir, we’ve got new orders incoming! We are to divert and join an attack group attacking a Confederacy fleet that just hit a gravitic trap nearby. Coordinates...”

The navigator rattled off a series of coordinates, and the sensor specialist dutifully pulled up the same hologram they had been looking at before as the navigator inputted the new calculations. Staring at the screen, Alecto nodded thoughtfully as he looked at it. It was one of the larger traps the GDL had created in that area of space. A small series of asteroids had been pulled into The Corellian Run a few

light years into the sector from Quanta. Combined, the asteroids had enough of a spatial footprint to pull ships out of hyperspace just as much as if they had run into the gravity well of a planet.

And all around them were mines, along with automated gun satellites. Those mines would move to attack any ship that came out of hyperspace, only stopping if the ship's IFF code was in their system. The gun satellites and communication buoys would then light up.

These ambush points were carefully documented by their users, regardless of what side it was, allowing defenders like Force Alecto to jump in and out while the attackers would have to do a blind to jump. Which was very dangerous for most ships. The Lucrehulks had proven they could absorb the damage done to their hyperspace engines and hulls from crashing into gravitic traps. The smaller ships, not so much. Alecto had seen reports and wreckage of smaller ships coming apart under the strain of abruptly hitting a large enough gravitic anomaly.

Alecto did a quick count, ensuring his flotilla was all present, then nodded to Trennan. The human Corellian native nodded back, then barked out. "Bring the flotilla to battle stations. Helm, once everyone has reported readiness, take us in."

Behind him, Alecto heard the door to the bridge open, and his padawan came in, sitting at one of the weapons stations without being ordered to. He nodded to the young Selonian, and the ship jumped back into hyperspace.

The moment they appeared, it was clear that they were not the only units diverted here. Several Arrow starfighters squadrons had arrived previously and now were in a desperate dogfight with hundreds upon hundreds of Vulture fighters. The Arrow's survivability and ability to speed away from Vulture fighters mattered not at all in this chaotic melee.

The site of three Lucrehulks, twelve Munificent class, and a dozen Hardcell class transport vessels was worse.

The Confederacy was still feeling its way out toward the proper fleet makeup, as was the GDL, if in a very different fashion. The GDL lacked enough large combatants, while the Confederacy lacked the ships to fulfill the destroyer or light cruiser classes.

Regardless, the Confederacy ships could take a tremendous amount of pounding, which they were currently showing good effect against another group of destroyers. One division was another group of Audacious class, the other, an unknown collection of similarly sized ships.

As Alecto watched, one of those ships exploded, its shields going down and nearby Vultures pouncing on it so quickly it hadn't a single chance of escaping. "I want the division to perform a firing run on target Omega," Alecto said, turning his head from the site of that exploding ship to note how the enemy ships had been designated by his sensor specialist and picking out a target with a glance, the Force guiding him to the most battered target. "Communications, keep me abreast of any issues coming from our ships. Order the gunboats to split off and spread out to back up our fellows, but keep eight gunboats tucked in behind us. Sanstish, take us in."

With the Selonian padawan guiding them with the Force through the battle space, the light cruiser and its fellows dodged a good deal of the fire aimed their way. Their shields flared only occasionally to Vulture fire as they zoomed through the battlefield.

The enemy Lucrehulk he had chosen as a target turned, trying to bring another segment of its shields to bear on the incoming division of light cruisers. But it failed, and they were within its range and firing before it could complete the maneuver. The spine-mounted trio of heavy turbolasers pounded in.

Shields that had been in the yellow failed under their punishment, and a moment later, one nearby division of frigates fired, as Alecto had sensed they would. Like Force Alecto, they were being led by another Jedi, and her force presence had leaped out to him, along with her intent.

The long-range torpedoes flung themselves through space behind the light cruiser division, which peeled off into teams of two, dodging out of the Lucrehulk's range. Behind them, the torpedoes struck the damaged segments of shielding. Several of them burst through, and the Lucrehulk reeled as sections of its hull exploded outwards under the explosive impact of several dozen torpedoes.

It wasn't out of the fight, but it was vulnerable.

However, more Vulture starfighters swarmed the light cruisers as they retreated, and shields began to fail across the division. The gunboats, who had also split off with them took a heavy toll, but as always, the CIS was utterly immune to any losses in their starfighter divisions.

One ship reeled out of position, its fellow trying desperately to go to his aid. The two jumped to hyperspace a moment later, leaving the division two ships short.

"The Redoubtable and Thrust report the Thrust's shield's suffered a failure. They can repair it quickly, but it will remain a weakness."

"Order them to pull out and head to Duro. We will meet them there," Alecto ordered, wincing. *I was worried about wear and tear on the ships. Looks like I was right.*

More Arrow fighters arrived, but it was like trying to fight back a tornado. The Confederacy always had more Vultures. The original division of Audacious class ships also returned, racing back into the battle after leaving the combat sphere behind for a moment to allow their shields to regenerate.

Alecto turned his ships around, reforming them into another single group of ships along with their accompanying gunboats. He jumped them into hyperspace, only to jump back in from another angle, directly above and behind where the other division of light cruisers was attacking from.

Two Munificents fell to the proton torpedoes of the Archers, and then, the same Lucrehulk from before was reeling anew from another lucky strike from the first division.

At the same time, three of the Corellian destroyers lost their shielding one after another. They tried to use their amazing speed again to pull away, but the Vulture fighters had spread out too much. Despite the gunboats Alecto had brought in doing their best to defend the larger ships, concussion missiles hit two of them before their shields could reform. One lost its engine and soon exploded with all hands lost.

The other kept on going, but it was obvious that it too had taken a lot of damage. Before it could turn to enter hyperspace on an open route, more Vulture fighters pounced, tearing the ship to pieces despite the efforts of a few nearby Arrows.

At the same time, the circular destroyer class was slogging it out with the enemy capital ships. Not ten minutes into the battle, their shields were already flickering. *And they don't have the legs to hit and run like the Audacious class can.*

Alecto took in the overall battle and shook his head. "All ships, prepare to retreat. Signal the surviving ships of division twelve. They need to retreat too."

"All ships have acknowledged your orders, turning away." his communications officers said smoothly. Their own ship had only taken a few glancing hits, but the division had been smacked, despite how short this battle had been. Such was the amount of enemy firepower they had faced.

"Prepare a comms package to high command. We will need those Mon Calamari heavy cruisers sooner than we thought. If Corellia itself cannot supply us with heavier ships anyway. Signal gunboats *Visto'k* and *Um'berish*. I sense they are near a few escape pods. Get me the commander of *Tangent* on the line." *Tangent's* commanding officer was the most senior of the core world element. "His ships aren't built to stand up to larger ships of the line. We'll need to refine his role in battle going forward."

For several moments Alecto continued to bark orders as the GDL ships used their speed to pull away from the enemy capital ships. The Vulture fighters continued to plague them, and three more Arrows were destroyed along with two Core World ships. Both ships shielding fell in the same area, an obvious design flaw that, along with their role on the battlefield, would need to be addressed.

But the other ships were able to pick up all of their escape pods, and the enemy Vulture fighters paid for their temerity. All the fighters who came out to try and continue the battle died against the accompanying gunboats. Gunboats which Alecto was astonished to note, had only lost a single ship during the entire engagement. That was probably a mistake of targeting priorities, but it was still something he could be thankful for as the remaining GDL ships flashed into hyperspace around his ship.

"Sensors, drop a probe behind us before we jump. I want to know what they are doing here," Alecto ordered. The coms buoys and satellites had already been destroyed when Force Alecto arrived.

Several hours later, as his crew began to canvas the ship looking for damage that had gone unreported by the ship's systems, the other ships in the flotilla were doing much the same around a red dwarf star, Alecto was watching the data from that probe. His eyes were narrowed in consternation at what looked to be the start of setting up a logistics outpost of some kind around the gravitic trap.

"Coms, get me a live link to High Command. We need to know that whatever is going on in the Corellia sector is decidedly part of a long-term plan." *My vision, my vision of myself on the space station over Duros... I wonder, is this the beginning of the future that will lead to that moment rather than the other one showing me leading the Green Jedi? Will this rock weather the storm, or is it my fate to break?*

OOOOOOO

On the other side of the budding campaign into the Corellia sector, Admiral Kul'Teska was now painfully aware of how mangled the hyperspace lanes within the sector were. Staring at the reports from the battle Alecto had taken part in and several others like it, the Bpfasshi admiral shook his head, raising a hand to stroke his long beard for a moment, his pasty white skin gleaming in the overhead light of his office. "How many trillions of mines have they spent on a defense like this?"

There was no chance they could jump straight to the other more important planets within the sector. Indeed, they couldn't jump directly to any of the sector's planets. What had been hopefully envisioned as a series of sharp attacks on the outer edge of the sector and then a single, overwhelming strike once the GDL thought the CIS was playing a long game wasn't going to happen. Not even Lucrehulks could be pulled out of hyperspace without taking damage, and every gravitic trap was accompanied by thousands of mines, and there simply was no way they could get to Corellia fast enough to beat any reinforcements they could call on. *Just like the defenses around Rendili. We were able to blockade the system thanks to the speed we could move on them, but the system is still holding us off, and the rest of the sector is a hotbed of sedition. Another siege like that is the last thing we want anyway.*

Shaking his head, Kul'Teska scowled a bit and began to write up several orders to be sent out later that day. This campaign was still in the first phase, and Kul'teska knew the full fleet would not be ready to move for a week more at best. But if the first phase, the phase meant to peel away Corellia's defenses to cover other planets within the sector, was going to be this bad, then the overall campaign was going to take far longer than he had anticipated, and he would need more in the way of resources as well. *So be it. Master Dominus has ordered Corellia's destruction, and long or slow, I will see it done.*

OOOOOOO

Ironically, as the war continued to grow, a Peace Party meeting was taking place on Coruscant that same day. The party wanted to make one last push to get the medical ship referendum through the Senate. There were layers to this push.

First of all, while most people didn't realize it, high-end medical systems, education, aid and technology were among the rarest of commodities beyond the Inner Rim sectors, and even there, some planets didn't have access to the level of medical technology that the Colonies and Core took for granted. Out there, it was bacta or homegrown industries. Or, far too often, nothing a civilized Core Worlder would recognize. Admittedly, some of the local pharmaceuticals were quite good, but there was little medicine alone could do for a plague, chopped-off limbs or burns.

Second, medical equipment, and bacta, obviously, was not being sold across the lines. While the droid army obviously didn't need any, the Confederacy, for they might have built up a vast surplus of bacta, only had a few planets known to export medical personnel and equipment. And even if the military didn't need much, the civilian side certainly did.

And third, this war was slowly descending into utter barbarity. The Confederacy had begun it, shooting escape pods out of space, followed by several Republic officers doing the same. The GDL had begun to go down the same road, although there it was smaller insurgencies on conquered planets. There, the locals were still resisting their conquerors in every way they could, and from what little news could escape onto the Hypercom, both sides were waging an extremely bloody war against one another.

Padme wondered how Harry and Aayla dealt with that aspect of the war and if they had seen it coming. Despite how close they were, the two hadn't shared anything about specific military plans, and as Padme had mentioned during the briefing, Padme had no military knowledge to understand their plans if they had.



Regardless, the news coming out of those planets conquered by the Confederacy was disturbing, to say the least, both on its own and the wider implications. So the Peace Party wished to use the bridge of sharing medical ships. Ships whose personnel would help with the needs of the military and civilian populations of any system they were in, regardless of faction, to try and open a line of communication, bypassing the militaries. To serve a common good, a common civility, to try to keep the war from pulling the galaxy further into the darkness.

*I don't know if we will succeed, Padme mused, but succeed or not, this is a battle worth fighting. A fight against barbarity rather than against a physical enemy, but still a worthy one. Harry and Aayla have their places. I have mine.*

She watched as the others slowly went over the Medical Ship Neutrality Act one last time, knowing it was pro-forma by this point. After days of arguing about wording, verbiage, and rules governing the medical ships, the Act was ready.

But everyone involved knew that the Centrists would never agree unless they had at least the GDL aboard before they submitted it to the wider Senate. It was time to reach out to the GDL and the Confederacy side of things.

Moments later, Padme sat at a long table with several of her other peace party senators, facing a hologram of former Senators Meena Tills and Vergari. The Senator for the Dac sector had joined the Drall to represent the GDL as ambassadors here on Coruscant.

The Corellian native and elderly Mon Calamari lady quickly read through the documents, with the Drall nodding his head equitably. This wasn't the first time he'd been contacted on this overture. Indeed, Vergari had agreed with the goals of the MSN Act wholeheartedly. Now he spoke aloud of events on his end. "I have spoken with the Dictat and others. The GDL wishes to agree with this statement. Open borders for medical ships can be a cornerstone of any future peace agreement and a major humanitarian aid now. Indeed, I have it on good authority that several of my fellow Corellians have designed a ship already."

This wasn't a real surprise, and his dry, droll tone won the Drall a round of laughter. Everyone in the galaxy probably knew Corellia was at the forefront of engineering. Particularly starship construction and design, right up there with Kuat and Rendili.

Meena spoke up, her voice gravelly and almost pained, such was her age. "Similarly, my King is fully behind this measure. But we cannot produce the design ourselves. Even Dac is being pushed to its limits due to the war. A war, I will remind everyone, that is not even half a year old yet. But this is the design my colleague was speaking of."

The Mon Calamari touched a series of controls on his end, and a new hologram replaced her image. The two of them were not in the Senatorial district at present, instead upon the GDL's fast courier ship, meeting with and being read into some security briefings they were not allowed to access on any non-GDL computer.

The ship shown was large, almost graceful but not quite, with several blocky lines ruining the streamlined image. Another ship, a Corellian YT series freighter, was shown to one side in comparison and was shown to be around three times the length and twice as broad at the front.

It didn't have any sensors beyond the necessary navigational aids. The list of details also showed heavy shielding, enough to be the equivalent of a heavy cruiser in Republic Navy terms. But there were few weapons mounts beyond a few quad cannons that would see off starfighters or boarding shuttles.

The realspace drive was slow, and Padme allowed herself to smirk at that, wondering how many arguments that idea had caused among the Corellians, who, regardless of species, seemed addicted to speed both in hyperspace and realspace. Although the hyperspace engine was indeed fast.

With a touch of an unseen hand, the details were replaced by an overview of the ship's interior. The interior was separated into different segments, depending on the various medical needs of the individuals within. The power source for a ship of its size was also quite large to allow for all the medical equipment, including several dozen bacta tanks set in long rows.

All in all, it was an excellent vessel. It could survive being attacked, could not attack itself, and any ship nearby would be able to tell it was both blind and unarmed. It was a ship that had no place in war. *Perfect.*

"None of us even considered designing a dedicated medical ship like this," Padme admitted aloud. "We were all thinking about using local military vessels repurposed as medical vessels. But this idea makes a lot of sense. You can't look at that ship and think warship, can you?"

"Oh, that is part of why it was so designed," Vergari answered with a smile.

"However, as I said," Meera became serious, shaking her head firmly. "Neither Dac nor Corellia can currently build these ships. We are more than willing to sell you the design and agree to your terms on opening our borders to them, so long as the agreement to inspect the ship's exterior for unnecessary sensor equipment is kept as part of the Act."

Bail Organa, Padme's close friend, asked, "And you can make this agreement without speaking to your superiors?"

"At the moment, we in the GDL are still putting together our form of government. But Meera and I were given plenipotentiary powers when dealing with the nonmilitary side of things in the Republic by Grand Defender Potter and my own Dictat. The Dictat is also on board with this idea, and I believe between the two of us, we can convince General Bel Iblis and the rest of the GDL high command," Vergari announced firmly. "These medical ships can represent a beacon of hope not only for soldiers but for regular people, cut off from their normal sources for medicine and other medical supplies."

He paused then before shaking his head slowly. "I am still concerned about how the Confederacy might see the ships or your underlying message behind pushing for this Act. After all, they don't have nearly as many living people under arms as we do. I will remind you, ladies and gentlemen, that their ground forces, starfighter core, and many of their naval personnel are droids."

"Yes, but several of their planets are known to have various medical issues, local fungi or air-based problems they have to deal with. And only three or four of the planets within the Confederacy are known for their pharmaceutical or medical technologies. I would wager all four that did might be somewhat overwhelmed," Senator Kin Robb of Taris said smoothly. "So long as it is clear that the ships are serving both military and civilians alike, I believe we can get the Confederacy's parliament to agree."

“If they have any power, perhaps. We have no real understanding of how much civilian control the Confederacy has. Certainly, their news agencies are not nearly as free as our own.” Meera mused, frowning as she worked her own controls, looking up that information for a moment. “I had not considered that information before, that there were planets within the Confederacy that routinely faced large-scale medical problems. They truly are lacking on that side of things, aren’t they? No wonder the Tyrant’s Bane had to step in to help deal with that one plague several months before hostilities began. Yes, senators, I think you might be onto something here.”

OOOOOOO

While news of the battle of Ord Cestus traveled around the galaxy and the war around and within the Corellian sector started to shift, Harry and the Tyrant’s Bane remained in orbit over the Valahari. It turned out that Harry’s easy assurance of the planet’s acceptance of his modified deal had been premature.

It turned out that the King of Valahari, Harko Vane, had tried to play all three sides of the war. When the Republic had rejected the idea of funding more defenses for the system without a significant return, he had reached out to contacts within the Confederacy just as he had to Serenno’s Council of Counts. Harko and his advisors hadn’t been so pleased with his counteroffer to their initial request for a trade deal in return for defenses.

The entire idea of joining the GDL wasn’t too bad, but the exclusivity of doing so, the idea that they wouldn’t be able to sell to either the CIS or the Republic under the table without severe consequences, was apparently a truly horrifying thought to Vane’s bottom line. Harko also disdained the Jedi Order, as his son had been taken in as a Force-sensitive over a decade ago.

The fact that Harry had uncovered and captured a CIS agent within hours of his arrival was but the icing on the cake. The man had been an advisor to an advisor for years and was set to marry into a cadet branch of House Vane. Now he was disgraced and being questioned by the locals, while a Sentinel and his formerly Agricorps padawan off the Bane led an investigation with the help of the information passed on by their slicer allies.

This all meant Harry had to bring his political prowess to bear on the man and his allies to get them to agree. An uphill task given his dislike for Jedi, but within minutes of meeting the man for the first time, Harry knew what levers to use: self-interest, pride and his desire to enrich his planet along with himself.

Still, that didn’t mean that the rest of the Bane’s crew couldn’t make better use of their time here. This included the two starfighter designers, Wade and Herren. They were natives to Valahari, although they hadn’t been back home in more than a decade.

As they exited the shuttle onto the landing pad, Herren paused, staring at the sun for a moment, feeling the breeze coming in from his right side. “Despite all the effort the Jedi put into the hydroponic section, being on a planet, especially our home planet, is really different. I...

you know, I think it's been at least two years, maybe more, since we boarded the Tyrant's Bane?"

"What does that matter? We have had access to materials, given the time to create the most magnificent starfighters to ever exist! Our advocacy is an art, my friend!" Wade announced, slapping the younger man on the shoulder before gesturing him on. "Now come, we had a meeting to get to lest I miss out on a magnificent excuse to brag... I mean to talk to our fellow starfighter designers, our true peers."

Herren snorted at that but followed after the older man quickly. "Just remember, we're supposed to start two new designs while we're here. One for mass production for droids and a heavy starfighter to replace the Arrows."

"Bah, the Arrows were but a starting design. A decent one, to be sure, but without the certain additions that only the Arrows aboard the Tyrant's Bane have access to, they were always destined to be cast aside eventually. No, I think a two-person starfighter design is most decidedly the way to go. If we are looking at survivability as being paramount, anyway," Wade said, nearly sounding as if he was gagging on the words. "Honestly, when you can go to any local dive bar and come away with a dozen starfighter pilots, I fail to see the point. Imagine what kind of maneuverability you could have if you took out the need for shields or even hyperspace engines!"

Wincing, Herren looked around, but thankfully no one was nearby to hear that snide remark and then decided to massage Wade's ego a bit. "Look at it this way, sir. The heavy starfighters are supposed to go in with the bombers to defend them against the Confederacy vultures and distract the opposing Lucrehulks. This will pit the heavy starfighter you design against the most mass-produced starfighter design in the galaxy. Your designs will prove their superiority with every battle they help win."

That seemed to work, and Wade smiled, patting the younger man on the shoulder as they continued on their way. At the end of the landing zone, they met with a few locals who directed them into a nearby car. Their green Jedi escorts assigned to the pair entered the hover car behind them.

Behind them, Aayla, who had come down in the same shuttle, exchanged a mental snort with Harry, who was already on the planet elsewhere. She had volunteered for this job because he simply could not get away from meeting with the local government and because both knew she was better at concealing her presence physically than Harry.

Even so, Harry wished that he was with her, and not just because Harry knew Aayla was going to take the opportunity to leave behind her Jedi robes and dress up a bit which he always enjoyed. After all, if he wanted to see her wearing something else, they could do that in the privacy of their shared mental realm or even in their room aboard the Bane. Instead, his desire

to be with her for once had more to do with what she was up to than anything else. *"I would like to be there when you meet Sanya and Haila. Maybe I could have Ahsoka stand in for me?"*

Aayla let loose a loud mental snort, and Harry ruefully agreed it probably wasn't a good idea. Nor was it a good idea for both of them to disappear for any length of time. Not so soon after having been out of touch while dropping off the younglings in Ruusan. Indeed, even now, Harry was fielding calls from the GDL, political and military, while his protocol droid argued with the locals. He had set up several meetings later that day, but for now, it was best to leave it to the droids to ensure all the small details were seen to.

*"No, Harry. You are precisely where you need to be right now, and you know it. Even without access to my empathic skills, you can handle the politicians. And you know I am better at sneaking around, and you are anyway. Don't worry, I will give the girls your regards."*

*"And ask them how they are doing with this whole war. I remember Sanya as being extremely pacifistic. That mentality will probably not have handled this war very well."*

*"Agreed. And I'm very thankful that Master Yaddle didn't argue with us about the need to set up some kind of long-term therapy sessions and downtime for Jedi within the GDL between combat missions,"* Aayla replied seriously before jokingly asking if Ahsoka was handling standing around doing nothing again well after a morning full of starfighter training. The groan in reply was all she could hope for. There would be time enough later for seriousness.

Moments later, as the last of the so-called VIPs from the *Tyrant's Bane* left the area, Aayla did too, disappearing under a mix of Force Stealth and Force Cloak, leaving the landing area behind.

Not an hour later, she was walking through the streets of the capital of Valahari, looking completely nondescript, despite her very apparent beauty. Gone was any hint of her being a Jedi. Instead, Aayla wore long pants, a tight blouse that drew attention to her chest, and a diaphanous white silken web around her head, covering her lekku.

On one hand, she wore a ring that Harry had created for her, similar to what he had from her. Aayla rarely wore it, neither of them seeing any need to advertise their relationship. And these days, both agreed that wearing them seemed incomplete somehow since they hadn't given one to Padme. But for blending in like this, it fit the image of a mildly wealthy married Twi'lek woman. Specifically, given the ring, a Twi'lek married to a human male.

A color change charm to her skin finished the transformation, changing Aayla's normally vibrant blue skin color into the same color as Harry's. The total package allowed her to blend into the populace without anyone the wiser.

Several hours later, she was on the other side of the planet from where the *Tyrant's Bane* resided in orbit, entering a hotel where she could already sense her two contacts.

The door opened, and she stepped in, facing four lightsabers in the hands of two Jedi Knights and a pair of padawans. Two were Haila and Lightfoot. Both stared at the young, vibrant-looking Twi'lek girl who bore little resemblance to Haila's friend from Clan Saa.

Beside Haila was another padawan the same age as Haila. She was a young Devaronian, her skin noticeably pink, somewhat like Zule's, only a lighter color. She also had black spots visible on her face and hands, along with the nubs where two horns would have been if she had been born male over her eyes.

Aayla raised her hands and, as the door closed behind her, counteracted the color change technique on her skin with a brief use of the Force. "If this is not enough, Sanya, you had a hard time learning your element but were one of the first five to learn the stunning technique. You also hated math until one of the teachers pointed out that it was necessary for navigation. Then you stayed up several nights to try to get over your distaste for it. But you were never quite as good as you wanted because you wanted to be a navigator in the future. Haila, you somehow had a lot of trouble learning the mental techniques needed to wake up easily and were among the first of us to realize boys and girls were..."

"OKAY!" Haila hastily turned her lightsaber off, making a chopping motion at her neck. "That's enough of that girl!" She then moved forward to hug Aayla, a motion Aayla returned with a chuckle.

Sanya, another former member of Clan Saa, stared at Aayla and then clicked off her lightsaber, returning it to her belt as she nodded to her Master before moving forward to join the hug despite the disapproving look that crossed the man's face. "That's Aayla, Master Brand. Wearing one heck of a good disguise based on the color change technique."

"Along with several accessories," Haila added with a snort. "You look good, Aayla."

"And Knight Secura also seems to be under a Force Stealth that I can't penetrate even while she's standing there," the older man murmured.

"Oh good, I thought it was just me," Master Lightfoot murmured, shaking her head and moving to take a seat on one of the beds.

"Don't feel too bad about that one, Masters. I learned from the best," Aayla said with a smile as she pulled back from the hug, looking at the two other young women closely, feeling them out with her empathic abilities. And overall, she liked what she sensed. Both seemed centered, somewhat laid back and weren't haunted or holding in anything Aayla could sense without trying to push to the point both would feel it.

With that, she turned to the two Jedi Masters. Although she had exchanged Hypercom communications with Master Lightfoot before this, thanks to her role in one of the first operations against the Sith's hidden network of spies and informers, Master Brand was new to her.

Jedi Knight Empatojayos Brand was a middle-aged man with rapidly receding hair who was a relatively unknown Sentinel, a former padawan of Master Yaddle. His eyes were a deep grey, stern and clear as he looked at Aayla thoughtfully before moving back to sit on the bed as his padawan did the same. Aayla moved over to pull out the one chair in the room, smiling politely at Sayna and Brand after sending a smile Master Lightfoot's way, while Haila moved over to look out the window. "You're looking well. And I understand the two of you are coming off your mandatory leave, correct?"

"We are, and I have to say, while I did not approve of it when we were pulled off active duty at the front, I have to admit now that it was probably a good idea. If not for me, then for my padawan," Brand announced, looking over at the younger woman.

She nodded fervently, shivering a little. "I wanted to be a Consular like Master Saa, like Master Brand. I, war like this is..." She shuddered a bit. "It is so beyond **anything** I've ever wanted to face. I realize as a Jedi that death should hold no mystery or fear for us, but I... seeing it in such tremendous numbers? Not just among our clone troopers, but among the civilian population? I, I can feel the Dark Side growing, the fear, the pain of the dying, the hate of the living in every battle, all of it. It's like standing in a sewer, the corruption growing to suffocate you."

"Which is why we wanted everyone who has fought at the sharp end of this war to have mandatory downtime. Time away from the war either to talk to people or out in the wilderness to meditate, to center themselves. Duty and The Code can only take you so far. We Jedi are not robots nor gods. We can break if we are not careful," Aayla answered, reaching forward and taking her friend's hands, squeezing them gently as she stared into her eyes. "If you need more time away, time to rest and recuperate..."

Haila came over and rested a hand on Sayna's shoulder. The Devaronian girl smiled at them both but said nothing, instead looking at her Master.

"I think we both need to be doing something at this point. But neither of us would be willing to take part in military action again," Brand said diplomatically. From his tone, he probably would, but he was willing to set that aside to help with his padawan, and, as a Sentinel, he was very well trained and espionage activities. "Perhaps you should tell us why we are all here?"

He paused then, as Aayla wondered if he really was as clinical as he sounded until a small smile appeared on his face. "And there is a bathroom over there. If you could change into a normal Jedi outfit, that could perhaps help in our taking you seriously, Knight Secura. At the moment, you look too much like a young wife going out on a date. Or a tryst, perhaps, given that we are meeting in a hotel. It's rather hard for me to take you seriously."

"Truly," Master Lightfoot agreed. "While I am intrigued by using such disguises to add to your Force abilities, you are among friends here."

Aayla tamped down a smile at their discomfiture but acquiesced, coming back out quickly with her Jedi robe, which she kept in a specially Force-expanded pocket over her former outfit. When she folded her arms in her lap a moment later, her ring was also gone, returned to its resting place on a necklace within that same expanded pouch.

Reaching out to Harry, she discovered he was busy with the first of his meetings that day, so he wouldn't have much attention to spare. There were a lot of personal and political landmines here he needed to get through. That was fine, though. Aayla could handle this. "I trust this helps?"

"Very much so. Although, where you were hiding that robe is beyond me. Why do I think that has something to do with the mystery slowly growing about the *Tyrant's Bane* and its abilities?" Brand asked, sounding almost whimsical now, but his eyes were sharp as he looked at Aayla.

Haila leaned forward eagerly. "Is that something from master Fay and Harry? Some new Force ability? Is that why we're here, to learn it?"

"Not quite," Aayla giggled, grateful that Haila's spirit hadn't dimmed over the years since they had last seen one another. "I will give you some resources based on that, but first, I have to say that it is one of our most closely guarded secrets. A secret that could literally change the galaxy for good... or ill, if the Sith can discover a way to duplicate it."

Aayla winced a bit, not liking what she was about to say. Hesitantly, she pulled out four necklaces, holding them out to the other Jedi. Like the one that Ahsoka and Padme wore, although nowhere near as finely made as the one they'd given to Padme, the runic arrays on the necklaces would help defend their minds from intrusion without the need to spend months learning to do the same on their own.

She explained that as the group put them on, then continued on. "Unfortunately, the nature of this secret is such that..." She stumbled to a halt for a moment, then shook her head, straightening her shoulders. "This is not Jedi Knight Aayla, a fellow member of Clan Saa, speaking now. This is the second-in-command of the GDL speaking, understand?"

Sanya and Haila both stiffened, but Brand placed a gentle hand on his padawan's shoulder, staring at Aayla thoughtfully. "Even with the help of these necklaces, we can still be captured. We can still be questioned and stripped of them. If you are so worried, do not give us whatever you are thinking of. The secrets of your robe and whatever it might entail is not enough to allow me to figure it out, and it is so random that even with the Force, I doubt any interrogator would be able to discern anything."

"While I am not as at home thinking about being captured or moving among the criminal underground as Brand is, I agree with that as well," Lightfoot agreed.



“... I can do that,” Aayla said with a relieved sigh. “We had hoped to give you some more resources, but now that it comes down to it, demanding that you protect our secret on top of your actual mission does seem like a bad idea.”

“Well, I think you can safely say that both of us understand the seriousness of this mission now,” Haila announced with a snort, the far quieter Sayna nodding in agreement. “Besides, we’ve been on enough infiltration missions before. We know how to make our own resources. Now, could you tell us what mission you’re assigning us?”

Aayla laughed at that and held out a datapad. “Sayna and Master Brand, the two of you were chosen because of all of the Jedi who have come to work directly for the GDL, you were the best combination of good at Force Stealth and knowing something of myself and Harry, which will allow us to give you some code phrases that no one else will be able to figure out. Master Lightfoot, Master Haila, you’ve shown you can work with or around the locals if need be, and you also know me and Harry, Haila. So putting you four into a new team for this mission was an easy decision to make.”

There was also the fact that Haila had all the lightsaber skills to become a Guardian, while Lightfoot was a Consular but a decent lightsaber fighter, a master of Shien. Brand... well, his lightsaber skills weren’t the best. And the less said about Sayna’s skills in any kind of combat, the better. Aayla was extremely happy they’d both come through their week-long stint in one of the many battlefields against the CIS intact, honestly.

“Is it going to be a long-term undercover operation?” Haila asked.

“Yes, although how long we don’t know. I would prefer all four of you could move entirely unseen on this, leaving no paper trail. This has to do with the Sith, and any such trail could lead them to uncover your mission and yourselves,” Aayla warned. All four Jedi nodded at that, and she went on. “You see, Master Vos has spent the past two years in the dark, creating what looks like an information network or, to put it another way...”

“An information brokerage, a clandestine one, no doubt. I remember meeting Vos several times, and he was always a little too comfortable moving through the galaxy’s criminal underbelly,” Brand guessed, nodding. While his words sounded condemning, his tone was somewhat admiring or amused. Aayla sensed both emotions from the man. “Is he working on his own? Given the nature of our Sith opponents and how well they can move in those circles and their own intellectual abilities, that would be a risk I personally would not take.”

“No, he is working with Master Komari Vosa, the former padawan of Master Dooku. But your code phrases will be targeted at Master Vos since both Harry and I know him much better than we do Komari.” From there, Aayla used the datapad to explain Ord Dalet, the plant that apparently Vos and Vosa were using as a base of operations, writing out a series of code phrases on the datapad, which she asked the four Jedi to memorize and delete. When the quartet had the phrases and questions memorized, not without a few smiles from the girls, it

had to be said, Aayla went on into greater detail on what they wanted the two of them to accomplish in meeting with Aayla's former Master.

"So the two of them deliberately reached out through an intermediary, which you believe implies they have dire information to share," Lightfoot mused, nodding her head, her dark black eyes inscrutable as she spoke. "From what I recall of Quinlan, that makes some sense. He certainly would not draw attention to himself if he was undercover unless he did have information like that. Do we have a timetable for a meeting?"

"And do you have a method for us to communicate back to you?" Brand added.

Aayla opened up another series of windows on her datapad, flicking through them. Each of them carried information on a specific type of communication method and a series of encryptions to be used with each.

Before the conversation got too technical, Sanya spoke up, her voice its normal quiet alto. "What specific information are you hoping your master has to share with us?"

At that, Aayla paused, handing the datapad to Haila as she thought about it for a second. "We believe that C'baoth is not the true master of the Sith." All four of her listeners started at that, showing that the secrecy on that bit of information had worked so far. "We believe that there is another somewhere pulling the strings, possibly someone within the Republic. We don't know his position, and we don't know his strengths or influence. We have begun to take apart his or her espionage service within the GDL, but that is not the same as knowing the full scope of our enemy's abilities, his reach, and his personal power. All of which we **must** learn. Frankly, any information on the Sith would be helpful. But I think, I think Master Vos has reached out to share something specific."

Then she smiled whimsically. "But what that might be, I have no idea. You four will have to discover that for us."

For a moment, there was silence, then Haila snorted. "So, no pressure, then."

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Aayla was meeting with the two Jedi, Harry and Ahsoka were in a meeting. Or rather, Harry was in a meeting. Ahsoka simply waited impatiently nearby, bored out of her mind. Politics at this scale exceeded her current education, let alone her attention span.

For Harry, this kind of meeting was par for the course for the past three years. Which did not mean he was any less bored. Vance was the kind of self-serving politico that Harry had met hundreds of times before, despite his dislike for the Jedi Order adding to his motivations. Harry functioned through it, showing none of the disinterest or boredom he could feel coming from Ahsoka despite her best efforts.

“No. The GDL will not control the hyperspace network within our environs,” Harry replied to a question about news neutrality, one of many so-called roadblocks the King had tried to come up to back away from the agreement Harry had proposed. “We keep certain information from being dispersed, military details and so forth, but we will not lie to the public about what is happening on the front lines. I will admit that has bit us on the rear occasionally already since the start of the war. But in the main, because we have been honest about our strategic goals and abilities, if not particularly open about our resources...”

He trailed off with a drawl, and Ahsoka and several of the others listeners laughed at that, although the King did not.

Ignoring that, Harry continued. “We are still seen in a positive light by our citizenry, despite the fact that most news agencies seem to have taken one side or another in this war already. I don’t particularly like seeing that, but it’s both human nature and far too outside of my control for me to bother worrying about. So long as the truth is getting out there, no matter what slant they tried to put on it, I’m satisfied.”

“And you say the tax for being part of the GDL is simply a flat rate?” Another one of the locals asked, changing the subject so abruptly it would have possibly thrown off most people. Not Harry, though. His past training with Master Fay had him ready for such tactics, just as he had been ready earlier for the local’s bluster, obfuscation and genuine annoyance at Harry’s pushing them to join the GDL outright.

King Vance had desperately wanted to remain part of the Republic officially and sell to everyone equally, but that wasn’t going to happen. The Republic wasn’t about to remain ignorant of such things for long, something that Harry had pointed out very easily. The Senate had passed several wartime laws covering collusion with the enemy, calling this a treasonous offense. *I’m not happy that the wording of that law is so ambiguous, but while I don’t like it, I can understand why Chancellor Palpatine and the Centrists don’t want our ‘depredations’ to continue.*

Shaking those thoughts off, Harry answered the question easily.

“No. It is not a flat rate across the board. It is a flat rate, eight percent of the local Global Domestic Product. Yes, this means that many planets will provide more in terms of money than others. But considering other planets provide an equal amount of manpower, it evens out. Indeed, from the latest numbers, Type One planets lead the way in recruitment. It has no relation to representation, either on the military or the political side. I will fight tooth and claw to keep any idea of...”

“Peace, Lord Potter!” Harko interrupted, waving his hand quickly, realizing their ploy had failed. “Obviously, this is a hot-button topic. Taxation almost always is. It is just there are so many different taxes placed on us by the Republic. And you are saying it is simply a simple flat rate?”

“Yes. At its base, it is. There are numerous smaller sets of codes, ways you can pay it off via production and so forth. But the base is an eight percent flat rate. Any agreements on top of that are, of course, separate,” Harry announced. “Once this war is concluded, and hostilities have ended, we imagine that the taxes will fall back to four percent, just enough to keep the military running instead of expanding, as well as the government. Although there, admittedly, we might be a little too naïve.”

Despite that, the locals, now that Harry had worn them down on their whole ‘sell to everyone but buy defenses from the GDL’ concept, were very impressed. They were uncertain if they would remain with the GDL if it truly became a body politic. That is, a governing body which would continue to exist if or when the war was won.

The locals were also not as optimistic about that score as Harry was. They had long-standing agreements with various other Republic worlds and conglomerations. But many of those conglomerations had joined the Commerce Guild or the Techno Union, and now that both bodies had turned against the Republic, any agreements with them were null and void.

Since the start of the war, Valahari as a whole had been approached by Kuat Drive Yards, which wished to expand its starfighter production tremendously and wanted to buy the planet outright. When that had failed, other corporations attempted to make deals at the more local level, but many of those deals had come with threats, especially from those companies in the Confederacy.

Even if the locals just looked at those deals that didn’t come with caveats, the one Harry was offering looked better on a commercial and defensive level. Soon, the locals called for a recess, wishing to go over the various agreements Harry had proposed, their earlier desire to remain neutral in truth if not officially hammered into pieces.

At that point, Harry and Ahsoka made their way onto the balcony, where Harry settled down onto the stone floor, crossing his legs and staring out over the King’s private garden, which looked quite a bit wilder than most such. Harry approved of it, if not how tumultuous his padawan’s mind was. “I can feel your frustration Ahsoka. Center yourself, please. Whatever did that wall do to you to have you stare at it so?”

He said this with a faint smile on his face and a snicker in his tone, which took much of the sting from the words, letting Ahsoka know that he understood her current predicament. Still, she gave voice to it, slumping down in front of him dramatically. “I’m sorry, Master, I’m just sooo bored! If I had known I would just be standing around today, I wouldn’t have spent so long in starfighter exercises this morning.”

“Understandable, and if I had known this would continue for so long, I would have asked one of the green Jedi to perhaps spar with you this afternoon instead of sitting through this. I’m sorry, I didn’t allow for Harko being so set against joining the GDL, and all for simple greed...”

Harry sighed. "Still, it's done now. I've convinced them they need to think in the long term, even if only self-preservation, rather than short-term profit."

"Are you sure I can't get away now, Master? Head back up to the Bane if nothing else?"

"What, and leave me here to suffer alone?" Harry mock pouted at that, his eyes gleaming with good humor.

Ahsoka giggled, shaking her head at her Master's antics, grateful that master Yoda had somehow known that the two of them would fit together so well as Master and padawan. She couldn't imagine being assigned one of the stiff, almost robotic Jedi for her Master. "But seriously, master, maybe I could just explore the grounds a bit?"

"... Actually..." Harry looked at her thoughtfully, then asked if she had her necklace on.

Rolling her eyes, Ahsoka pulled it out from under her shirt to show it to him, although she knew that Harry knew she had put it on that morning. Still, she felt a bit of excitement, wondering what her Master was going to say.

"I will allow you to explore the grounds of the King's palace, but I also want you to talk to some of the servants here. You noted he had live servants, yes? Rich people, for some reason, tend to overlook their servants, but they hear a lot of information they probably shouldn't. Get a feel for them. See what the common men here think about this war, the GDL and the Republic. I will expect a formal report later. And, if you don't argue with me, the two of us can explore a bit when you're done. Maybe find a local café to eat at tonight instead of returning to the Tyrant's Bane."

"You sure I wouldn't be a third repulsor, master?" Ahsoka teased.

"Unfortunately, my lady is not going to be joining us. She will be going to several meetings, both openly and clandestinely. And yes, I know that sounds much more fun than what we're doing, but Aayla is better at espionage than I am." Standing up, Harry gestured back into the room they had just exited, where the inner door had just opened, and one of the locals had poked his head in to ask for Harry's presence. "Live and learn, I suppose, my padawan."

Unfortunately, when evening came around, Harry was still stuck in meetings, but that was more because the locals wanted to finish everything today, which was a good sign in the long term. With a slight twinge of concern, Harry sent Ahsoka and a few of the local guardsmen in plain clothes to discover a local restaurant they could go to later that day. He owed it to her for putting up with being stuck at the King's palace for so long and for the information she passed on to him at another break later that day.

According to Ahsoka, the local populace was interested in the GDL. Their reasons, however, were somewhat surprising. It had little to do with disdain for the Republic. Rather, there was a lot of public approval for Harry Potter and Aayla specifically and a lot of trust in them. Their stance on trade, their openness, and, again, according to Ahsoka, the photogenic

nature of the pair had grabbed the common man's imagination apparently, even on a normally politically ambivalent planet like Valahari. There was also a certain disdain for King Vance.

Beyond that, Ahsoka reported the locals didn't seem to care about the war as much as the common civilians on Serenno had when she'd walked around its capital. There wasn't ignorance so much as there was disinterest. They approved of and enjoyed watching the news about Harry and Aayla, and many of them had seen the recordings of the fight on Rendili. But they didn't consider the bigger picture or, the deeper issues behind the war.

Harry made a mental note of that but wasn't sure how to use it to their advantage. Not in any way he wished to pursue it since popularity like that was often ephemeral in nature, soon overtaken by the next big thing. Regardless, for now, it was a good sign for Valahari's integration into the wider GDL, and Ahsoka had completed her mission quite well, and Harry reluctantly released her to explore the city.

So it was that a grinning Ahsoka stepped out of the servant's entrance of the palace just as it began dark, followed by two human guards dressed like they were heading home for the night. "Don't get in trouble," he says. Seriously, what kind of trouble does he think I can get into with two guards following me and a government-approved map of the city to follow..." She shook her head theatrically to herself. "No respect. I swear."

Back in the King's palace, Harry sighed, communicating with Aayla. She was currently meeting with another pair of Jedi, both Ex-Clan Saa Knights, who would be taking part in an espionage mission into CIS space, specifically, the planet of Fortress in the Colonies region. But she took time out of that meeting to laugh with Harry as he relayed what he had done and added, *"I feel as if I have just made a terrible mistake. I am just hoping my Potter Luck isn't contagious, and her meeting with those infiltration droids was just a fluke..."*

*"Ehh, better to find out now rather than later,"* Aayla responded, causing Harry to groan mentally. Then they were both back to concentrating on the world around them while still feeling as if the Force was going to lead Ahsoka into trouble in lieu of doing the same thing to one of them.

OOOOOO

For the first forty minutes of her walk through the darkening city, there was no hint of anything to match Harry's concerns. Ahsoka was able to get the two local guards to understand that she didn't really need someone to watch over her every move. Once that was done, they kept a discreet distance back, and Ahsoka was finally able to start taking in the sites without feeling as if she was a young rich girl let out on the town only because she had minders with them.

Ahsoka could still feel their attention on her, but it began to wane as she took in the sights, intrigued to look around this, only her ninth planet to explore. And whereas Ruusan and Coruscant were **extreme** polar opposites, one built up to a monstrous degree, so much it didn't

have any real native fauna left, the other being almost barbaric in its simplicity, this place seemed more like Serenno. *At least in that, it has both local forests and such normal-looking cities. The design of the city, not so much.*

The city was built around verdant parks and smalltown type businesses. The industry present in any real city within the Republic was built around the edges of the city, spread out rather than built into single structures, with the center of the city being for home, restaurant and commercial districts.

As she walked, Ahsoka was surprised that no one seemed to look at her and see her lightsaber. Or even realize she was a Jedi since she wasn't wearing the traditional robes. Ahsoka spotted a few kids her age who shouted at her and asked if she wanted to go with them, but she waved them off. A few mothers clucked when they saw her for some reason, which Ahsoka didn't understand until she heard a comment on how her parents should not have ever let her out of the house with something so cheap looking on.

That annoyed her a bit, but Ahsoka set it aside. The Jedi were not about material possessions, after all. And her clothing, long pants and a tight, brown-colored shirt, was extremely durable and well-made. That was enough. *Besides, if I ever wanted anything, I could just ask Master Harry to make it for me,* Ahsoka thought, snickering slightly to herself.

Only a few times was she recognized as a Jedi and most of those that did a double take at her age. Indeed, a few wondered very loudly if the lightsaber was some kind of prop for a masquerade outfit rather than anything serious.

Eventually, she came to what looked like a restaurant district. Several large restaurants dominated the edges, but several smaller, more local restaurants were inside. At first, the smells were not to Ahsoka's liking, nor was the amount of noise. The noise coming from the number of people in this area of the city hit her montrals all at once as she rounded a corner leading into the area, causing her to stagger for a second before she could use the Force to slowly deaden her sense of hearing.

As she went, Ahsoka began to do a series of exercises Master Harry had given her while they found the spy the day before. She reached out with the Force feeling the intent or broadcasted emotions of those around her to get an overall sense of the crowd around her. This wasn't like master Aayla's empathy, where she could feel the emotions of everyone around her. It was more about intent and powerful thoughts, needs or emotions.

And slowly, as she went, Ahsoka let her hearing return to normal. This let Ahsoka listen in on many of the conversations around her. Those conversations followed the general sense of self-absorption she had been picking up.

There were no conversations about the wider galaxy. Everyone seemed to be chattering about local issues, unaware of the war. Only a few news feeds were talking about it, and most

locals weren't listening unless Harry or Aayla showed up, where interest spiked for a moment, only to fade back when they were off the screen. *Kriff, are people really so shallow?*

This attitude surprised Ahsoka, who had thought the people she interacted with in the palace were outliers. But it appeared they weren't.

Valahari wasn't a backwater after all. While nowhere near the mercantile powerhouse that Serenno was before the war, or the military powerhouse it had become, Valahari was known to export starfighter designs, mechanics, and engineers across the galaxy. It was the home of some of the best and the brightest starfighter designers of the galaxy, and starfighters were part and parcel of the local society. Indeed, at least half of the conversations that weren't more personal or about food that Ahsoka overheard were about starfighter races, obstacle courses, and engine specs, of all things.

Surely the general population of a planet like that would be more interested in global politics? But no. The only ones who talked about the war did so to sneer at the Vultures, Aethersprites and Arrows, calling them mass-produced junk. They all had pride in their local designs, arguing about which one would more easily wipe the floor with the main starfighters in use by the three sides of the war in an even contest.

*An even contest... in a war... kriff, but they really have no idea. A thousand vultures can be built for the same price as two hundred starfighters.* Shaking her head as she remembered one of Master Harry's lessons on the economy of war. That part of the conflict had been one Ahsoka had never considered, but Harry and Aayla had explained a lot of it to her, just as he had explained why the droid army of the CIS was such a bad idea.

After another hour of moving through the area, Ahsoka paused at a small snack bar. Jedi or not, she was a growing girl and needed food.

There she bought some munchies, stopping to eat them. The snack bar had gone to the extreme expense of setting up hoverchairs that could lift people out of the crowd. Ahsoka greatly enjoyed the view, crossing her legs while sitting there, sipping her drink occasionally as she watched the crowd, lit by numerous streetlights all around the area, while she waited for the call from her Master.

*Ugh, I could do without that greenish vegetable. What was its name again? It's got a weird aftertaste. Still, some of the meat is quite nice,* Ahsoka reflected, and then her thoughts paused as her Force senses tingled. Something was off a discordant note in the background noise of the crowd, almost.

Closing her eyes, Ahsoka concentrated, pushing her Force senses through the miasma of various small-scale, unimportant intent or desires that dominated the crowd. Because there was one out there who wasn't feeling hungry, who wasn't intent on flirting or having fun. No, this was a sharp spike of fear, a need to run and flee. Ahsoka still couldn't feel the emotions



behind that intent or any specific thoughts, but the strength of the intent was powerful enough to come through.

Standing up on her chair to get a better view of her, Ahsoka covered her eyes with one hand as if she had just spotted the person she was waiting for. A moment later, she spotted what looked like a young boy, human, perhaps, or near human, moving through the crowd. Considering that the population of this world was mostly human, he didn't stand out.

But the way he was moving through the crowd did. It reminded her of a cut-purse that she had seen once in a movie, only this boy had something in his hands, something she couldn't make out, but it certainly wasn't any kind of wallet or anything of that nature.

Another intent spike flowed over Ahsoka's Force senses, and she looked beyond the boy in the direction he had come from, her eyes narrowing. That intent had been filled with the promise of dealing out pain, of wishing to reclaim something, perhaps. Ahsoka wasn't as certain about that second point. Still, that was enough for her, and Ahsoka looked in the direction she felt that spike from. A moment later, five burly humans, all men, all extremely well-muscled but wearing good suits for some reason, pushed through the crowd without a care in the world as to anger they were causing as they moved after the boy.

*What the heck is going on?* she thought, moving one hand up to rub at her tentacles for a moment before shrugging. *As a Jedi, my job is to stick my nose into things I shouldn't. So...*

With that, Ahsoka dropped off of the hover chair instead of using the controls to send it back to the ground. She did use the controls but wasn't on the chair as it arrived back by the kiosk. Instead, Ahsoka leaped towards a nearby rooftop, one of the few in this area that wasn't a café. She landed on the tilted roof, then raced to the edge before pausing. *Right, I almost forgot the two locals.*

She turned then, waving at her two minders before pointing down the streets. That done, Ahsoka dropped over the edge into the alleyway the child was aiming for as he pushed through the crowd.

She landed on a trash collector, the robot driving it twisting to look up at her. Then the boy arrived, skidding to a halt as he spotted her.

This close, Ahsoka didn't need Aayla's Force Empathy to tell he was frightened but determined. She then patted her lightsaber, her other hand holding a drinking bulb and half a meat stick. "Easy, I'm a Jedi padawan. I saw you running through the crowd, and those guys were after you."

The boy stared at her for a moment, slowly shaking his head. "I don't know what Jedi is, but if you want to help me, they'll be after you too."

With a shrug, Ahsoka reached over, pulling him up onto the top of the droids, ignoring his squawk of annoyance. "Then they probably better get ready for a fight themselves. Now, hold still."

When the group of toughs had pushed through the crowd and into the alleyway where the kid had disappeared from their sight, Ahsoka had changed the color of her outfit, hidden her lightsaber, and changed the youth's hairstyle color and skin color.

He was munching on a stick of meat Ahsoka had kept with her from the food stand while she was sipping from her drink as the group arrived. They glared at the two kids, and one of them said gruffly. "Is that him?"

"Course not, that brat's white-skinned, not heavily tanned. He ain't been outside since we took him," another one muttered under his breath, elbowing the first. "Be quiet for a second."

That one stood forward and tried to put a disarming smile on his face, but the disarming part really needed work. "Hey, you two, have you seen another youngster joke about your own age come through here, brown hair, looking a little scruffy? He's a pickpocket and stole something from my friend here."

Ahsoka took a sip from her drink, then pointed with the bulb down the alleyway. "He ran right past us and snatched one of our meat sticks right out of Damien's hands."

'Damien' grunted, shaking his head but didn't speak, looking a little annoyed as Ahsoka had coached him to.

As he did, behind the two toughs, Ahsoka's own minders arrived. But a quick glance over the heads of the speaker and a slight shake of her head indicated they should wait.

The four toughs argued amongst themselves for a few seconds, then started down the alleyway.

At that point, her minders approached, "Er, miss, what the heck is going on?"

"Apparently, a slave ring," Ahsoka answered grimly, tapping the youngster on his shoulder. "This one escaped from them. But he doesn't know the city well enough to lead us back. You take him back to the government building and straight to my Master, all right?"

Both bodyguards looked at her askance, but Ahsoka eventually convinced them she could follow the toughs far more easily than they could. Not a few moments later, Ahsoka was wrapped in the best Force Cloak she could create, which was quite good for her age thanks to Aayla's teaching, and she followed after the five men. An hour later, Ahsoka felt her Master's slight amusement and consternation through the bond as he started to concentrate on her, moving in her direction. But she set that sensation aside, concentrating on the people she was following for now.

Soon the group entered a somewhat high-rise area where they passed through a series of security checks into a large mansion. Here, Ahsoka had to break off and go around the mansion for a second. But the outer wall was well-defended by cameras on mounts that allowed them to move in overlapping half-circles.

Reaching out with the Force, Ahsoka grimaced as she held one of the cameras in place for a few seconds. Just a few seconds, while the other one traversed out of position instead of covering the area right around the second camera as it should have. Then Ahsoka raced towards the camera she had been holding. The next instant, she was up and over, landing side grounds, where she moved forward again, grinning now. Ahsoka really enjoyed this kind of adventure, and if she had an opportunity to free some slaves, all the better.

Unfortunately, Ahsoka's luck began to fail as she entered the mansion by the doors leading out onto a patio. The moment she opened the patio door, a guard was there, a cigarette already lit in his hands as he reached for the door. Only the Force let her stop walking right into him. She ducked to one side, a bolt of Force Stun flashing out from her outstretched hand even as the man opened his mouth to shout.

The man slumped, and Ahsoka tried to grab the guy, but while she was strong for her age, Ahsoka couldn't lift a man more than three times her own weight, and the guard crashed to the ground. The next second, shouts of alarm began in various directions. Two more guards appeared and instantly raised blasters. "Fucking kill her, Jedi bitch!"

"Oh well, so much for the subtle method," Ahsoka caroled as her lightsaber came off her belt flashing in front of her face.

In comparison to fighting combat droids, fighting crooks and criminals was pathetically easy. They didn't have quite the same instinct to shout 'freeze' that a security guard or policeman would before opening fire, but neither did they have enough real firepower on hand to deal with a Jedi, who could use Force Shield, Force Stun and her lightsaber. Within minutes, Ahsoka had left a trail of unconscious bodies behind her.

But as she made her way deeper into the mansion, she faced real threats. Automated repeating blasters opened up at her as she rounded the corner on the second floor. Another automated gun came from the ceiling behind her, but she sensed the movement and covered herself with a circular shield, protecting her from incoming fire.

The flare of the plaster balls against her shield blinded Ahsoka, but she was a Jedi. With her senses on overdrive, Ahsoka gestured, sending bolts of stunning energy forward toward where she felt the minds of a few of the mansion defenders. As they fell, Ahsoka turned, launching her lightsaber at the automated blaster. The lightsaber sliced into the cowl of the gun, then returned to her hand just as several more automated turrets appeared, forcing her to retreat back into the stairway and down it to the first floor.

At that point, the mansion doors crashed open, and the lights of the mansion cut off, someone having cut the power.

The lights and weapons came back on, but Ahsoka was right alongside them by that point, slicing her lightsaber in both directions. And a moment later, a loud shout was heard. "This mansion is being searched under suspicion of slave trafficking. Stand down, or we are authorized to use lethal force!"

Moments later, Harry walked up to where Ahsoka was standing guard over several better-dressed gangsters in what might have been an office at one point, shaking his head slowly from side to side. "Padawan, I told you I want a nice quiet restaurant for dinner. This was not what I had in mind..."

His lips twitched into a wry smile as he felt Aayla nearly doubled over with laughter at the fact that Harry's brand of luck seemed contagious, as Ahsoka shrugged unrepentantly.

Hours later, Harry, Ahsoka and Aayla sat around the common room they and many other Jedi aboard the Bane used as a gathering place. None of the others were around, as Harry explained what the locals had discovered when they raided the mansion.

"...So ENG4Solutions actually does have the paperwork to sell indentured servants into slavery for breach of contract. It's actually quite an elegant system. The surface company brings them in on extremely lucrative engineer or design contracts. They get used to the area, settle in and then get kidnapped by the criminals. The criminals then keep them until past the expiration date on their contracts, and once they are legally in breach of contract, they disappear entirely."

"And while they have been kidnapped, the kriffers train them," Aayla scowled in anger. "Eventually, they're so going to be so well-trained that there would be no difference between them and someone born into slavery, like a Twi'lek born into it on Ryloth."

"Right. At that point, the slaves are either sold to someone in the Republic or into Hutt space. Which would be very much illegal, but the company actually having that paperwork connecting them to the legal slave trade muddies the waters tremendously. Even with all the evidence, the kriffers behind this would be in litigation for years because of that, the sheer amount of money they can throw at the problem, and the fact they have so many connections out-system."

Harry then smiled thinly, and Ahsoka shivered a bit at the expression on her Master's face. "If the GDL didn't outlaw slavery, anyway. Personal slaves owned from before a planet joined the GDL is one thing, and even there, I know the Dictat Count Luthor and several other planetary leaders wanted to stamp out the process. But none of these are personal slaves. They were to be sold to other people, which is extremely illegal."

Neither Harry nor Aayla had anything to do with that decision. No matter how much they wanted to, and Harry knew Aayla treasured certain fantasies about it, they had far too many other things on their plates to add trying to shut down the slave trade. Sith first, slavery next, was something they had thought between them several times.

Instead, this push had come from Count Luthor, who abhorred the practice and wanted it wiped from the galaxy. The fact the Republic had never had the moral fiber to do so had always been an itch the crotchety old man couldn't scratch. A blanket law to outlaw the purchase or use of slaves after a planet joined the GDL was one of the **very** few real laws not related to defense and taxation on the books already, although it fell to the GDL's espionage service to enforce it.

*"Actually, as far as I know, this might be the first time that law will be enforced. And we have Ahsoka to thank for it. This, I can use this to push for the GDL to reach out to Ryloth to start stopping the slave trade at its source!"* Aayla's effusive glee at that and pride in Ahsoka's actions coming through their bond needed no words, and to one side, Ahsoka almost turned as red as Shaak Ti as she felt her Master's approval and Aayla's affection for her radiating out of them. "Er, so I did really good, huh?"

"You did very well, although I could have wished you hadn't essentially ditched your guards. But you are a Jedi in training, just like I was, and you were following what the Force told you. I am many things, but I don't want to be a hypocrite, so I will simply praise you for a job well done and ask politely that you take backup with you next time, hmm?"

As Ahsoka mumbled something that even the most charitable would not call a promise, Harry went on. "The GDL still doesn't really have the manpower to police this issue, but we can demand it from the locals. Here on Valahari, the King will help because this will be a major black eye that you just wandered around and discovered this when the locals hadn't... for whatever reason. And I think that we can also request more help from the Order."

He then smiled, snorting in dark humor. "Indeed, I would wager that Master Yoda will jump at the chance. More Consulars are requesting reassignment away from the war with every passing week. He can't afford to let many go, but rotating a hundred or so Jedi out from the front every month? That would be one major anti-slavery Force. Perhaps led by Master Windu... although that's doubtful given his combat skills." Harry shrugged. "Regardless, this, and Aayla reaching out to Ryloth directly, will get the engine started."

Ahsoka nodded, then glanced towards a view screen showing Valahari from orbit. "How long do you think it will take the locals to finish going over the nomenclature and everything, Master?"

"A day or two, no more. After that... well, we'll have to see." Harry's good humor was gone now, and Aayla gently stroked his hand, a bare shade of the feeling of agreement she sent down their link. "After that, I hope we can strike out against the CIS. I would like to launch at

least three, maybe four strikes against the Confederacy before meeting with the Hapan representatives and Padme. Since almost immediately after that, Aayla and I at least will need to be in Corellia for the gag, Congress of Stars.”

A part of Harry wanted to meet with Padme as soon as possible, but he knew the war had to take priority. Aayla also felt the same way, although she also wished to head to Corellia to help the Diktat and the delegates set up the congress and everything else. But both of them knew the war came first. *“Although, I would assume that Padme’s had time to follow up on the little trap we asked her to help set up, right?”*

Harry grinned, kissed her on the cheek, and smirked at a groaning Ahsoka. “Well, on that note, padawan, it’s meditation time for you, and for us, we have a call to make.”

Unfortunately for the young lovers, Padme couldn’t talk to them for long that day. Indeed, she was rushing out of the room as they called. “I love you both, but this long-distance communication thing is hard as kriff! I am this close!” Padme exclaimed, holding up her fingers a few inches apart. “This close to getting the Medical Ship Neutrality Act passed! And then, and then I can finally freaking rest!”

“Ah, that would explain the bags under your eyes, love,” Aayla quipped. “Zule, I’m disappointed that you haven’t been making her sleep better.”

“Oh, I have plans to rectify that if she doesn’t get some sleep tonight, trust me. Malla and I have been looking for medicinal aides, shall we say? It’s either that or asking her mother about lullabies,” Zule snickered behind Padme’s image, pushing her face out of the pickup for a moment before Padme mock-bit at her hand, causing the Jedi to twitch away.

“Regardless, now is not the time to go into detail on the results of the Ketchaf incident. In short, Director Isaard was forced to audit his entire branch. Republic Naval Intelligence is doing the same, and their merger has been called off for now, and the Jedi are overseeing both. However, several dozen people have gone missing or left Coruscant or elsewhere within the directorates ahead of the investigation. Good in a way, but not so good in the long term as most avoided capture. But we are looking at several dozen trained operatives who just gone or were killed and then disposed of with no one the wiser.”

“So we’ve hurt the Sith more by forcing them to such extremes than anything else. That’s a win I’ll take.” Harry’s smile went from grim to tender, and both women on the other end shivered a bit at the look in his eyes as he looked at Padme. “Now go get your kind of win, love.”

Aayla gave Padme a thumb’s up. “We’ll call you tomorrow and celebrate, Padme.”

“Your confidence in my abilities is welcome, as is your affection,” Padme answered with a smile before she signed off and rushed out the door with a still faintly flushing Zule pausing only a second to turn off the Coms.

OOOOOOO

Later that day on Coruscant, the Peace Party smiled to a sentient as the Medical Ship Neutrality Act passed, as well as the bill to allocate some funds to build a fleet of the ship design they had bought from the Corellian company had made it. It would take a month or so before the first of those ships came off the line, although it would become much quicker for shipyards to start constructing them after all the bugs were worked out.

Padme smiled and nodded at the others, although she wasn't as happy as they were, something her companion, Zule, called her out on that night when they returned to her quarters. "All right, Padme, something is bothering you. Out with it," Zule announced, pushing Padme towards the sofa as she moved towards the small kitchenette. Padme had been invited out for a celebratory dinner with the rest of her allies but had decided she would prefer to spend the night in. "I thought you would be doing cartwheels right now, especially when you convinced the Senate to reach out to former Senator Bonteri and have her be your first contact with the Confederacy's parliament."

"It was a victory, but... I... I don't like several of the comments senators made during the debate. And I am talking about senators who actually had the floor, not just senators in the background talking to one another on personal channels I happened to overhear. They were almost angry, dismissive of the GDL, of its existence. I was willing to accept that many of the centrists would still view the GDL askance even at this point, but I hoped that would be balanced by the GDL fighting this war alongside the Republic."

Padme slowly shook her head, biting her lip. "But to see so much disdain and low-key irritation with the GDL still? I would almost prefer to see hot anger at Harry and the GDL since that feeling is hard to sustain. Annoyance and derision? Those emotions are going to stay around for a while."

Zule frowned thoughtfully, nodding her head. "I can see that, although I am more concerned about the pro-human movement in the core worlds starting riots and such."

"Considering that those pro-human terrorists nearly killed me and you, I can certainly see your point. But... We need to start pushing more of a narrative that the GDL is the Republic's ally whenever we can."

"Loyal to the Republic's ideals, but not the Senate perhaps?" The deadpan look Zule got from Padme for that caused the half-Falleen to snort in laughter, shaking her head. "Okay, so not that. But is this something that you can really change? And is it only in the Senate or the general public?"

When Padme answered she didn't know, the young Jedi snorted. Sabe came out of the kitchen, holding several plates in her arms as if she was a skilled waitress rather than a senatorial aid. "In that case, I suggest simply making a note of it for now. I'll look through newsfeeds from the front lines and the GDL, and see how the public is taking them, so we can

get a handle on if it's a local senatorial side issue or worse. Until then, you just won a major victory towards perhaps getting this war to maintain at least some civility. I believe that deserves a night of mindless action holos and munchies."

Padme laughed at that, an intense feeling of longing going through her from head to toe and other places as she thought about how she would prefer to celebrate something like this. But with Harry and Aayla set to call her the next day for the night, this would do.

OOOOOOO

Unfortunately, when Harry, Aayla and Padme tried to chat the next day, Harry and Aayla had to interrupt things. They had greeted a now much less exhausted-looking Padme, and they had been about to segue from pleasantries to a more detailed discussion about what had been going on for the past five days, alarms began to blare through the Tyrant's Bane.

"Well...kriff," Aayla murmured sadly. "Call us when you can, Padme. We'll hopefully be free at some point later today."

"Right. Force be with you both. I'll call you around dinnertime here on Coruscant. Maybe you can walk Zule, Sabe and me through making something, Harry." Padme joked, oddly feeling no concern or fear for her loves as they entered battle, only annoyance at the timing. She understood the nature of the ship they were on, after all.

"Send me a list of the ingredients you have on hand, and I'll come up with something," Harry promised, waving at her before he and Aayla ended the call and rushed out of the Hypercom room aboard the Bane, rushing toward the bridge. "*You realize the King and his district governors are meeting right now, right? King Vane is likely to see this attack as a farce, some trick on our part to force his hand.*"

"It won't matter, Harry," Aayla shook her head. "*The Valahari won't stand by and let us defend them on our own, and while Harko Vane might dislike the Jedi, he won't let that sway him, not from your impressions of the man, at least. He'll be snarky and paranoid and maybe push the decision back a day or more, but that's all. I'll meet with him instead of you if you want, sooth some feathers while you deal with the fallout of the battle.*"

Harry thanked her for that, and by that point, he and Aayla had reached the bridge. "Report."

"Hyperspace footprint, medium scale," The officer of the watch, Jedi Knight Casahk, reported. "it is at least six Lucrehulks, twenty lighter ships, can't tell from here what they are."

Valahari lacked an interconnected sensor web or single station sensor array that a Core World would have. Without that, the Tyrant's Bane was left to use its own admittedly powerful sensors. But the enemy had decided to jump in well away from the planet. Possibly because the system's twin red stars – a strange Astro-navigational phenomenon that had somehow not affected Valahari– made more pinpoint jumps difficult.



“There’s a third class of ship that is even smaller than the twenty lighter ships, one we haven’t personally seen before. But the engine readings we’re getting are in the books. Hardcell transport vessels. The enemy flotilla is making for the planet slowly,” Casahk, a young Miralian man, answered.

*“A decent fast attack force. But not one that could take on the Bane if they had any idea of our real abilities. It’s obvious the various lies and falsehoods Master Yoda laid out is still holding.”* Aayla murmured in his mind.

*“True, but fighting here in an allied system will force us to keep to certain parameters in this fight,”* Harry answered, a feeling of rueful frustration filling the words. Both of them were eager to show the Tyrant’s Bane’s full abilities off but wanted to do it offensively so that the CIS wouldn’t have much time to adapt to its abilities. And they couldn’t keep the fight from being recorded by the nearly two hundred civilian vessels in the system. All of whom, Harry noted, were making a run for it in various ways.

“Coms, order the team of Jedi with our design team to remain in place but send out a recall signal to the rest. Inform the Verpine techs on duty in the hanger bay to ready the scrubbers for when we get back,” Harry ordered. This was normal when coming and going from the Bane. They always had to be careful small spy droids, or even simple audio or video recording bugs, didn’t make their way onto the ship.

As Harry was dealing with that and talking to the locals, Aayla turned to the officers racing onto the bridge from elsewhere, and one Jedi Knight in particular. He was a Green Jedi Master named War’all Zaal. A Corragut Jedi, he was a Guardian who had shown a very good grasp of ship tactics and had slowly become Harry and Aayla’s first officer over the past few months.

Corragut were an exceedingly spindly-looking race with long, double-jointed arms and legs, compact bodies, and thin, dexterous fingers. Despite that, their faces were almost human, including hair, normal-looking eyes and mouths. They routinely struggled in normal-gravity worlds, their homeworld having only a quarter of the galactic norm for life-bearing planets. But they were a highly advanced race, having been discovered by Corellia thousands of years ago in the early days of Corellian exploration, and like all Green Jedi, Corragut was intensely loyal to both the Corellia Sector and Corellia itself.

“You were on Watch the night we arrived. Di you finish the mission I asked you to?”

“We did,” War’all answered, his voice high and fluting almost. “Our full complement of Vulture fighters is in the asteroid belt now. We can send them orders to move around until they’re behind the attackers at any time. Although the distance is not going to help us much.”

Aayla breathed a sigh of relief at that. Like most systems, the Valahari system had an asteroid belt out beyond what most people considered the gravity well of its twin suns. And it certainly was outside of that in terms of hyperspace navigation. But the enemy had jumped in

well out there as well. "That's fine. But seeing that many starfighter wings is not going to make anyone happy. It's that kind of confusion we want to create."

Harry nodded in approval, thanking the Corragut Jedi and gesturing for him to take over the weapons station before ordering. "Prepare the IFF transponder for new data, folks. The locals are going to come out and play with us. Launch Arrows for now. Keep frigate division seventy-two and gunboat division eight hundred and three behind us along with the locals. Bring up the power to the gravity well projector but wait to activate it. Keep the shields to a normal level for now. I want the jammers ready too, but let us see if we can make the CIS come in fat and happy."

When it became clear Harry would be forced to remain on Valahari longer than anticipated, High Command had sent them one of Serenno's frigate divisions along with a gunboat division just in case an attack like this occurred. Valahari was close not only to the now useless Ord Cestus but also to the edge of the sector, and since they hadn't joined the GDL yet, the area around it hadn't been seeded with mines or hyperspace traps as much as the rest of the sector. They had arrived in the middle of the night, but thankfully the small size of the ships, despite their number, hadn't alarmed the locals much.

Soon, the battle began to take shape as the enemy moved deeper in-system. Six Lucrehulks, twenty Munificent's and an equal number of Hardcell transports. A third of which were stuffed with Vulture fighters to add to the wings upon wings from the Lucrehulks judging by the nearly forty thousand Vulture force the enemy fleet launched ahead of them.

They retained a large CAP (Combat Air Patrol), around two thousand more, but Harry was surprised. "They've launched all their fighters then, or near enough. Odd."

"Sensors agree. The Munificent's might have retained two squads aboard apiece, but that's all," the Verpine sensor specialist agreed, with a feeling of bafflement coming through clearly from the bug-like sentient thanks to the Force.

"They are extremely confident then, wishing to overawe the locals and deal with us quickly," Aayla said with a shake of her head. "They think the Tyrant's *Bane's* secret weapon won't work on them, possibly because we didn't use any such in the battle over Ord Cestus or because of their own security measures on their droids. But they have underestimated us and the local's pugnacious attitude. They might not have cared overmuch about the war, but they aren't the kind to take being threatened well."

Ahsoka snickered. She had come onto the bridge with several of the other Jedi, practicing her lightsaber forms while Harry and Aayla went to talk to Padme. "Oh yeah! Those Vultures aren't going to look like a threat to the locals, Master." The others turned to her, and she snickered again. "The locals hate mass-produced junk like that. They'll see those Vultures as a personal affront."

“Sir, the CIS commander is sending out a broadcast over all local and Hypercom channels,” the communications officer reported.

“On screen, please. Let us see what we can glean from seeing our enemy,” Aayla ordered.

The CIS officer in charge, a human with, in Aayla’s mental words, *“A face you just want to punch the smarm off”*, smiled into the camera. He was a fit, tall man with a crew cut and hazel eyes, but the smile was very wrong, and more than one Jedi shook their heads as they looked at him.

“He looks like one of those used landspeeder salesmen from back on Coruscant,” Ahsoka laughed.

“Attention, citizens of Valahari. I am Commodore Drex of the peace-loving Confederacy of Independent Systems. Word has reached us that this planet wishes to break off from the decaying, morally destitute Republic but did not believe in its own strength to do so. That is the kind of problem that we in the Confederacy know well. I and my flotilla are here to help.”

While Ahsoka and a few of the younger Jedi on the bridge jeered at that, the man’s smile fell away, his gaze into the pickup turning flinty. “We also understand that the GDL has made an offer and that even their so-called leader is here. But we urge you to reconsider any such agreement. Their strength is minuscule compared to that of the CIS, and any overtures or deals made with them could be repudiated at a moment if they suddenly decide to rejoin the Republic like the quislings they truly are underneath the surface. Like ourselves, the GDL is led by Jedi, but unlike the noble Master C’baoth, Duke Potter has not renounced his connection to the Jedi Order, an Order everyone with a working brain knows is a tool of the Senate.”

*“Look at his face when he spoke C’baoth’s name, Harry,”* Aayla sent mentally, her emotions becoming both interested and concerned. *“That almost looks like a drug addict either getting a hit or talking about his favorite drug. That is disturbing as kriff.”*

The change had only been there for a second, an almost exalted, awe-filled expression mixed with one of pleasure. Indeed, now that Harry looked at the memory of that moment, he likened it more to someone being given intense pleasure. Not sexual, not really, but certainly intense pleasure. *“I agree though that it’s disturbing. I wonder, could it have something to do with the Force? Some Sith trick to ensure loyalty?”*

*“Maybe. But if C’baoth’s used it on his officers down to the Commodore level, then there’s a real danger, even if Padme can convince the civilian government of the CIS to end hostilities, or even to fight a cleaner war, that the Confederacy military won’t obey, whatever the civilians might think.”*

*“Eh, I had assumed that would be the case regardless. The Sith were never ones to use democracy. Beyond that, I think we’re leaping ahead of ourselves here. The Force might be*

*telling me that you're right on your guess, but it's still just that and based on one data point. We need more information before we jump to conclusions."*

By the time the bonded lovers had finished their internal discussion, the CIS commodore had finished speaking, and the locals had finally responded to the invading force. And that response left neither the CIS forces nor the GDL in any doubt as to what they thought of being invaded.

First hundreds, then thousands of starfighters rose from around the globe to join the Crusher class starfighters that Valahari used as a defense. These were dedicated dogfighters that looked almost like a 'W' set on its side, with powerful cannons, great maneuverability and engines, but lacked in shielding and had no concussion missiles or proton torpedoes. Six twelve-squadron wings of these vessels were already in space from the four defense space stations and the station on the moon.

But they were quickly dwarfed by the number of other local starfighters. There were so many the sensors had trouble picking out individual fighters to give them a count, but eventually, it came out to around ninety-two thousand starfighters. They were all home built, and most looked fast and agile, piloted by sentients determined to defend their home.

But they were highly disorganized and driven almost entirely by civilians. Most of them would be excellent pilots, but, as Aayla pointed out, there was a difference between being a good pilot and being a good starfighter pilot.

As Harry and his people watched, some of them started to form ad hoc squadrons, and others flew only with their similarly-designed companions, which could range from ten to two hundred and twenty in the case of one extremely popular style beyond the Crushers. At the same time, more scanner data came in, and just like the designs varied, so did their weapons loadout.

Some were immensely armed starfighters. Indeed, some of them were so well-armed they would match a pre-war patrol boat. But some only had a single laser. And none, even the best armed, had rocket or missile systems. And in terms of capital ships, the locals had only a few repurposed freighters, mostly Corellian types.

"Coms, are the locals willing to work with us?" Harry asked, without much hope, honestly. King Vane wouldn't want to, not if he didn't have to, and frankly, the locals looked so disorganized that Harry doubted the idea would even occur to most.

"Sorry, Captain," the comms officer replied, shaking his head. "The local net's kind of flooded by various starfighters... mostly bragging to one another if the samples I pulled were anything to go by. We'll need to keep our data net separate lest we deal with the same thing."

Harry frowned at that, before shrugging. "Nothing we can do about it just yet. But be ready to reach out to them when we start jamming the enemy's coms."

That they began moments later as the two forces closed. The locals began to panic for a few moments when they lost communications, but the commanders of the Crusher squadrons and the GDL's coms officers soon had them relatively organized and moving forward. The Crushers kept themselves separate, moving to join the Gunboats, Arrows and the Falcons off the Tyrant's Bane, while the rest were quickly sifted into squadrons.

This took time, and the locals hadn't stopped moving for the most part, pushing through and well past the GDL flotilla. Now, every Jedi aboard the Tyrant's Banes bridge stared at the mass of starfighters zoomed forward to do battle with the incoming Vulture strike, anticipation growing.

"Wait for it... Wait for it..." Harry murmured, his eyes almost closed as he gave himself to the Force, trying to determine the perfect moment as the Force gestalt of his crew rose around him. Then seconds before the two globes of starfighters met, he murmured. "Now."

Harry need not have bothered verbal commands, given the Force gestalt and his and Aayla's use of Battle Precognition, and the command was going out over the coms even as he opened his mouth. Just as the Vulture fighters were about to hit the front of the barely coordinated mass of local starfighters behind the incoming Confederacy fleet, the Tyrant's Bane's own Vulture wings powered up their weapons systems going active.

In the one pitched battle before this, the Tyrant's Bane had been careful to not show how many wings of starfighters it truly held within its Force-expanded environs. It had not done that now. Instead, to cover their true numbers, nearly four thousand vultures, the Tyrant's Bane had jumped out system and back several times while dropping off their Vultures, as if they were ferrying them in instead of simply releasing them slowly.

The enemy commander should have kept to his original plan. The defensive fire of a division of Lucrehulks was extreme, to say nothing of their fellows. On their own, Vultures lacked the firepower necessary to fight enemy capital ships. And the attacking force was only half of the CAP the enemy had kept in place.

But he didn't. Instead, he panicked. The CAP flew out in every direction, looking for more traps as if he was concerned he would run into mines. Which he no doubt would have if faced with the defenses of even a Type 1 GDL world. At the same time, the Vulture wings coming towards the locals and GDL almost seemed to implode as starfighter squadrons peeled back and away at the frantic demands of their motherships or Drex.

"It would appear as if our opponent over there is either not very experienced or overly paranoid. He should have had more faith in his anti-air defenses," Harry murmured, having anticipated something like this, even while snorting at the old term for the anti-starfighter envelope of a fleet. "Regardless, it gives us more of an advantage now."

While the locals began to engage the badly reduced Vulture swarm in a massive dogfight, Harry nodded to the communications officer. "Signal our commander air group and the commanders of the Crusher wings. I want them to remain close to us and the frigates. Gunboats are free to engage."

At that order, the gunboats maxed their engines, racing forward, passing the Tyrant's *Bane* and engaging the Vultures quickly. They weren't firing nearly as fast as they should have been, given how overwhelmed their IFF systems were by the locals, but they would have a field day against a Vulture swarm that was, for once, outnumbered by the locals.

Behind the throng of vultures was the rest of the invading fleet. It hadn't stopped moving forward despite the Ben's Vultures behind it, and now the Hardcell transports were reaching the combat zone.

Hardcells were hardened transport ships, basically. They had such impressive shielding and, more importantly, armor for their size that they could get away with ramming other vessels out of their way. Harry had seen combat reports of that very thing happening. They also knew that each of those Hardcells would carry a lot of military forces, even discounting the nine that had launched nearly seven hundred Vultures each previously. The remaining Hardcells could carry entire legions of combat droids, tanks and artillery.

They could not be allowed to land on Valahari. Beyond their starfighters, the moon base and four space stations, the locals didn't have any real defenses. No planetary shield, no planetary-based defensive guns. And of course, they didn't have anything like a standard standing army. No Republic world did. Heck, few GDL planets did.

"Helmsman, I want us to close with those Hardcells. Take us on a course to avoid the dogfight if possible, but close with them," Harry ordered. Despite not being a Jedi, the helmsman had anticipated his order, and the ship was already moving forward. The frigates and the few local repurposed freighters moved behind them, creating a three-dimensional wedge shape. The *Tyrant's Bane* and its accompanying ships stayed close so that the disparate ships could cover one another's blind spots, and the local ships accompanying the *Bane* could get the full benefit of its defensive envelope.

"Status on the Hypercom jammers?"

"Active. The enemy is trying to counter, but our ECM Suite is better than their ECCM. We can't break into their local net, but they're not sending any messages home," the electronic warfare specialist, a Verpine, answered.

"Activate the gravity well projector," Harry ordered.

A moment later, a new gravitic anomaly appeared within the system, stopping everyone on the battlefield from jumping into hyperspace. Given the delicate balance the Valahari system

retained between its two suns, the Bane might damage the local environment if they kept the generator on for too long, but Harry knew this fight would be long over before that could become an issue.

At that point, Drek seemed to find his courage once more. The squadrons of Vultures that had raced away from the point of contact with the locals and Harry's forces had moved almost at an angle to cut off the Bane's vultures before they could hit the CIS flotilla. But now they twisted back around again to join the dogfight around the GDL ships.

Both sides of that furious melee were already taking significant losses. While all of the locals were very good pilots were game from what Aayla, who was in charge of that part of the battle, could tell their disorganization was having a major negative impact. The many different starfighters were also not proving up to the mass-produced Vultures. However, the locals and Aayla's trick with the Vultures coming in from the system's outer edge had decisively blunted the enemy's numerical advantage in starfighters.

"Permission to activate the main guns?" Zaal requested.

"Denied. We're already showing several of our secrets here. Bring up the shielding to full power, but do not engage with the main batteries," Harry answered regretfully.

Aayla expanded on the point, smiling over at the Corragant Jedi. "Remember, we don't want anyone to know the full abilities of our ship until the best moment. And the locals do not have nearly as much operational security as Serenno or one of the other GDL planets. Word of this battle will get out, possibly full recordings from the civilians, even if we don't put them out ourselves."

The GDL force moved almost around the dogfight, which could not spread fast enough to counter. With the second force of Vultures not yet in the battle zone, the Hardcells faced the GDL capital ships almost on their own as they came within range of the Tyrant's Bane's secondary weapons.

And this was a fight Hardcells could not win. Despite their impressive shielding letting them survive the GDL's fire, they simply lacked any real ability to do damage in turn. The Tyrant's Bane's shields soaked up their fire despite being at the level of a normal Lucrehulk, while behind them, the frigates locked on targeting solutions. A second later, three Hardcells died in quick succession, their shields overloaded and their armor blowing apart under the torpedoes of the frigates.

But the destruction of those first few Hardcells had obviously been noticed by Drek, and whoever else was commanding the CIS forces. A moment later, the Vultures in the dogfight began to move toward the frigates, but they were not having it easy as the gunboats whittled down their numbers still more. But the second group of enemy Vultures was almost on them, and Harry released the Crushers, who had already been blaring at his comms officer, to engage.

"Enemy course change, collision course detected! Five of those Hardcells are making straight for us!" The tactical officer announced, feeling it coming through the Force.

Where any other officer would have been panicking at that news, Harry simply nodded his head to the man, smiling faintly. "Bring shields up to one hundred percent."

"Yes, sir."

As the Hardcells closed, Harry asked the comms operator to open communication with the nearest frigates. Both ships answered instantly, and Harry ordered them to aim their torpedoes at a single Hardcell that he designated. "Knock their shields down and let the Hardcells smash into our outer shielding with their armor alone. The Arrows and Falcons will then engage."

The Bane's own starfighters had kept underneath the Bane's shielding up to this point. All of them, even the Jedi in their Falcons, were champing at the bit by this point.

He then had the comms switch frequency, talking to the locals and the other frigate captains. "The rest of the Hardcells will try to get around and out of the battlefield. Be ready to pounce on them in turn."

Like with a planetary shield, if an object was moving slowly enough, it could pass through the shielding of the Tyrant's Bane. Or at least, that was what the Hardcells captains would assume. Given the density of the Bane's shielding - after all, it had the same power as a planetary shield only over a far smaller area, that was something of a given - Harry doubted that the Hardcells would have much luck.

Still, there was no reason to take undo risk. "Helm, keep us moving up and down. I don't want any of those Hardcells to hit the same zone." With that, Harry once more began to use Battle Precognition. He directed both the defensive fire of the ship and the torpedo fire of the frigates, targeting one charging Hardcell after another while the helmsman shifted the ship this way and that in three dimensions, even negating their forward momentum at one point.

Although several were able to smash into it despite the destroyer's torpedoes, such was the density of their shielding, none of the Hardcells could crash into the Bane's shielding together. But now, as the Hardcells slowed and their own shields flickered out, several other systems joined them, the secondary-level ion cannons of the Tyrant's Bane taking a horrendous toll on their systems. Guns shut off, shield blisters blew, and engines died as the ion cannons did their work. And then, the husbanded Arrow and Falcon fighters pushed forward, locking up the enemy ships almost instantly and pummeling them with proton torpedoes.

Only four of the Hardcells were still alive by the time the two opposing lines of battle, or rather, one line, and one ship, began to enter engagement range. "Destroyer captains, you may



target any ship you can. All ships, do not be afraid to fall back. The lives of your crew matter more than a kill," Harry ordered as Battle Precognition began to show its worth.

Vulture starfighters aiming for vulnerable areas on the local 'capital ships', were blown out of space by the defensive fire of the Bane. Sections of the enemy ship's shielding, which looked damaged from their fights with the Bane's own Vultures, who had mostly been wiped out by this point, were targeted by the secondary weapons.

One of the Lucrehulks lost a section of shielding and began to turn away desperately. The Arrows, now released from their purely defensive work, surged through the battle space, following the Lucrehulk around and pummeling that section. They took fire in turn, but thanks to the changes made to them, taking down the starfighters' shielding was only half the battle.

Harry could practically feel the consternation and shock of the enemy as it realized how dense the Tyrant's Banes shielding was and, indeed, how tough the Arrow fighters were. He probably had reports of a few of the Bane's Vultures being remarkably tough to kill but had probably dismissed those reports. Now though, as a few Arrow fighters took as much pummeling as a gunboat could have, it became very clear that the GDL had access to some extremely advanced technology. Or at least, that was what Drek would assume.

"Not that we are going to give them any time to conjecture on that score," Aayla murmured aloud, concentrating too much on their conjoined Battle Precognition to communicate mentally with Harry along their normal link.

Ahsoka grumbled, once more wishing to be out with the starfighters. But she didn't voice any complaints, instead giving her all to the gestalt, adding her power to it if not her actions, as every station aboard the bridge was already occupied.

The last Hardcell exploded to one side of the Bane, having come under fire from a flight of local starfighters that actually did have proton torpedoes as it tried to pull away from the Bane on a bad course, although tiny magazines apparently as they were already pulling back to rearm. A Munificent class followed on its heels, shattered by the destroyers, who were also now pulling back and away from the point of impact between the two lines of battle.

This allowed more of the enemy to target the Tyrant's Bane, which should have been a turning point in the battle. But while more local starfighters began to die, the fire against the Bane availed the attackers nothing. In return, six Munificents were destroyed in quick succession.

Still, they persisted for a time. It was very apparent they knew the gravity well projector was on the Bane, and if they couldn't knock it out, they couldn't run even if they wanted to.

Twenty minutes later, shields began flickering on several surviving enemy ships, including the Lucrehulks. The one that had already been damaged by the Arrows was definitely

having trouble. Without any verbal order, more ion cannons began to target it instead of its fellows whenever they could. Systems began to fail all along the ship, and the rest of the Confederacy fleet began to try and retreat.

More Vulture starfighters launched, the last of the ones aboard the Lucrehulks, only to be pounced on by the locals. Thanks to the initial disorganization Harry's trick had caused, they'd had numerical superiority from the start, and although that had been severely whittled down, and several thousand pilots had died, they still outnumbered the surviving Vultures.

"Ahsoka, help over on sensors. Backtrack the battle and see if you can use the sensors or the Force to find anyone who could eject." Starfighter pilots routinely did not have the gear necessary to survive bailing out as their in-air cousins did, but occasionally starfighters were built with some kind of last-minute survival body pods.

Ahsoka nodded wordlessly, wincing as the sentient cost of this battle suddenly occurred to her. She had been so caught up in the excitement of the battle that she had forgotten to remember that people would be really dying. *And not just on our own side either. I, I can't forget that our enemies are sentients too.* "Yes, master."

"Do not beat yourself over the head with it, Ahsoka," Aayla said, from where she was now communicating directly with the locals. Originally they'd been unwilling to take many orders from her or the rest of the GDL officers handling the starfighter portion of the battle. But now that they'd taken such severe losses, that attitude had faded, and more than the Crushers were working in real tandem with the GDL forces, letting Harry and Aayla's Battle Precognition direct their actions.

"Feeling excitement for overcoming a challenge is not wrong. And you are not in a position of command. It is my Harry's job to think of such things. Your job is simply to learn and to do what you can to help. When you are in command, then you will need to be wary of getting tunnel vision like that."

Ahsoka nodded again, this time more firmly, and she began to go over the sensor readings, not even looking at the main battle anymore but rather the wreckage behind it.

Nor was she alone in this. Several other officers across the GDL fleet were doing the same. It was evident to everyone that the battle was over at this point. Only the immense shielding of the Lucrehulks facing them kept them in the battle, and although many of the frigates and most of the local 'fleet' had been pummeled badly, with four of the frigates too badly damaged to continue, they'd pulled out of the fight. And their fellows had come back in. And again, the proton torpedoes of the destroyers, coupled with the immense shielding and defensive nature of the Bane, had worked wonders.

The locals generally began to pull back, as did the Arrow and Falcon starfighters from the GDL, who had also taken losses. But the survivors returned to the planet to rearm again,

coming back in with more proton torpedoes are concussion missiles to add their weight once more, using the shared telemetry data from the capital ships to launch their starfighter-sized torpedoes or missiles at long-range. There was no need to dive deeper into the enemy's defensive envelope, not at this stage of the battle.

The Munificent had been whittled down to over half their number by this point, while only a single Lucrehulk had been pummeled into wreckage. They came under long-range fire from the locals and close range from the Bane's ion cannons. Their shields started to fail, and Harry started to send out calls for the enemy to surrender.

Meanwhile, Ahsoka began to find a few extremely tiny escape pods, more through the Force than her scanners, really. In her opinion, they couldn't really be called pods. They were more like coffins, and their signals were ridiculously hard to find. But they seemed to have worked on several of the local starfighters. It might only save one life in every twenty, but even so, the families of those saved would greatly appreciate the effort.

As the Munificent were whittled down to five, a second Lucrehulk lost a large segment of shielding over its bridge. This was followed rapidly by the bridge's destruction, which put the ship out of the fight. Once more, Harry offered the enemy a chance to surrender once more. Still, it went unheeded. Then, almost abruptly, the retreating ships broke apart, trying to escape individually.

More Valahari starfighters rejoined the battle, pouncing on the remaining Munificent. The Bane followed on the heels of two Lucrehulks staying together, while the remaining gunboats, of which the GDL had lost five, and the frigates, followed one of the others. The last had lost its hyperspace engines.

Finally, as the Bane's fire began to pummel its targets into pieces, there came a call. "Harry, we're being hailed. A Captain Roul on the Big Seller wants to surrender."

"Put him on screen, halt turbolaser fire, but keep a third of the ion cannons that can range on the enemy ships going." A moment later, Drek, a Skakoan, appeared, its eyes invisible through the pickup and the goggles that led down to his rebreather. "Captain, I understand you wish to surrender. Do you speak for your own ship alone? Or your remaining ships?"

Elsewhere in the system, one of the Munificent exploded under the vengeful fire of the surviving Crushers. The Crushers had gone in close and raked the Munificent with their laser cannons but had paid for it. Still, that did lend a nasty backdrop to Harry's question.

"I am," Roul answered, his words coming out with the habitual noise of the Skakoan rebreather. "I am \*FZZT\* senior among the surviving captains. They \*FZZT\* will follow my orders."

"What happened to Commodore Drek?"

“Commodore Drek \*FZZT\* retreated to his stateroom with an illness. I \*FZZT\* was his flagship captain.”

Harry nodded slowly. *“How much do you want to bet that illness means he came down with ‘bolter to the head’ disease?”*

*“No takers here, Harry. I’d say that adds more credence to my worry about what C’baoth might be doing to his flag officers,”* Aayla replied. She was no expert on Skakoan body language, but with the image helping her, Aayla could sense through the Force the man was walking the ragged edge of shock and horror at what could be called a one-sided battle.

“Cease fire,” Harry said aloud to his bridge crew before turning to Roul. “Tell your ships to shut down all systems across the board bar their real space engines. They will move towards the planet slowly so that our boarding shuttles can meet them. We will take your people prisoner, as well as any survivors from the ships you have lost. but they will be treated in accordance with the established laws of war should none of your people attempt to booby trap your ships.” Harry let his voice and expression harden then. “If they do, then those rights will disappear, and the individuals of that ship will be treated as terrorists.”

Roul slowly nodded. “\*FZZT\* Agreed.” Moments later, the surviving enemy ships powered down their weapons systems and shielding. But Harry kept the gravity well projector on until the boarding crews were on each enemy ship.

The battle was over, but the cleanup would take quite a long time. *Thankfully, we didn’t have to show everything the Bane can do, just the majority of the secondary tricks, so to speak. The question about our ‘secret weapon’ will remain a mystery for now.*

Later that day, as King Vane went on the news and announced the planet’s formally joining the GDL, Harry and the others began to go over their prizes.

The most damaged Lucrehulks would be sent on to Dac, accompanied by one of the local freighters. The Munificent would be sent to Serenno, probably to be dispersed around the sector for repair. Serenno was busy building destroyers and lacked the dock space to handle even the Munificent.

Two Lucrehulks would remain here and be turned into the center of a real defense force. Neither had anything wrong with its hangar bays, although much of their shielding would need to be replaced. Still, the locals could do that work since the ships’ internal generators were still functional. Both ships’ engines were shot to hell, real space and hyperspace, and would need weeks of work, even in a place like Corellia, to make them mobile again. Here, that was practically impossible. But the locals were pleased enough with what they were getting.

All in all, Harry felt that this whole trip had been a success. *Although I think it’s the last victory on the political front we’re going to see for a while now. The drums of war are beating*

*all the louder, and the Tyrant's Bane, and us, need to start doing our part on a larger scale,* Harry reflected later that evening, to which Aayla could only agree.

**OOOOOOO**

Nor was this the only victory the GDL scored that day. Elsewhere, several defensive operations succeeded, and the first six cloaking device-equipped frigates finished their refits. With them, Commodore Rafael was now free to start his espionage missions and hopefully find the hidden shipyards that had built the CIS war machine.

Moreover, Jedi forces also began to operate on numerous Type 1 planets conquered by the Confederacy. There were twenty such planets, the only real gains the CIS had made against the GDL since the war began.

One such force was being led by Obi-Wan Kenobi, a Jedi Knight Harry and Allison had met long ago on Tatooine. He had made a name for himself in the years since as an extremely capable combatant, one of the premier users of Soresu in the Order, but also as an able negotiator. The Negotiator had actually become his nickname in any news article that covered his actions, although, despite that acknowledgment, Obi-Wan himself continued to act as a humble Jedi, never putting himself forward or becoming arrogant.

So he had been perfectly willing to learn new skills and join a group of three other Jedi to act as saboteurs and spies behind the lines in the GDL. He didn't know the other three Jedi all that well, but Obi-Wan supposed that by the time this mission was over, he would.

Obi-Wan himself was very obviously the people person. To Obi-Wan's surprise, this also meant he was in charge of the team. It would be up to him to work with the locals, who apparently were working from some kind of continuity plan put in place by Master Yaddle and General Iblis before hostilities began on type 1 planets.

*Even now, it strikes me as amazing that such planets would willingly join the GDL, even knowing they would probably be conquered. How much does that have to do with how much the GDL has helped these planets or how much anger there was locally against the Republic? That was not a nice thought, but it was what he had to face. And perhaps I should also acknowledge that Harry has a significant amount of charisma,* he added mentally, shaking his head drolly from side to side as he moved through the darkness with his other companions.

They had been inserted onto this planet, a planet in the inner rim named Orchis, a world rich with both wood and various metal ores, four days past. It had been colonized from the Core Worlds millennia ago but had faced local issues, a type of lung disease that the Republic only found a cure for that didn't involve simply bathing the affected in bacta tanks a hundred years prior. But before that, the disease had hammered the population routinely to the point that the planet simply hadn't been able to build up the industry its agricultural wealth would normally call for.

It had thus been taken advantage of by the Republic in various deals over the years.

The fact that the GDL wasn't going to take advantage of them, wasn't going to tax them so harshly they couldn't build up their local industry and was willing to provide enough military equipment to build up a local naval force had made this planet leap at the chance to join the GDL. It didn't have the local power network necessary for a planetary generator, but it did have numerous space stations, and the battle for the planet had been fierce before the Confederacy forced the defenders to surrender.

But if the Confederacy had thought that getting the orbitals to surrender would mean an end to all resistance on the planet below, they would have been sadly mistaken. But they weren't that naïve. They had placed a massive occupation force, two full army groups of droids, one for each main continent on the planet. Obi-Wan had seen droids marching through a few of the cities, in company strength, shoulder to shoulder as they marched down the main streets, a show of force that would have cowed the population of many planets. Indeed, Obi-Wan reflected that perhaps it should have also cowed this one. But it hadn't.

Instead, it had **infuriated** the locals. Locals who knew very well that throwing bottles at droids got you a plasma bolt in return, who knew that fighting droids in the open was a losing game. And who had a lot of passion for explosives due to mining being the planet's main industry.

*And one thing droids are not good at is nontraditional warfare*, Obi-Wan reflected as he took the offered night lens from one of the other Jedi. They'd seen several instances of that since landing.

Ahead of the group of Jedi, a massive supply base was in the process of being constructed. It would house a full division of droids or more, perhaps. Obi-Wan wasn't certain, unaware of how much space droids took up. It was also supposed to house the new planetary government headquarters. The last had been destroyed in an explosion set by local partisans. That destruction had incinerated all the local records of who was who, numbers, occupations, and so forth.

The Jedi who handed the amplivisor to him was another human, whose name was Master Sorrel. He was perhaps the most scraggly Jedi that Obi-Wan had ever met and considering his own Master Qui-Gon had not been the best at looking after his hair or beard, that was saying something. Obi-Wan knew that it wasn't part of his local disguise, as instead, the man had talked about slicking back his hair to hide his identity when they needed to blend in with the local populace.

Sorrel was a Warden who admitted that his lightsaber skills were not very good. He had trouble with Force Precognition when in close combat which was a must for any lightsaber user. But he was a crack shot with a sniper rifle and could pilot and hotwire anything. He also was very good at mind tricks and most of the Clan Saa techniques.

Beside him, Master Lotto, a Druulgothan, crouched, staring ahead of them, his large shoulders hunched forward. A member of a lizard-like species, he had no need of the device, being able to see in the dark as easily as in the day. He was the muscle for this group, a staunch Guardian who was a decent lightsaber duelist but also could use guns and pilot well enough. He was nowhere near as good as some of the other pilots of the Jedi Order, but he had been good enough to get them to the ground upon their arrival without crashing, which was all Obi-Wan wanted in a pilot.

The fourth member of their group was the computer specialist, a young, newly made Jedi Knight named Kristin J'atharna. She was a near human, an Arkanian, who took to electronics as few other Jedi Obi-Wan had ever heard of could. She was a dab hand at improvised explosives, repairing nearly anything and slicing. That last was a skill perhaps only a handful of Jedi possessed.

Her inclusion on this particular team told Obi-Wan that GDL High Command, and the Jedi Order perhaps, had more in mind for the four of them instantly working on this one planet against its conquerors. What that might be, he didn't know, but he sensed it in the Force. *Something to do with the droids, perhaps? There must be some reason she brought along so much cracking gear on what should be a long-term sabotage campaign rather than an espionage mission.*

"That's the last patrol. Ten minutes before they come back. Let's go." Obi-Wan ordered.

The other Jedi moved with him, racing forward through the trees and out into the cleared zone around the growing base. The invaders had taken over a small landing area situated on the inner edge of a coastal city and then expanded outward into the wilderness area beyond that zone. This had created an obvious weakness, but the enemy simply sent more patrols through the woods, making it practically impossible to sneak through the multiple layers of defense.

But the droids were not the best at moving through the forest unheard. The four Jedi had been able to make it this close without being seen, mainly by taking to the treetops and using the color change technique to blend in at need. Droids didn't look up even

Now, as Sorrell once more climbed up a tree, his sniper rifle coming off his back, Obi-Wan and the other three raced out into the open around the base, using one of the color change skills on their cloaks every so often to blend further into the night.

Then they were across and moving through the buildings. Here, Obi-Wan finally saw living sentients that were part of the Confederacy forces. A hundred yards from where they entered the base, he could see several of them arguing about something that Obi-Wan didn't bother trying to overhear. Two others, both insectile Geonosians, were very obviously inspecting a dozer of some kind, its engine cowling open.

Kristin nodded to the other two and gestured to the pair of engineers, moving quickly before Obi-Wan could give her the go-ahead. He and Lotto moved into cover, and Kristin was behind the two engineers, point-blank force stuns gleaming momentarily from her hands as she touched their backs, sending the technique directly into the bug-like sentients to keep the glow from being seen. Both Geonosians collapsed, and she dragged them underneath the dozer before fiddling with the dozer's engine for a moment.

She was back with the others a moment later, tapping a small device on her belt. "If we need a distraction," she murmured to the others.

Obi-Wan nodded and began to use the Force to figure out where the largest number of living mines were. He could also sense most of them were inactive at the moment, sleeping in a series of barracks nearby. However, on the other side of the base, several minds felt to him as if they were still awake.

He gestured wordlessly, and the others, who could sense the same thing he did, fell into line behind him.

It was well they had because the base command post was situated on the other side of another open killing zone. Here, twelve more droids patrolled in groups of two while for mean on station at the door into the small bunker that housed the command post.

"Well, at least we know that those minds we all felt weren't some kind of all-night Sabaac game or something similar. That would've been embarrassing," he murmured to the others.

Both of them snorted in amusement, then Kristin tapped the control to her little surprise, but Obi-Wan shook his head. He gestured around them, asking if she could find something else to blow up. The grin he got in return was somewhat off-putting, especially coming from another Jedi, and he resolved to talk to her about it later. *A Jedi should not take much pleasure in destroying something, no matter what that might be.*

He and Lotto remained there for a moment as Lotto picked up small stones, flinging them up into the nighttime sky. They landed elsewhere in the open area around the command post, and from where they were, they saw several of the droids stiffen and turn their attention in that direction. The others didn't, instead raising their weapons and staring out into the darkness.

"I am very thankful that the enemy has seemingly never thought of adding a heat vision ability to their droids," Sorrell murmured. "But they do not seem as easy to trick as they should be."

"And because they are droids, there is little we can do with the Force to shift their attention," Obi-Wan agreed, his voice so soft that someone standing two paces away wouldn't



have been able to hear. They could cut past them, but then they'd have to fight their way out of the base entirely. Which would not be fun. The best idea would be to get in and out without being seen, but the Force was telling Obi-Wan that they weren't going to get that lucky.

Ten minutes later, they were still waiting there still as statues in the darkness when a series of explosions went off in the direction that headed toward the city. Obi-Wan turned in that direction, having anticipated something large-scale, but not like that. "I wonder what she found to... Occur to," he murmured dryly.

The lizard alien chuckled at that, the sound like rustling leaves in the darkness. "Kristin certainly does have an explosive personality."

"Puns now? What have I ever done to you to be hurt so?" Obi-Wan retorted drolly, and the lizard-like Jedi chuckled once more.

Moments later, as the camp came awake and hundreds of people began to move out of the barracks nearby, along with several of the droids on patrol here, Kristin joined them, moving like a shadow through the still-dark base. "I made it look as if the portable generator they are using as the base's main source of power had a fault. Too much air entering the containment area equals boom," Kristin said with a faint smile.

A smile that faded as she stared ahead of them towards the command post. A group of ten Geonosians had just run out. Several of the droids peeled off to join them.

The Three Jedi quickly ducked back further out of sight, covering themselves with their Force Stealth as much as possible. None of them were as good at it as the former Jedi Shadows, the practically defunct branch of the Jedi order, which had been hunted by the Sith to near extinction leading up to the war. Thankfully the Geonosians were in too much of a rush to look around and passed them by.

The rest of the droids on guard around the command post didn't seem to be in any rush to follow, though. Instead, they were all on high alert, spreading out in a semicircle around the entrance to the command post. Which meant they were completely ignoring the back of it.

Without a word spoken, the trio of Jedi retreated slowly from where they had been observing the entrance and around it to the opposite side of the cleared zone around the command post. There, with the other two covering him with their blasters, Obi-Wan darted forward. Reaching the back wall of the bunker, Obi-Wan cut into it using his lightsaber, placing the emitter flush against the wall and slowly cutting through the reinforced ferrocrete.

It was slow going. The armor was extremely thick and heat resistant. But eventually, Obi-Wan's lightsaber cut a small enough hole that he and the other three could crawl through. Lotto came through last, finding it a very tight fit.

By the time he was able to stand up on the other side, Obi-Wan and Kristin were under attack, and alarms were unfortunately blaring. Two automated gun turrets had come down from the ceiling swirling to face them as they entered. The guns hadn't recognized the sizzling noise caused by Obi-Wan's lightsaber or the removal of the small portion of the outer wall as a threat, but two unknown heat signatures entering their security zone certainly were.

Obi-Wan was a Master of the defensive style, Soresu. Built for lightsaber-to-lightsaber combat, it could absorb and redirect a person's assaults, giving Obi-Wan an advantage. The angrier, the better. But unlike Shien, the other purely defensive style wasn't so good at deflecting blaster bolts back into the attacker. Despite that, he stood there, his lightsaber whirling in an intricate arc as Kristin lined up her shots with her blaster around him.

Lotto joined in with his blaster, quickly hitting the two automated guns. But alarms were blaring throughout the bunker now and the base beyond. As they raced forward, several security droids came out of nearby rooms, blasting away at the intruders. "Jedi. Engage. Obliterate!"

"I will take the lead. Kristin, which direction?" Obi-Wan questioned as he began to batter aside more blaster bolts coming towards them. Lotto took a position directly behind him, shielding Kristin with his bulk. Unlike the others, Lotto could probably take a few strikes from a blaster, and unless they hit him in the eyes or mouth, he'd keep on going.

"Down this hallway and then to the left," Kristin responded, feeling where most of the minds around them were.

Obi-Wan nodded and moved in that direction as quickly as possible while Lotto and Kristin gave them cover fire.

When they came to the intersection, Lotto stepped forward, his lightsaber activating along with Kristin's. The two of them were able to batter more of the defenders' fire back into them than Obi-Wan alone had been able to, and several droids went down, clearing the way to the entrance to the command room. Lotto took up position there, using a Force Shield for the first time, letting the defender's fire batter away at his shield.

Behind him, Kristin and Obi-Wan entered the command center, finding the first living opponents of the night. All the officers and Geonosians were armed. Kristin recognized one of them as the individual who had recently been on the news as the Confederacy-appointed overseer for the planet. He was the only human in the room, a cyborg with both arms replaced with metal ones.

Force Stuns flashed out from both Jedi, washing over the entire room, knocking every sentient within unconscious before they could even get a single shot off, and Kristin was then rushing forward, gesturing to the overseer. "Do you think we can get him out of here? And is he important enough to try?"

"I doubt a mere planetary governor is placed high enough within the Confederacy to matter to the overall war. And he just arrived on-planet before we did, so he doesn't know enough about their occupation plans either." In reality, Obi-Wan knew they should probably execute the man, but that was not the Jedi way. If he had died in the battle, that would've been one thing, but with the Force stun technique, there had been no need to kill anyone here.

Kristin nodded and began to plug her hacking devices into the computer, downloading everything she could, hashing what remained, and generally making trouble for any computer specialist who came in after her. Ten minutes later, she announced, "Done! I also sent a virus to the ships in orbit through the command network. Their communications system will be complete garbage until they get rid of it. Same thing on the ground, although I used a different virus."

She then ducked underneath another console and began to fiddle with something underneath. Moments later, the smell of smoke began to appear as whatever she was doing shorted out the console. And then she did it again to several more.

"Kristin, Obi-Wan. I don't mean to jog your elbows, but I could use some help out here," Lotto shouted over the sounds of repeated blaster bolts hitting his Force Shield. This was followed by the more Fzz-crack of blaster bolts hitting a lightsaber.

Obi-Wan quickly moved to join him, while Kristin kept up her work for a few more seconds before doing the same, firing past the other Jedi into the droids.

As the droids tried to close, she tossed two grenades forward over Obi-Wan's head into the mass of droids. There they exploded, destroying most of them. But behind the B1 droids, four droidekas rolled forward, their shields flickering as they began to fire back before flickering back on as Kristin fired on them.

Without a word, the three formed a Force gestalt, with Kristin reaching forward with her hand to thrust the droids back off their feet. They flew back, crashing into the far wall. The physical impact wasn't fast enough to activate them, and all four droids crashed into the far wall, badly denting their chassis with their weapons crushed along one side.

Then Lotto and Obi-Wan launched themselves forward, chopping down into the droids before they could get their shields back up. With the droidekas dealt with, they raced back down the corridor towards her and exit, with Lotto going forward first, grunting under the impact of a few blaster bolts on his shoulders and head before he raised a Force Shield once more.

Joining Lotto, Obi-Wan summoned a Force Shield, taking over the defense as they moved forward, while Kristin and Lotto fired back at the growing number of droids rushing toward them. Force Pushes and tossed explosives from Kristin let the trio push their way out of the open area around the camp command post, where Kristin dropped numerous smoke

bombs at her feet, which spread quickly. The smoke wasn't just smoke. It was a gaseous compound that carried a minuscule amount of metal that blinded sensors.

But the droids had no fear of friendly fire and kept firing into the smoke, even as the Jedi retreated, almost hitting all three several times, searing away bits of their cloaks. With Obi-Wan's Force Shield down, the droids couldn't target them very well, though, and the Jedi reached the outer edge of the base.

Here, the fourth member of their team made his presence known. Precise disruptor-rated energy bolts slammed into droid heads or bodies before Sorrel launched several more smoke bombs in an arc around his fellow Jedi, covering the area.

This, and Kristin activating her little surprise, gave the group enough to cover to reach the woods.

"Well, that was more excitement than we had suspected," Sorrel announced, climbing down from his tree and joining them in running out into the darkness.

"Yes, well, any crash you can get away from is a good one," Obi-Wan replied.

Sorrel shook his head wryly. "What is it with you and crashing, Obi-Wan?"

"The phrase 'once beaten, twice shy' comes to mind. Only in my case, I've always been cautious and have crashed eight times since I became a padawan."

"That is indeed more than the average," Kristin quipped.

Several hours later, the four had changed their appearances, hiding their lightsabers in small bags at their feet. Each was different in some fundamental way, be it clothing or hairstyle, and none of the foursome drew any attention save Lotto, whose species was not normal around here. But thanks to the color change technique and Force-assisted healing, even Lotto didn't look any worse for wear from the night's work.

Outside cheers abounded about the news that had already spread across the planet. There were no droid patrols in this rundown segment of the city, and the locals were all looking to let out some aggression anyway.

*No, the GDL populations on these planets are not rolling over, Obi-Wan reflected, listening with half an ear as Kristin explained all the data she'd been able to gather. Beside him, Andrew and Terrel sipped at their drinks, their expressions reflective. And while I dislike violence for violence's sake, this time, it was in service to a good cause. I can only hope that all our missions can go as smoothly.*

OOOOOO

As the war ground on, this and other small-scale conflicts abounded for the next week. Every side scored victories, and every side lost. The various fronts grew, impacting more people, as the sheer scale of the war slowly began to grind itself into people's consciousness.

Meanwhile, Harry, Aayla and Padme had time to talk in depth. Behind the veil of the new security codes, the trio of lovers compared notes, making plans going forward, both personal for when they could meet in person once more and continuing to burn the Sith's intelligence apparatus away. Unfortunately, there their work was slowly fading out for lack of targets.

On another kind of front, and to the surprise of all three, the Confederacy Parliament agreed to the idea of the Medical Ship Neutrality Act. With MP Bonteri pushing, they even offered to match the number of vessels the Republic could build, provided that the Republic supplied them with bacta. This was a touchy point, but Padme felt she could get the Senate to agree, so long as the Confederacy did not try to divert those ships and the bacta they contained was tightly controlled.

The fact that the GDL could not afford to build any specially designed hospital cruisers themselves earned it several sneers in many corners. But most thinking individuals understood that the GDL, as the smallest of the three polities, was straining every sinew it could in the war against the Confederacy. And none of the GDL sectors sneered at all at the idea, knowing their planets would benefit.

Of course, the war also continued by other means through several proxies, including the Senator of Ryloth, who was furious with the GDL. With her duties seen to for the moment, Aayla, with the help of the Senator for the Arkanis system, had gone behind Orn Fre Taa's back, or that was the way he thought of it, to contact the clans that ruled Ryloth. Her offer to her people was simple: Ryloth was offered the same deal they had offered Type 1 planets. Provide warriors, trained naval personnel, and espionage agents to the GDL instead of taxes, and the GDL would provide technology. Not just defense as was normal, but technology, food, and medicine, the things Ryloth could not provide its citizens.

The clans were extremely concerned by several things at this point. The war, for certain. Ryloth was an Outer Rim planet in the Gaulus Sector, an area of space currently being overlooked by the war... and the Republic as a whole. That state of affairs was very bad in the long term, as Ryloth, Gaulus, and the other advanced planets in the sector were very susceptible to Confederacy assault. And exploitation from the Hutts out beyond the Outer Rim. Since the start of the war, the local crime syndicates had grown ever bolder, to the point the planet was close to a civil war.

So Ryloth had leaped at the chance to join the GDL, and the Tyrant's Bane led a full defense fleet, crewed by men and women from the Ruusan sector, out to them. Within days nine Golan-style defense stations were in place, with four gunboat divisions, Arrow wings and a new division of destroyers to defend the system, manned mainly by the locals. Ryloth already

had a planetary shield generator, although it only defended the zone around the equator. The rest of the planet was, as Harry knew all too well, inimical to all life.

But the pair of them had underestimated Senator Orn Fre Taa. The leader of the influential Rim Faction, he was furious that his own planet had opted to join the GDL, undermining his position in the Senate. With the Rim Faction behind him, he quickly pushed through a motion to stop any planet, system or sector from leaving the Republic during a time of war is not only illegal but treasonous. The motion passed quickly, as while most knew they needed the GDL to keep fighting, there were still a lot of voices in the Senate raised against them.

Worse, many of those voices were in the Peace Party. Several hundred Peace Party Senators feared that the GDL, for all it had peacefully seceded, would not be willing to rejoin the Republic after the war and thus would cause more conflict in the future. None could be convinced that two polities could coexist peacefully in the galaxy. So Padme was forced to allow the party to vote as their consciences dictated or lose face with her fellow Senators.

From now on, the GDL would grow no stronger unless it convinced CIS systems to join them. And going by the writing of the law, this law could be used to force the GDL back into the fold if need be. Something Harry and Aayla were extremely concerned by.

Which was precisely what Darth Sidious was going for.

Indeed, this was a clear victory for Sidious, just as the ones he had created in the field were for his public persona. The assault on Bilbringi failed miserably, with the entire naval force being ambushed in turn. At the same time, the 501<sup>st</sup>, Anakin and Mace scored their first major factory. However, they lacked the manpower necessary to retain control of the planet. The droid factories were turned into so much slag, and the 501<sup>st</sup> could escape with minimum losses thanks to the leadership of the two Jedi.

Meanwhile, the Confederacy campaign into the Corellia sector began to build up, pushing deeper into the sector. It was slow going, slogging almost, but more GDL forces were being pulled away from other sectors to fight against the growing Confederacy war machine as it ground into the GDL.

The Confederacy certainly wasn't having it all its own way. The Corellians had brought out of mothballs six more dreadnoughts, which were very much a cut above them the Lucrehulks. But, the Confederacy was also beginning to field their own dreadnaught class. The ship obviously had been laid down in significant numbers before the war but was only now beginning to appear on the front lines now. Analysts in the Republic and GDL believed this was because the CIS had believed that their Vulture swarms would be more effective than they had and that these ships both demanded larger crews and far more in the way of parts than the Lucrehulks, being more comparable to Munificent's but three times the size.

Indeed, it finally seemed like the war was slowly going in the direction Sidious wanted it to.

But that was only on the surface. Underneath the surface, Sidious was still losing ground in the GDL in the shadow war, and he was getting disturbing reports about the number of destroyers that the GDL were building and pushing into the battle.

Worse was one single report he had gotten from the Core Worlds...

**OOOOOOO**

Inside his hidden throne room, Sidious raged, his lightsaber activated as he for once lost all control of his emotions, turning into a berserker fit to frighten even Maul. So furious was he that Sidious barely kept his Force Cloak in place so every Jedi on the planet wouldn't feel his presence. With his lightsaber, he hacked into the ground floor, ceiling and the few decorations there, raging and furious at what he had just read.

"How!" He howled, "How by the Dark Side did they find out about Arthur Dener? How!?"

The worthy in question was a business mogul within the Core Worlds, one of the richest individuals within that area of space, or perhaps the entire Republic. Through a series of proxies, he owned several thousand local newspapers spread across the Core and one of the largest intergalactic news agencies with subsidiaries everywhere.

And the man had worked for the Sith just as his predecessors had going back generations. They had seven generations to make those various agencies into hotbeds of anti-Jedi sentiment ready to boil over from carefully crafted critiques to outright attacks. They were to have begun turning the Republic against the Jedi eventually, just as they had the locals far more subtly. With Master Trebor finally slain, the work would have continued on unimpeded.

And now Dener was dead. Assassinated, Sidious was certain, no matter what the official police report said or even his local spies. *Died in a riot, utter kriffing nonsense! The man had several hundred bodyguards. He never went anywhere without a full company of them! To imagine that Arthur would be overcome by a simple riot was ridiculous. Now, this was enemy action.* Somehow, someone had used the reaction of Dener and the news agencies he controlled to figure out where his true loyalties lay.

Luckily it seemed as if they hadn't been in a position to capture Dener but even so, the man's loss, without an heir, was massively troublesome. Worse was that his mansion had been ransacked during the same riot. According to local police, the rioters had vandalized the whole block.

But Sidious knew someone had used that as cover to get at the man's computers. Luckily, the man had a dead man's switch embedded in his spine. His death would have instantly sent out a signal that would have cut all ties between Sidious further along the web leading back to Sidious. But even so, the man's business dealings would certainly come to light.

*I could move to nationalize his intergalactic new agency, considering he doesn't have any heirs, and it is a vastly important news outlet. That could work. But more importantly who was ruthless enough to do something like this? It is not the Jedi for certain unless...*

With a roar of rage, Sidious hurled his lightsaber into the wall, where it went through like a spear, the plasma blade burning through the wall for a moment before slowly burning its way down to the floor. "UNLESSS, it is a Jedi who has been acting in the shadows for years! Waiting, gathering information no longer connected to the Order at all!"

Sidious left his lightsaber there, moving back over to his computer and the waiting droid, which had brought in the bad news. Sidious was actually pleased that his self-control had kept him from hacking the droid into pieces, although Sidious acknowledged that he would once he was done with the droid for the day. For now, he had the droid look up some information for him pulling it out onto a screen nearby.

Faces, faces of Jedi whose current location he didn't know, flashed up, moving quickly across the screen as Sidious stared at them, reaching out with his connection to the Veil, demanding information from the Dark Side. *Curse it. The Jedi cannot hide from me! With the Veil, I will find them now I know they are out there!*

As one picture passed before his eyes, Sidious paused, the Dark Side flaring a warning within him. "This one..."

He stared at the image of Komari Vosa for a moment, reminded of how much he had wanted the woman dead now more than a decade past. Her position as head of the Bando Gora had situated her very well to fight Sidious in the shadows of the galaxy, amongst the criminal element. And after she had taken over Dooku's former position as lightsaber instructor at the retraining center on Serenno, she had disappeared years before the war began.

*I've not even gotten a single report on her since. So she has had years to build up a clandestine network, completely unconnected to the Jedi. If she had reached out even once, I would've known! I would've had a hint. But as it is? Damn it, I thought her return to the order had negated any threat she could have posed. Another, Force damned mistake, although this one I can put at Plagueis' feet rather than my own. Not that it makes this any more palatable.*

With a scowl, Sidious focussed the search down to Jedi Knights and Masters that had been at the training center on Serenno in the same timeframe where Kumari had disappeared. This allowed him to narrow it down until he was staring at the image of Aayla Secura's former master, Quinlan Vos. "Him! Of course. Blast it, the Dark Woman and the other Shadows took so



much of my personal attention, I didn't realize that he, a student of a Shadow was still abroad," Sidious snarled into the emptiness of his room before deliberately standing up and pacing over to his lightsaber, reaching down and turning it off with a finger.

However, as he turned back to bark orders to the droid, Sidious felt himself calming down tremendously. Knowing those two were out there and in the shadows somewhere, trying to hunt down the various network of spies, agents and connections the Sith had created over the past thousand years was actually somewhat therapeutic. It meant that the issue with the anti-alien riots and so forth were not random events. Someone had caused them.

It was also a sign of ruthlessness and pragmatism he could actually admire. That wouldn't stop him from ordering both hunted down and slain like dogs, but it made him feel somewhat better. *Unless I can turn them to the Dark Side. Vos and Vosa... ugh, alliteration, are both powerful in the Force, after all. That would be acceptable, if not as personally gratifying, to see their heads brought to me on a golden platter.*

*Regardless, I have missed the fact that I had a hidden enemy out there. I was concentrating on Potter so much that these two, much like Potter himself did when he was with Master Fay, completely avoided my sight. Very well. They overreached in slaying Denar. I know they are out there now. And with an actual enemy to combat, I can assign agents to fight them in turn, and the criminal element besides. Those two will soon learn that however good they are at moving through them, the shadows of this galaxy belong to me!*

OOOOOO

However, unbeknownst to Sidious, at least two other people were moving unseen, their movements covered by the war, which he should probably have been **very** concerned about.

Mak and Kas stared down at the display screen on the bridge of their freighter, which showed the planet named Vjun trying desperately to deal with the amount of Dark Side energies pouring out from the planet.

No one truly understood what had occurred here. One day all was well, then the next, madness had begun to spread throughout the populace, driving civilians regardless of age or gender to attack everyone around them like feral beasts with teeth and claws. Mothers attacked children. Babies assaulted mothers. The elderly mauled their nurses. Security men were drowned in the bodies of the citizens they were supposed to protect, tearing and being torn apart in turn. Billions descended into a hellish nightmare the likes of which the galaxy had not seen in recorded history.

Despite the best efforts of the few Jedi who could get there as the disaster occurred, the madness spread to the entire planet, and nothing had stopped it. Vjun had been quarantined since. Though to the Jedi, even the tragedy of what had happened was only the tip of the iceberg. To their senses, Vjun was simply drenched in the Dark Side, a black hole of hate, fear,

and the mind-erasing rage of the infected, which distorted the Force for several systems around it.

Which made it the perfect place to hide a construct of the Dark Side like the two former members of Harry's crew were looking for.

"...I, I can sense something momentous here, something beyond the Dark Side, or... perhaps deeper into it? It's hard to describe, but I think those pylons we're supposed to find, one of them is here for certain. Hidden among the background of the Dark Side that has taken over the planet, just like you said," Kas murmured, directing the ship down into the atmosphere.

"I wish I was wrong," Mak murmured, the two falling silent for the moment it took them to come out of the clouds over a random city on the planet. There they stared at the transformed creatures roaming the streets. "Not only is it going to be extremely difficult for the two of us to move around down there without constantly fighting with the... creatures, but finding the pylon itself is going to be like finding a needle in a haystack of other needles. I doubt we'll get so lucky as to discover that it can be seen from the air. And the Force is so distorted by the Dark Side here, I don't know what would happen if we tried to use it to guide our search."

"Maybe. But searching a single planet is far easier than searching the galaxy," Kas answered with a shrug.

"You have a point, my heart." Despite the terms of endearment, Mak scowled further before shaking his head, and the two began to hammer out a plan of how to search the entire planet while also keeping their sanity, knowing how the Dark Side below would probably affect them over time.

But no matter how long it would take or how hard be, both of them were determined. The Dark Side pylon they had seen in the protected vision of the future they'd seen while under the protection of Harry and Allison's Force Light constructs was important. And as they continued the search, both Mak and Kas believed that it had something to do With the veil of the Dark Side, the source of the Sith's strength, at least in the Force if not in any other manner.

*And if we can destroy one of them, perhaps, perhaps the Veil can be broken...*

### **End Chapter**

I had a bleeping lot of trouble to get back into this. I had to rewrite several scenes, as I had just lost the plot basically, and was having Harry act as Ranma. This is a bad thing, obviously.

Beyond that, I have now introduced the full cast of the Tyrant's Bane's bridge crew, and the Jedi who will be part of the war on the ground in various areas: guerrilla, space, and espionage. I have also pushed forward several of the background plots. Now those can continue in the

background as Harry and co. take further center stage, and the war moves forward in various ways while the political side of things doesn't matter as much.