

I am not British or related to Disney in any way. I still have my soul and believe that the Force is a genderless natural power.

Funny thing: in the original, Thyferra sided with the CIS... so how did the Republic not run out of bacta? They kept selling it? OUCH on many levels.

Hey all! This was the winner of the February HP poll, which I ran in the last two weeks of January over on my patron poll. My reasoning being, I wanted to get the chapter done and out in time for the Super Bowl. Or as I like to put it, Choosing Between Two Evils. No, I'm not bitter that none of the teams I was rooting for made it to the Superbowl, not at all...

Anyway, it has also been a few months since this was updated, so I was pleased to see it won. However, I won't be able to work on it from around 1 Eastern time tomorrow to when I get back Tuesday morning from Family Time. Now, while I Grammarlied and read through a large chunk of this chapter, I can't deny I'm not the best when it comes to looking for small mistakes. And because I wanted to post this here for the Super Bowl, I am sending it on to its editor at the same time. If you want to wait until he has had a chance to look through it before reading, I completely understand.

Now with that out of the way, enjoy guys!

Chapter 23: The Battle of Thyferra

Nearly fourteen hours before Operation Trident was supposed to kick off and was suddenly called off thanks to Harry and Aayla's ability to punch through the Veil of the Dark Side, Padme, her group and her assigned escorts were about to jump into the Polinth System from the Vanik system. They were doing this on the, in her opinion, rather bizarrely named dreadnaught-class heavy cruiser Adamantine. The name of the class, not the name of the ship. Padme actually approved of that, although using a heavy cruiser in the first place had been a point of contention between her, Master Windu, and the Chancellor.

While she knew that she would need to be defended by a small fleet of ships as a Senator leaving Coruscant, Padme had originally wanted to pick a small locally built frigate, one made by an old friend of one of her fellow Peace Party members, for her trip out to the Chommell sector and then from there to Thyferra. She knew that her personal small skiff was too much of a target, yet surely a frigate would have been enough? And even if they were attacked, a single frigate would surely not have attracted any attention?

But the Chancellor had decided to load Padme down with more missions between the Chomell Sector meeting she had originally gone to and the mission to Thyferra. This had forced her to change her arrival time backward by several days, and one particular mission, in particular, had 'forced' the Chancellor to ask her to show a bit more in terms of martial Force than Padme would otherwise have wished to be associated with. Now, the Adamantine was the largest ship in the flotilla, which was composed of ten gunboats, two frigates, and five starfighter squadrons.

That had annoyed Padme, but her arguments against the idea ended within an hour of boarding the *Adamantine* when Chewbacca reported that the vessel Padme had hoped to use had been found to have several explosive devices placed on it. The origins of the explosive had yet to be discovered, but Chewbacca was firmly behind the idea of changing to a purely military craft for her mode of transportation from now on.

“Especially with all the attempts at other Senators there have been lately,” Chewbacca had growled out, which, again, Padme could not argue with. There had been several attempts on various Senators in the past week alone, let alone the numerous attempts on Padme’s own life since the war began and directly before.

Since then, the past two days had been spent mainly on political issues on the various planets she visited. Yet even here, there was a surprise. Because Padme had found herself not in the position of needing to shore up support for the war, for which she would’ve been a very strange choice to do, admittedly, but the Republic as a whole.

It had startled Padme to realize there were so many Colony Region and even Core Worlds that had listened to her and Harry’s arguments on the Senate floor, to the debates of the Peace Party and the more intelligent, less vociferous Senators of both the Secessionist and Centrist parties had before the assumption of the war. That had colored local democracies tremendously, and while the majority of Core Worlds were part of the Centrist movement, many who had been mostly legislaturist rather than Centrist had begun to raise concerns about the Centrist faction on the local level. That was fascinating, and while these missions had stretched her abilities to the utmost, Padme had actually enjoyed them a lot.

What was it that Primit Sandoval said to me? Padme mused, pushing the datapad she had been reading through for the third time on Thyferra away. Something was going on there, but Padme couldn’t quite figure it out. Some assumption or basic mistake in the intelligence she had been given, but she needed to back away for a moment to let her mind realize what she was seeing. *‘I wonder if the freedom of the common citizen of the Republic will die in the pursuit of stability?’*

Thinking about the words of the Primit, the elected official that governed the Ghorman System, Padme shook her head, frowning. *While I admit that I think there should be some limit to individual freedom, precisely when you’re so-called freedom impinges on someone else’s, I can understand why Sandoval is concerned about the Republic going too far. After hearing some of the latest rumblings from the Centrists and how they want more military authority put in place over the industrial sectors, I would be concerned, too. Worse is the fact that they were able to convince the Senators who wanted to remodel the industrial sectors of the Core Worlds and the educational departments of their position. Thank the Force there was so much pushback. Setting Senate-chosen military officers in charge of the civilian sector industry would be a bad precedent. I took the idea as simply a sign of how angry the Senator of Hosnian Prime was because of how the war was going, but I can see why Sandoval was concerned.*

Still, both the Peace Party and those Senators not entirely blinded by Centrist dogma are on the lookout. Freedom and democracy will only die within the Republic when I am already a corpse! I will fight that fight as long as I am able to, regardless of my position.

Looking over to the clock on her desk, Padme thrust herself out of the chair she had been sitting in, moving to open the door to the main room of the suite of rooms that she had been given aboard the heavy cruiser. *Time for a snack before I go back to looking over this data package.*

Currently, Padme was sharing a suite of cabins with her normal household. Sabrina handled most of her communications on missions like this, acting more like a secretary than a maid while away from Coruscant and their communications systems. Chewbacca was chief of security as usual, while his wife acted as cook and Zule Xiss as a bodyguard and aide, something that had caused several raised eyebrows on this trip, although Padme would not have even tried to leave Zule behind even if she could have.

While the bedrooms and the main room were comfortable enough, the type of furniture within them all showed that this ship had been hastily converted to carrying VIPs and still retained much of the drab utilitarian plainness of a ship-of-war. The suite did not have its own kitchen and only had one bathroom for all of them.

This last issue was brought startlingly to the forefront of Padme's mind as Zule came out of the bathroom naked as the day she had been born, toweling off her short dark pink hair with a towel and presenting her entire body towards Padme.

Padme couldn't help herself. She simply stared for a few seconds, heat rising to her cheeks. Zule's hips were a bit wider than Padme's her legs a little more muscled, trained for leaping and lunging instead of simple agility or running. Her waist was a bit thicker, her breasts though, Padme's eyes drawn like load stones to the startlingly dark green nipples on Zule's high firm breasts, the perkiness of which Padme knew were the secret envy of many of the Senators, above and beyond her own.

It was only when she felt her eyes start to drift downward from Zule's chest that Padme regained control of herself. She twirled around, her face almost puce in embarrassment. "By the Force, Zule! Put something on, woman!"

Zule grinned to herself, finding it funny that the same thing had happened to both Harry and, before him, Aayla had happened again. *And it's not like I planned it either. The Force works in amusing ways sometimes, even with the Veil in the way. This time though, I'm not embarrassed at all, oh no.* "Oh, come on, Padme, it's nothing you haven't seen before. Admittedly, my coloration is a bit different from Aayla's. Blue is a far cry from red. But my and Aayla's nipples are almost the same color. Or is that the problem, they made you nostalgic?"

"Oh, really!?" Padme had known that Zule was fully aware of her and Harry and Aayla's relationship before this, she'd been teased on it several times by the woman, but that was a little more pointed than normal. "That's a little too far, Zule, even from you!"

Sensing the downturn in Padme's thoughts and her teasing was just a step too far, Zule made certain her next words were conciliatory, and when she moved forward to hug Padme from behind, Padme was grateful to find that the woman had wrapped the towel around herself. "I'm sorry. I know that you three haven't been together physically nearly as often as you could wish. I shouldn't tease you like that. But I was serious. Chewbacca is down in the hangar bay, checking over the shuttles. It's just us women here, and I just got back from training with Rex and a few other clones. I wanted to have an extra

long shower, and I left my change of clothing back in my room. And you know it's always annoying to put on dirty clothing after you've gotten clean."

"I accept your apology, but please go put some clothing on for my sake!" Padme muttered, still flushed and not entirely from ire.

Zule released the hug, moved around Padme and headed towards her quarters, but that didn't stop her from leaving the door open for just a second after she had already dropped her towel. "Zule!"

Moments later, Zule was back, dressed in her typical Jedi outfit, pants, and a formfitting vest that barred her arms up to the shoulder when she wasn't wearing her Jedi robe, as she was now. Like Aayla and Harry, Zule fully embraced the idea of Jedi not really caring overmuch about possessions, although Padme often wondered if that kind of thinking also extended to their lightsabers. *I could say something about boys and their toys, but considering how many Jedi are also women, it would probably go in a very different direction...*

For a moment, Padme watched Zule as she pattered around the small fresher station. It wasn't a kitchen, simply a small fridge with a few drinks and prepackaged foods within, along with a microwave and a trash dispenser.

Like Aayla and Harry, Zule was not like any other Jedi Padme had met or heard of. She had a sense of humor, for one thing, something that only one out of every seven Jedi could say, according to the Jedi themselves. Zule was far more in touch with her emotions than most Jedi, even after the various reforms that had swept through the order over the time Padme had been Senator. Zule was also somewhat open about her sexuality among friends, which had come as something of a startling surprise to Padme as she got to know the other woman.

None of that had stopped Zule from becoming a dear friend to Padme and a close confidant, one whom Padme trusted almost as much as she trusted her two absent lovers. *And it isn't as if this isn't the first time she's teased me. It is the first time I've seen her naked, though. I would certainly have remembered if I'd seen that before. I wonder, is this... Is this how all half-Falleen act? I know that Falleen can be somewhat sexually aggressive, but it is normally a low-key thing, simply taking advantage of their pheromones, proving their superiority by making other people come onto them rather than vice versa. But I've never actually met a half-Falleen other than Zule before. Pity that my idea of trying to hook her up with Sabrina didn't work out. Poor Sabrina, still pining after Eirtae and using relationships with men to try and get over it.*

For some reason, the idea of Sabe and Zule getting together bothered Padme for a second, but Padme shunted all such thoughts aside, watching as Zule moved back over into the sitting area, sitting across from her on the second, somewhat hard, utilitarian sofa. There was an interrogative look on the other girl's face as she cocked her head, looking at Padme closely. "You look as if you want to ask me something. And not something about my lack of attire a few moments ago. Is it serious time?"

"It is serious time far too often with the way the galaxy is going, and despite my embarrassment a second ago, I thank you for helping me keep a positive outlook," Padme quipped, to which Zule bowed her head in acknowledgment. "But yes. I will try to get you back in some fashion for the embarrassment earlier, but that is not what is uppermost in my mind."

Zule snickered until Padme handed her the datapad she had brought out of her room. "I want your opinion on the data we were given on the issues occurring on Theodore. A lot of it is very obviously the typical local governmental rear covering, and most of the rest hint at price gouging and corporate espionage on a scale I find appalling. But there is something that is bothering me about the incidents being reported that have halted the new production lines and the rest of these reports that bother me."

On the surface, Padme's mission to Thyferra was simply to make certain that the Thyferrans were able to meet the demands for bacta being put on their supply by the war. However, that was a multifold issue. Efforts to enhance Thyferra's bacta yield should have started before hostilities began, but had yet to yield any upsurge in the amount of bacta on the market. Thus part of Padme's mission was to investigate that the Thyferrans were not artificially keeping the supply of bacta at a certain amount. Looking at the report, that seemed to be the case, or there was some kind of corporate warfare going on that was slowing the growth of new bacta labs.

"Have you asked Master Windu about it? I've never been personally to Thyferra, although I understand that Master Jerec is due to meet us there, and he has been there before. If Master Windu doesn't have anything to tell you about these reports, we can wait for him," Zule answered, taking the data pad even so. "We're not expected to get this issue done quickly, right?"

"Master Windu is a fantastic politician and an excellent general. But he is not my friend, and say what you will about him, I do not think anyone has stated he has the common touch. Nor do I want to wait in ignorance for Master Jerec. I want your opinion," Padme stated firmly, looking sternly across at the other woman. "There is something... off... about these reports. Something obvious yet which eludes me, and I want your opinion on what it could be."

Looking across at the Nabooan woman, Zule mentally shook her head. *It is almost startling how regal Padme can be even after so many years removed from being Queen. I have seen senators and local rulers who can trace back their lineage for generations, and even they aren't as regal acting as Padme sometimes acts. Which is highly ironic, considering both the fact that her position as Queen was a democratically appointed one and Padme herself believes so much in the importance of representation and democracy on top of the need for peace. I would say something about those not exactly being in order of importance to her, but Padme hasn't really compromised on any of that unless the universe has forced her to. For a Senator, she has a spine of steel to go with an immense amount of moral fiber, personal courage, and a highly intelligent mind. Is it any wonder I'm starting to fall for her?*

Although very few other Jedi would have been willing to admit that, even to themselves. But that was the long and short of it when it came to why Zule sometimes teased Padme as she had earlier.

Zule had begun to feel an attachment to Aayla while the two of them were still learning in the temple over a decade ago. It was the knowledge of that which her former Master had used as an excuse to distance the two of them from her former friends within Clan Saa. Zule had also had more than a little interest in Harry, and both of those emotions had grown when she had moved into the *Tyrant's Bane* for more than a year. There was a reason Zule hadn't been all that annoyed when Harry saw her naked aboard the Tyrant's Bane.

She had subtly flirted with both of them, always standing close, despite knowing that she would never have the same depth of connection the two of them did, but still wanting to be a part of that

relationship in some fashion if she ever got the chance. Zule had also seen how the two of them and Padme had danced around one another occasionally, how both of them had lit up every time they'd be able to even talk to Padme over the Hypernet. It'd been absolutely no surprise to her that Padme had joined Aayla and Harry's relationship.

And getting to know the girl had shown her that... well, Padme was just easy to fall for! And in the months since she had basically assigned herself to act as Padme's third bodyguard (in her mind, Lowbacca counted as a third bodyguard, although she really wasn't a combatant like her husband), Zule had found herself drawn to Padme and it had nothing to do with how Padme's presence felt in the Force. That was merely a bonus.

Looking through the data, Zule frowned a bit. "All of this is coming humans, both agents of the Republic pulled from the local population and the official reports. Is that normal? I thought that the majority of the inhabitants of Thyferra were the natives, the insect-like Vratix? Or are they considered not sentient... No, wait, that doesn't sound right. Weren't they involved in the Stark Hyperspace War?"

Padme gasped, hopping to her feet, racing off to her office-cum-bedroom. "That's it!"

Snorting at that, Zule connected to the Hypernet for a moment, looking at all of the information that was available on the Vratix, raising her voice for a second so Padme could hear. "They are sentient! But there isn't a lot of information about them at all on the Hypernet."

While Zule had been looking that up, Padme had grabbed a spare datapad and was now inputting some information on her own. "The Ashern rebel group made the Republic as a whole aware of price hiking by one of the distribution corporations. Family owned, family operated, hugely powerful, built around each of the original human colony ships. But that won the Vratix some representation in their government." Padme glared at nothing for a moment, a furious scowl on her lips. "So why is the last report from Thyferra coming from a Vratix more than two years old?"

"It says here that Thyferra is an elected democracy to a certain point. The humans prefer to live in space stations due to the humidity of the planet. Each civilian habitat elects a 'Speaker', but was also built and is mainly run by corporations, who also the local industry, which is based entirely on the creation and distribution of bacta. Says here, they also raised funds and bought two planetary shield generators over the past decade, one for the planet one for Luna Fort, the star system's largest military base," Zule read off.

She tapped the segment that was most important to them right now, the bit about how much of the economy ran through a small group of corporations. "In that kind of environment, I would wager that the people at the top of the local food chain have a lot of dirty ways to make certain that they are elected into whatever position of power they want to be. And if they... say... dealt with the previous leaders of this rebel group harshly enough, they could have moved into positions of power before the Vratix could get the word out."

"True. And Xucphra and the rest would have a **lot** of resources and reasons to make certain they stayed at the top. But if the corporations that control the distribution of bacta have created some kind of corporate oligarchy, that means they have abrogated the agreement with the Vratix reached by the Senate at the end of the Stark Hyperspace War."

Frowning thoughtfully, Padme went on more slowly. What we have here is supposition. With the pressure I am on from the Chancellor and the rest of the Senate Military Oversight Committee to make certain that the corporate distributors of bacta are kept happy, I probably should not look into this more closely. I can understand their point. With the war on, we need more bacta than ever before.”

And let's not mention the argument I made about bacta not being solely a military resource, Padme thought before going on. “Yet simply accepting the status quo if the corporations of Thyferra have somehow taken over from the democratic government is not something I am willing to do. Especially if those same voices are the ones that are trying to shut down any attempt to see if bacta could be created anywhere else in the galaxy or are trying to price gouge the Republic and GDL. Regardless of their bought and paid-for lobbyists, if we are right, this needs to be stopped.”

Padme stood for a moment, pacing around as she thought. “What we need is one of two things. One, enough evidence to point to wrongdoing on the part of the distributors, particularly the two most powerful groups, Zaltin and Xucphra in terms of whether or not they are artificially keeping the bacta supply at a certain level. The other corporations are much smaller in terms of GDP than those two. Even in wartime, such evidence would be enough to force the Senate to launch an investigation. However, if they did, whatever timeline that investigation occurred or the outcome of it would be out of my hands. While I’m on the Senate Anti-corruption Committee that committee only oversees the Senate itself. For this investigation, a new team would need to be formed from Republic Intelligence and the Jedi. And it would run into tremendous opposition.”

If people like Harry or the other counts of Sorrento thought they were rich, then they probably had never even considered how rich people could get if they were the heads of corporations that led a **Republic-sanctioned** monopoly, particularly on something like bacta, which was the bedrock of Republic medical technology. To say the the family-led corporations involved in that distribution network were rich was a vast understatement. They could literally buy and sell whole planets out of pocket change. The only reason that wasn’t public knowledge was that it was the families that were rich, not individuals, and the corporations those families ran went out of their way to stay out of the limelight.

“Particularly in wartime because obviously, any such investigation would slow down bacta production for some reason,” Zule interjected before smiling. “And what is choice two?”

“We contact the Vratix directly. If the electoral process or whatever manner of representation was set in place after the Stark Hyperspace War has been stolen from them, then as a Senator, I have the power to recognize such. And I have all of these Jedi with me as well, who can also act as representatives of the Republic and specifically Republic Intelligence,” Padme answered, returning the other woman’s smile. “Now, all of this is speculation, of course. But again, I do have all of these Jedi, and considering that I will be in diplomatic talks almost from the moment we arrive, I don’t think I’ll need all of them or my hulking, furry companion around.”

“You know, I’ve been on Coruscant for months now, more than half a year at this point. I think I want to see some natural green. I’m certain Chewbacca would jump at the chance to get away from spacestations, ships and endless, endless ferrocrete cities.” Zule said, her face composed, her tone smooth, not a hint of levity within it, only a bit of longing for a change of pace. This did not match the glint in her eyes even a little bit.

“And if in so doing new evidence comes to light that the issues which have halted any increase in production are not caused by CIS sabotage, but because the local civilian population is no longer being represented by its own government, well, it is the will of the Force,” Padme said, her own tone grave and serious. Then, the two of them locked gazes and grinned fiercely at one another.

For just a moment, Zule leaned forward, an urge to kiss the other girl growing. But then she caught herself, pulling back. Padme didn’t notice the movement, but was still smiling at the other woman when there came a buzz from the door. “Enter.”

Master Windu and Anakin came in, nodding to Padme, although Zule felt that Windu looked pensive about something. “We are due to come out of hyperspace in Thyferra in another thirty minutes. My padawan and I have been going over the military data of this sector, and it has made for some fascinating reading, which we wanted to make certain you were aware of, Senator Amidala.”

“Which he means that while there is a local defense force, it’s a local defense fleet,” Anakin grumbled, moving over to grab some recaf for himself, waving the pot at the room at large and pouring a second cup for his Master a second later. “It flies the colors of the Republic Navy, and at least twenty percent of its hulls were built and sold to them by the Republic Navy. But all of its officers and the rest of its ships are locals. They’ve gone through the various crash courses to claim their ranks in the Republic Navy, but still, it smacks far too much of local politics that every single captain and flag officer comes from Thyferra.”

Both women stiffened and glanced at one another. “Do you...” Zule murmured.

“Indeed, that doesn’t fill me with confidence that we were wrong on our earlier concerns.” That dry statement won a snort of laughter from Zule and cocked heads from Anakin and Mace. Padme stood up, gesturing the two Jedi to the sofa she had been sitting in before shifting over to join Zule on her side of the table, pushing the two datapads the pair had been working on.

She didn’t notice the brief look of annoyance that crossed Anakin’s features, nor did Master Windu, although he caught the sardonic thought from his padawan of women sticking together. That caused his own lips to twitch as the former Master of the Order reflected that yes, some things were truly universal. *I have yet to interact with a single species where women do not show a certain amount of solidarity towards men more often than not. Unless they are in direct competition, of course.*

The two men sat down where Padme had been sitting, looking inquisitively at the datapads as the Senator began. “Tell me more about the defense force. Specifically, is there any sign of their loyalties being to their home corporations, or are they loyal to the Republic? Do you think you and your officers will be able to take over command from the local officers and expect to be obeyed by their sailors?”

“Those are some very specific and worrisome questions. They also imply that you think our authority as representatives of the Republic High Command will not be enough to force a change in command,” Mace mused before looking at his padawan speculatively, his eyes gleaming with more than minor interest, as if he too thought there was trouble ahead of them. “Where is it coming from?”

“Zule and I think we noticed a trend in the data we were given from Thyferra which is immensely troubling. And the fact it fell on us to discover it annoys me even more,” Padme grumbled. “The analysts

back on Coruscant who prepared the data packet for this mission will never be assigned to a mission I'm a part of again, not if I have anything to say about it."

"That still does not tell me the specific trend, but very well. We do have concerns on the issue of the local defense fleet's loyalty, yes." Mace answered, placing his hands in his lap in a meditative pose. "I realize that the push to make certain that competent officers are in place of all local defense forces only really started after the war began, and hasn't really gotten anywhere yet. But even so, I would've thought that this system was one of the ones that should've been looked at most closely. Admiral Kinca Xu is seemingly competent enough on paper and seems to be extremely good at the logistical side of things."

"The locals have a massive reserve of concussion missiles, proton torpedoes, and have upgraded every wing in their Starfighter Corps with Aethersprites. The same with their gunboats and frigates." Anakin supplied. "They've also recently added three dreadnaught class heavy cruisers to their defense fleet. Their battle preparation also seems to be very high... although their flagship is..."

"Going by the reports to RHC, his fleet is ready for combat," Mace interrupted, sending his padawan a fond look of exasperation as he did so, seemingly cutting off a small tirade before it could begin. "But Kinca hasn't seen actual combat, not even against pirates, let alone against serious opponents. Nor has anyone on his command staff, or very many of his captains. Kinca and his second in command, who seems a bit of a non-entity, really, served in Thyferra's military during the Stark Hyperspace War but didn't see any action. And he is part of the Xucphra Corporation. The corporation whose price gouging almost directly caused that war."

Mace looked composed as he said that which Padme knew was probably what he felt too, but given what she knew of the Stark Hyperspace War, she doubted she would have been able to feel the same.

The Stark Hyperspace War was started by a single man by the name of Iolo Stark. He created a consortium of pirates, bounty hunters and mercenaries in the Outer Rim and a special computer virus that targeted astronavigation computers. He had backing by several powers within the Republic, who hoped that the collapse of the Republic would allow them to seize greater power, using the threat of cutting off bacta from the rest of the galaxy, selling it and other goods bound for the Colonies or Core sectors in the Outer Rim, making themselves minor heroes. The backers for this plan included the Neimoidian who led the Trade Federation before Nute Gunray, the Xucphra Corporation and the planet of Eriadu.

Through a series of betrayals and backstabbing from Gunray, who Mace now knew had been working with the Sith all along instead of merely being a bumbling fool, Master Tvokka, one of the most learned and far-seeing Jedi, was slain at the peace conference that might have allowed them all to find a solution. A fleet put together by the Militarist Faction at the time was wiped out, sending the survivors to fight a battle on the surface of Qotile.

Meanwhile, Master Tholme and his padawan Quinlan Vos had been sent to Thyferra, where they discovered the bacta scarcity had been artificially created at the source, and that the leader of the Xucphra corporation was in contact with Stark. This, and a series of victories in the mountains of Qotile, allowed Finis Valorum to push for a greater military intervention, despite having been against it at first.

Through the use of Trade Federation ships and the Jedi and Plo Koon convincing Iolo Stark to defect, they defeated the so-called Stark Collective Combine in battle, ending the war.

“Why **any** member of that corporation is still in a position of power within Thyferra is beyond me,” Padme scowled, internally wondering how long the Sith had been pulling the strings of everyone, Jedi and Senate alike. “It is one of the many things we will need to be looking into because the Stark Hyperspace War was the impetus used to give the native Vratix a say in their world government. Before that, the human population was in total control, and the wider galaxy didn’t know that the Vratix were sentient. Those who knew of their existence at all simply thought they were little better than animals. But after that war, the Vratix should have won representation in the Thyferran government. Judging by what we’re seeing, that hasn’t happened, or has been reversed since. The reports we’ve looked at starting sometime in the last two years, and not a one is from a Vratix or mentions them at all,” Padme said, gesturing to the data pads.

Mace picked them up, setting them on his lap one after another. With one hand he gestured to Anakin, indicating that Anakin should tell the two ladies about what else was of interest on the military side of things as he began to read.

That worthy winced a bit. “Okay, so on paper, the local defense fleet is actually pretty decent. A dozen light cruiser designs built out of Kuat and Rendili to back up their heavy cruiser divisions, and one... Well, are either of you familiar with the term UGLY?”

Even while reading Mace allowed himself a theatrical sigh at his padawan’s acerbic tone, causing Anakin to grin as Zule explained for Padme. “It’s a term used by starfighter pilots to describe a starfighter that’s been cobbled together by a lot of parts from different types of starfighters. It flies. It might even have a surprising amount of firepower. But it will never be as good as a real starfighter, and there will always be something missing, a lack of shielding, thrust, or what have you.”

“Right. In this case, though, I’m not talking about starfighters. The Thyferran flagship is a local build that’s basically a rip-off of the Mandator class out of Kuat,” Anakin explained, scowling with all the anger of a priest who had just been told about something going on in a red-light district. “They apparently couldn’t buy the rights to build one, so they stole the designs and built their own. But then to cover their tracks they changed just enough that it isn’t obviously a Mandator. This one’s got quad cannons instead of turbolasers, has only a few proton torpedo launchers, and no hyperdrive! Its shielding is apparently good, but it’s built more for anti-fighter combat than anything that size should be! Even a heavy cruiser designed to take other capital ships on like ours could beat it in a straight up fight!”

“Before you get too into tearing the design down, Anakin, remember the Confederacy is a starfighter heavy force. If you can’t survive their Vulture swarms, you won’t live to engage their larger ships. Their doctrine might have evolved since the war began, but that aspect hasn’t changed,” Zule pointed out. “I know the GDL’s put a lot of effort into our doctrine to combat that tactic.”

Anakin grimaced. “Yeah, I guess, but I always feel more starfighters on our side are the best defense against that. It’s the pilot in me.” Zule nodded in commiseration, and Anakin went on, still looking a bit annoyed with the very obvious ways in which this ship had been built by the lowest local bidder.

When he spoke, though, his voice was more serious than it had been. “Anyway, setting aside the *Barrage*, there are a few other issues wrong with how the local defense fleet is organized. They have these huge asteroid fortresses, really well-designed and built bastions. But they have them set at the two ‘entrances’ to the star system via the Rimma Trade Rout.”

It wasn’t altogether unusual for Hyperspace lanes to go through star systems along a specific route rather than encompass the entire system. And even where that wasn’t true, many heavily settled star systems preferred to try to limit where ships could jump into the system. In times of peace not going along with local regulations like this meant fines and possibly having your ship searched for contraband. In times of war, it meant explosions via the billions of mines that star systems of all three sides of this war used to defend themselves against unwanted guests.

“They also don’t have nearly as many mines around the outer system as they should. They’ve got a lot more in terms of one-shot satellites. That’s not a sound tactical decision, and one that was probably made for monetary reasons,” Anakin scowled once more, shaking his head. “So Master Windu and I will something to argue with the locals about, not even taking into what’s been going on elsewhere in the Sixth Fleet’s command zone.”

Padme looked interested, and Anakin shrugged. “You know about some of the attacks from the Confederacy around here? But what you might not know, because Master Windu and I didn’t until ten minutes ago, is that a series of attacks were launched in the past hour. Not towards Polinth System, thankfully, but into some of the surrounding sectors which also fall under Sixth Fleet’s envelope.”

Here, Anakin winced, his face shifting into a grim guise while his tone was cold, yet Zule could sense a flicker of approving thoughts despite that. “The details of the attacks in this command zone made for some interesting reading, both the newest ones and all the other attacks in the area. Whoever the local Sep commander is, he’s aggressive as a rancor and twice as vicious but also isn’t willing to take losses. Instead of operations that take control of planets or target fleets, they’ve been hitting specific strategic targets and then retreating before the local defense forces can show up. Unless they have overwhelming fleet strength, in which case they jump back in and attack.”

Zule frowned. “You mean they left probes behind, and they weren’t spotted? And then the probes sent readouts about the response fleet?”

“Exactly. Tricky, but doable. The Head Sep around her has done that that twice and handed the Sixth Fleet two sharp losses. Fourteen ships were lost in one engagement and seven in the next. And when I say vicious, I mean it.” Anakin shook his head. “Each strike from the Seps in this area caused hundreds of thousands of lives. Especially one attack that sent two space stations around a gas planet into the planet after their shield generators and station-keeping grav lifts had been destroyed. A wing of Vultures was left behind to slow down any attempt at evacuation, and nearly everyone on those two stations died when they hit the gas giant’s thermosphere.”

“Are there any plans on the military side to reinforce the Sixth Fleet?” Zule asked.

“Yes,” Mace answered, taking over from his padawan and handing the datapad he’d just finished reading to the younger man, who took it and looked through it for a brief second before scowling. “Elements of other fleets are supposed to be seconded into Sixth Fleet over the next few weeks, and local defense forces like the ones in Thyferra are supposedly interconnected into the Sixth Fleet’s

command sphere. Whether or not that is true on the ground is a different matter entirely and something I now question even more after reading what you two discovered. Myself and my padawan have learned not to always rely on intel. Still, it looks as if we will at least not have to worry about Separatist attacks while we clean up the local military and government. So long as we find evidence of your concerns, at any rate.”

Noting that Master Windu had acknowledged there was indeed something wrong, thus agreeing with Zule and Padme, Padme asked Anakin to pull up the hologram in the center of the table for a moment and show her where those attacks had been. It did indeed look as if there had been more successful attacks by the Confederacy in the Sixth Fleet’s command zone, but all of those attacks had been small-scale. *Not in terms of life, Anakin’s right about that, but, setting that aside, none of the targets, small-scale tibanna gas mining stations, proton torpedo construction stations, a military moon base, are that important. But why did the Sixth Fleet assign so many ships to each attacked star system like this?*

“I don’t have enough of a military mind to tell you anything that you already haven’t thought up. Although I would say that judging by the distribution of forces after these attacks, the Sixth Fleet’s Admiral is quite heavy-handed,” Padme said aloud.

“Agreed. I have asked for and received permission from the Republic High Command for myself and Anakin to leave you once our business in Thyferra has been concluded. We are to go on to the Sixth Fleet’s headquarters and take over there for a time. In fact, I was told that I had discretion on whether or not we should leave before that business was completed. That will no longer be happening,” Mace stated dryly.

“So you don’t think Zule and I are jumping at shadows, then? I rather honestly hoped you would. It isn’t every day that I help to restore a government after all. I haven’t had to do that since I had to restore my own, in fact,” Padme said, starting out serious and ending with a small joke.

All three of the Jedi smiled at that, but Mace shook his head. “I was involved in the Stark Hyperspace War and talked extensively with Master Tholme afterward about his role in the investigations into and discussion with the Ashern rebels. I know for a fact that Vratix wanted the representation they later received. But looking at those reports, there is not a single Vratix involved in the Thyferran government even down to the factory level.” Elsewhere, Mace would have used the term municipal, but with the creation of bacta being so huge a part of the economy, the locals didn’t use that term.

“That makes me feel about as... dirty, I suppose, as I did when I learned Iolo Stark changed sides and was given a position in the Commerce Guild. And thinking about it, the issues being reported in getting the new laboratories up and running certainly sound like the actions the Ashern rebels would have used to try and slow bacta production and bring more Republic officials to Thyferra. Finding out what has sparked such will be interesting.”

“What’s the plan?” Anakin asked briskly, always willing to fight for the underdog.

“Is there anything else on the military side that I should be aware of?” Padme inquired.

Master Windu shrugged his shoulders minutely, his tone as firm as granite when he spoke. "The 501st, Anakin and I will take care of the military side of things if need be. There will be no problems from the military, whatever the true loyalties of the officers might be. I take it that Zule and Chewbacca will be sent down to the planet to do some reconnaissance there? Perhaps even meet with the Ashern rebels if possible? If they began their rebellion once more, they would be an invaluable local resource."

Padme nodded. "That was my thought. The two of you can be visible Jedi, draw attention to yourselves, while I allow myself to be wined and dined by the locals as they try to obfuscate the truth of whatever is going on, and I rake them over the coals about bacta prices, drawing all their ire on me as I dismiss their claims and poke the sleeping bantha. I often discover more when I allow my opponents to lie to me when they don't know I know they're lying than when they are trying to actively hide the truth."

"And that right there is why this particular Jedi would never be good to Senator," Anakin snickered, shaking his head ruefully. "That kind of thinking is too crooked for my tastes."

"I would say the same, although an oblique approach in warfare is always something to be appreciated. Coming straight at your enemy is usually the height of foolishness," Zule teased, to which the younger man laughed, conceding the issue even as he frowned, the words niggling at his mind but not quite enough to make him feel as if it was coming from the Force.

From there, the conversation shifted to specific individuals they would be meeting with when they arrived as the ship continued on its way from The Rimma Trade Route's entry point into the Thyferra system and towards the planet. About ten minutes passed before Master Windu received a communication.

"Master Windu, this is Lars," The clone captain who commanded the *Adamantine* said briskly from the other end. Named Lars, he was dour of face though not of disposition, and served Master Windu as a voice of experience with space-based military issues as Commander Rex did on land-based matters. "We just received a report from my coms officer. Admiral Xu is not on Warm Welcome at the local CIC." Warm Welcome was the name of the civilian habitat that served as the center of government and the system's military. "Nor is he on the... what did Anakin call it?"

"The bastardized child of a dreadnaught and a gunboat," Anakin supplied, telling the clone captain he was there too. "Where is Admiral Xu based, then?"

"He's flying his flag from the asteroid fortress, the one called Troubadour." The man on the other end of the coms sounded just as irritated as Anakin looked at the mention of the asteroid fortress. "And I still say having them so far out like this is ridiculously stupid."

Zule's brows drew together and she picked up one of the datapads, reading from it quickly. "According to this, the Xucphra corporation funded the Troubadour's creation out of its own pocket. Given his last name, we might need to assume that Xu is from one of that corporation's ruling families."

"A power play then," Mace nodded serenely. "He wishes to both meet me in an unusual location and in a place where he is surrounded by other Xucphra loyalists. A well-worn tactic, although I would have thought that such would no longer be used during times of war. Silly me. I will need to depart quickly then or hold off the *Adamantine's* journey deeper into the system."

With that, he got up, as did Anakin, ready to follow his Master out the door. But then Anakin paused, looking over at Padme, frowning. "Master, if Zule and Chewbacca are..."

"Say no more, padawan," Mace said, shaking his head. *Thank the Force that Anakin's infatuation with Padme has faded, or else this could be awkward. But he doesn't have my age or experience to overawe Xu.* "Stay with Senator Amidala. Do not act as her bodyguard; the Thyferrans would not believe such from a Jedi, and you certainly don't look like Knight Ziss if they have heard of her assignment to the Senator by the GDL. Say rather you are there to give a Jedi's insights on the civilian side as I will be doing on the military side. I will take Rex with me."

With that said Mace looked at Zule. "I trust you will be able to see to your part in this?"

"I'll be able to get myself down to the surface using my Force Cloak, but Chewbacca might need a bit more cover," Zule admitted. "And if I'm not able to convince the locals to trust me, we might need him to gather more physical evidence of whatever is going on on the planet to interfere with the latest attempts to increase Bacta output. Any evidence that those are acts of deliberate sabotage can be used to browbeat the locals if nothing else."

While it had been almost entirely accidental, Chewbacca's abilities with technology and the years he'd spent protecting Padme and overseeing her suite's defenses had given Chewbacca a lot of the same skill sets that a trained computer forensics or explosives investigator would have. It was why he was so much better at making certain that there were no bombs on shuttles than even most Jedi who were not specifically trained to spot such as that.

"And in that case, you won't need me beside Padme all day. Zule and I could switch off," Anakin mused, nodding his head. While he wasn't the trained Jedi forensic specialist, he had a way with computers and engineering that mirrored Chewbacca's and the Force to help guide him as well. *And I can't allow my interest in Padme to blind me to our mission here.* Even as he thought that Anakin was pleased. Anytime he had to spend with Padme, Anakin was happy with, and Anakin had already used this trip to renew their friendship and away their previous interactions during the last debate before war broke out had not really allowed him to.

For her part, Padme nodded, smiling over at Anakin. "I hope you're ready to look handsome and draw female attention, Anakin. I can almost guarantee that the Lord Governor Dlarit will almost undoubtedly throw some kind of soiree in my honor." She scowled then, her smile disappearing into a flat, annoyed expression that had Zule patting her on the shoulder commiseratingly. "As if I am impressed by such! But it has never failed, and much politicking happens at such parties. It is then that we will start to learn the truth from the lies of these locals. If such is, in fact, happening."

While Padme added on that last in order to remind herself to keep an open mind, having all three of her Jedi companions point out the same issue meant there probably was something going on there. *Although, how much I will be able to do about it is in question. The flow of bacta is all important. Keeping it going and enlarging that flow is the only thing that the Senate as a whole will be concerned with. But if Zule is able to get in touch with the locals, I will be a much happier woman.*

Agreed, and she stood up, heading towards the bathroom as Sabrina came out of her own room, carrying the dress she had chosen for Padme, her own clothing and austere businesswoman's outfit that

would allow her to blend in among the other aides and lower-level functionaries. “In that case, I suggest we be about it.”

After Mace left, the other three talked for a time before Padme had Zule lay out a dress for her in the local fashion. Getting a shower, manicure and everything else took her nearly three hours, but she was still able to join Zule and Anakin on the bridge of the Adamantine, where the main screen showed a map of the system next to a view of the planet they were here to see.

The Polith system was a very large star system with seven planets, although only Thyferra, the fourth planet out from the sun, was livable by most sentients. The two innermost were barren rocks, while the third was apparently home to a extremely nasty local germ that had so far defeated any effort to get rid of it. Iqobal, the fifth planet, was a gas giant of impressive size although no real gasses of any worth. It did have 54 moons though, some of which could support life or did have various useful metals. Anakin said that was where the majority of the local Starfighter wings outside of those based on Welcome Home and the lunar base were housed.

There was also a large civilian presence there in the form of mining complexes, hydroponics stations and science labs. Ferxani, a second gas giant, had thirty-three moons, yet contained only a few scattered mining operations, much like in the asteroid belt that ringed the system and which had been the source for the asteroids turned into fortresses.

Thyferra itself boasted a almost daunting number of space stations. While people could work on Thyferra, it was just too humid and hot for humans to live everyday, so most of the human population lived in various space stations, built over time to accommodate the growing population. With them were thirty six defense stations, local built designs that varied wildly according to the readings they were getting both in size and weapons. The large moon also had a military presence in the form of scattered planetary-sized weapons batteries and

Thyferra itself had no such weapons batteries. Reading between the lines, none of the locals trusted their fellow corporations with such weapons so close to their own civilian populations. The ones on the moon could not range on targets in orbit over the planet, although it was close. Thyferra however did boast a planetary shield, although the planet’s power grid was sparse at best, with only the power stations in the closest city and refinery sites being able to link up to the generator. Growing the ingredients to bacta simply took too much space, with the refineries all of a size to be small cities, and the farms, if they could be called that, covering acres upon acres of the planet’s surface.

As the Adamantine closed, they were given a orbital zone to hold position. From there a shuttle would take them from the heavy cruiser to Warm Welcome station.

As the heavy cruiser slowed to a crawl, Padme straightened her shoulders and looked at her companions, electing not to make a big deal of the fact that Zule was looking at her legs or Anakin trying not to do the same after being caught earlier. “Well, here we go. Pleasant smiles everyone. And watch out for hidden daggers.”

Scene break

When Master Windu met with the local admiral he was not impressed. Admiral Kinca Xu was thin, tall, and seemingly exuded an officious persona, trying to carry himself like a military man. Yet when Windu looked at him, he could see from the redness in the man's eyes that he drank too much and could sense the man's thoughts about the Jedi, disdainful ones towards the clones and annoyed ones towards Windu himself. "Master Windu, welcome aboard asteroid space station Troubadour. I have some refreshments ready for you if..."

"I will leave political niceties to politicians. By the fact that I accepted your invitation aboard the Troubadour, you should realize that I am not in Polinth System to merely help Senator Padme in making a deal with your Lord governor. I'm here to evaluate your defenses, and I believe that I have already seen several issues with that defense. On this mission, I speak in my official capacity as a General of the Republic military, not just as a Jedi Master," Master Windu corrected firmly.

Those two titles were not synonymous. As much as the Senate had hoped, and certain Jedi had believed, there were only so many Jedi who really had the training and mental aptitude towards acting as generals. Windu was one of them, and despite still being an padawan, Anakin was well on his way to becoming another.

"This is Commander Rex, my aide-de-camp. Together we will be going over the reasons for your current deployment plan, and why it is wrong," Mace continued, ripping off the proverbial bandage. *Better to get it over with now and gain insight on this man's character than to let it linger.*

"Sir!" Rex said, standing at attention but not saluting. The bald, heavily tanned clone with dark yet strangely kind eyes tended to only salute people he felt had done something to deserve it.

"But surely, the trip from Hyperspace, and from your shuttle will have tired you. Surely there will be enough time in the future for us to talk shop," Kinca laughed heartily, even as he began to sweat, put off and intimidated by Master Windu's serious mien. "I'm certain there will be more than enough time for us to talk shop later."

"On the contrary, the issues myself and my staff identified just from reading about your star system are enough that I question your competence let alone your right to bear that ranking insignia you do." With that stinging rebuke, Windu turned to one of the numerous aids that the admiral had introduced when Windu and his own people had come off their shuttle. "Take us to your command center place."

That man, a far younger, if slightly overweight young man blinked, then nodded his head quickly. "Of course master Jedi. Please, follow me."

As he walked, Mace kept a firm control of his face reflecting that he had been perhaps a bit too blunt with Xu. But Mace could not help himself. Because he had been feeling off since right before entering Thyferra, the feeling beginning even before he and Anakin spoke to Senator Amidala and Knight Xiss. And now, as he spoke to the Admiral, that feeling had started to take shape into a Shatterpoint.

Not one set in the present, but the future.

Very rarely had Mace seen Shatterpoints like this. Normally the weaknesses he saw were in people or solid objects. Only occasionally had they been about the future at all, say the future of the Jedi Order, or a planet. But now, staring into the future, he could see a Shatterpoint larger than any he

had ever senses before, more complex than any he had ever envisioned, a series of cracks that themselves were separate, smaller Shatterpoints, which spoke of a future fraught with disastrous possibilities, even if the details were impossible to discern. Where the Shatterpoint was coming from, what would spark it, Mace could not say. The Veil of the Dark Side obscured it even now that Mace was aware of the Shatterpoint's existence.

But it was clear that it was something that would happen in Thyferra. And Mace had not seen any hint of this until he physically arrived in Polinth system. *I think the issues here go much deeper than we anticipated. Perhaps some kind of local war is starting to stir, the Vratix against the humans? Or something worse? I must be on my guard.*

Mace debated calling in more military aide, but he could not see enough of the future to be certain that more military aide would not instead make the Shatterpoint occur sooner for some reason. And while Yoda would be willing to take his word for things, as would the other Jedi, Yularen and the rest of High Command would not be willing to divert military forces needed elsewhere on such a vague reason. *I will keep that in mind, but for now, I will soldier on.*

The admiral remained silent as they walked, simply following after Windu as he followed the young man. But if he thought that Windu's introspection would last or he would be waiting until they arrived at the command center to point out troublesome issues, he was very wrong. *Whatever the future might hold, this system's defense fleet must be whipped into shape.*

"Tell me, Admiral, I am aware you passed through officer command school on Coruscant, the accelerated program I believe? That is an excellent base for competency, but scholastic education can never truly prepare one for the reality of combat. Yet when I looked at your records, neither you nor any of your senior officers have actually seen any combat, not even against pirates or the occasional smuggler. Considering how much bacta goes for on the black market, I know there is always a steady demand of such. How is it that none of you have any combat experience? Or have such past battles simply not made its way into your Republic Navy files? And might I ask who made the decision to put the Troubadour out here rather than closer into Thyferra? Out here it is of limited utility, similar to the Gold Road on the other side of the system. Further more..."

And with that, Mace began to assert his authority over Xu and the rest of his flag officers. It would be a battle, but it was one he would eventually win. He just hoped it would help divert the Shatterpoint, whatever it might be.

Scene break

When he was informed of his role in the investigation, Chewbacca protested, arguing that he should stay by Padme if there was any chance that someone could target her. But he and his wife exchanged a few words, and when Padme showed that she was wearing both the concealed blaster and a concealed vibroknife and that the outfit Sabrina had chosen for her came with an emergency personal shield generator, he was mollified. It wouldn't last for longer than a few blaster bolts, but that would be enough with Anakin around. Further, he trusted that Anakin would be able to use the Force to see if any of the hors devours were poisoned. On the *Adamantine* or back on Coruscant, they didn't have to worry about that, as Lowbacca prepared all of the fivesome's food when living in Padme's suite and had even

gotten a signed writ from Senate security forces that allowed her to move in and take over the kitchen of any restaurant that Padme ate out at.

She wasn't the only aide to have that ability. Several other Senators had aides devoted to making certain they weren't poisoned. Considering two Senators had died since the war began thanks to poison, this was simply seen as common sense.

Thus Chewbacca was able to slip off easily during the initial welcome at the docking bay of the Warm Welcome Space station before the local welcoming party, led by Speaker Primus Iolo Zaltin, who was also the head of the so-named corporation, ushered Padme and Anakin to their hotel first, and then to, as Padme had predicted, a party in her honor.

Nearly two hours of wheeling and dealing and glad handing later, Anakin stood in the corner of the ballroom, trying hard not to notice how much glitter and ostentatious signs of wealth were all around him. He had been a Jedi for over a decade now, and yet he had never gotten used to being at parties like this. *I'd wager that even the clothing on some of the servants here is more expensive than old Watto's yearly parts budget*, he thought, shaking his head.

least I was able to keep those two young idiots from flirting with Padme too much he thought, thinking of the Lord Governor's son and nephew. Taking after Lord Governor Dlarit, both of them were handsome dark-haired men with the bronzed skin of people who spent a lot of time on the surface of Thyferra or a lot of time to look the part, anyway. One was around Anakin's age, the other near to Padme's. They had both tried more than once to flirt with Padme at the start of the festivities, until Anakin's glowers and Padme's biting words cut them down to size.

What did she say to the older one? That genteel manners were nice, but what really mattered was substance? Then she asked him what he had done with his life outside of his oh so exquisite education, Anakin thought, grinning. *I wish I could have taken a picture, but the memory of the look on his face will warm my heart many a night.*

From the very start of the party, Padme had stunned the locals by being utterly unwilling to flirt, make small talk, or indeed converse on anything but the war, Thyferra's policies, and the bacta trade. It was very obvious that the rich and powerful of Thyferra's society gathered here, into somewhat obvious camps judging by the thoughts that Anakin occasionally picked up from this or that group, had no idea what to do with a Senator who was as humble and as austere as Padme was.

Yet Anakin's smile faded quickly. Something was niggling at him, just out of reach of his Force senses. It was still too diffuse for him to pick up anything specific, but Anakin felt as if there was some kind of danger building. How big or where it would come from Anakin couldn't tell yet, but it was there.

Anakin finished his drink, and turned back to the party, looking to his right where Padme was talking to a few middle-aged men and their wives. None of them looked as if they liked what she was saying any more than the nephew of the Lord Governor had an hour ago or more ago. *How long have we been here? UGH. High society and politics, two of my least favorite things.*

Soon, however, the small group broke up, some of them moving towards the bar, others moving through the crowd, talking to some of the people within it. Many of them did not look happy to be

talking to one another, and that unhappiness ratcheted still higher as the individuals that Padme had been talking to spoke.

“Well, I think I conveyed the Senate’s unhappiness with how slow the expansion work on creating new bacta processing plants is, as well as the current price of it. Even now, I will wager you any amount you would care to name that after this party is broken up, there will be many people here calling various Senators, demanding that I be recalled or that someone already in their pocket be sent in,” Padme said as she joined Anakin by the window. “What about you? I noted a number of military officers here.”

“Mostly the defense station commanders. Good people, but unimaginative. The starfighter wings are actually quite decent.” Thyferra could boast a force of nearly three thousand Aethersprites to back up their nearly two thousand patrol boat fleet and the bigger ships. “If I can believe their readiness reports and how many hours their starfighter pilots clock in their fighters anyway,” Anakin mused. “On the other hand, some of their wing commanders were not even starfighter pilots to begin with. That’s a recipe for disaster. Non-starfighter pilots always think they can do less, or worse, more than they really can. I also get the impression that what we’re dealing with here is a few armed camps with only the basic premise of working together. The officer’s loyalties are almost all to their home corporations rather than Thyferra as a whole.”

“I was the impression I got as well from the Lord Governor Dlarit and his Speaker Primus. One comes from Xucphra and the other from the main family of Zaltin corporation. I understand that’s the way it is supposed to be, but that just makes their corporate rivalry an even bigger part of their governmental structure.” Padme shook her head. “It works, but during a war is completely unacceptable. To say nothing of anything else...”

Anakin nodded, indicating he had seen much the same things, before going on to say that he had plans to beat some sense into the local starfighter commanders. Few of whom had actually flown in anything but parade formation with their men. “If they fly the colors of the Republic Navy, they will need to follow our doctrines and our regulations,” he said in a louder tone, causing several men nearby who wore the local officers uniform to wince, and quickly try to fade into the background of the party.

“I think you just added to the number of people who are going to be calling to Coruscant to try to get us all reassigned,” Padme murmured in amusement.

Anakin grinned suddenly, a rakish expression that had several of the nearby girls swooning, even though it wasn’t directed at them. Instead, it was first directed at Padme, then over towards the doorway, where Master Windu just walked through the door with Admiral Xu and a few other local officers with far too many epaulets and awards to be believed. “I would wager you anything that my master has already done worse.”

This proved to be the case as after exchanging pleasantries, Windu met up with the other two carrying a small tray of food that he didn’t even bother looking at before setting aside. “I was able to convince Admiral Xu that the two asteroid fortresses should be towed somewhere where they could actually be of some defense, and offered my own ship to help just to push him into it. I also convinced him that if he was unable or unwilling to fully trust his own forces to not put any local issues ahead of defending the system that they should be replaced by clone officers. That did not go over well, but I

imagine once Rex, Anakin and myself beat all the local commanders at a few wargames, they will either shape up, or if worse comes to worse, I can always cite their incompetence and ask for permission to remove them and replace them with officers of my own choosing from High Command.”

Master Windu made a point of catching Padme’s eye’s, indicating that incompetence wasn’t the only reason why he would take that step if need be, but she understood instantly, nodding her head. But something about the Jedi Masters attitude spoke to a greater need, and Padme was not the only one to notice.

“Master, is something wrong?” Anakin questioned. “I, I can sense something, some danger, but its too diffuse for me to figure out more.”

Mace remained silent for a second, then shook his head, speaking quietly but more openly than he would with nearly any non-Jedi. But Senator Amidala both knew several secrets about the Sith, and had more than earned his respect in the past. “I feel something in the future. A danger to this system. I cannot tell if it is coming from within, caused by our presence, caused by the local issues or the enemy in some fashion. It is of the Dark Side, but that is all I can tell. The Veil is hiding everything from me.”

“I see...” Padme mused. “What Republic Navy units can get here in, say, a few hours?”

“None but Sixth Fleet,” Mace answered quickly. “I could prevail upon a few of the system defense forces from Tauber or Delm, but they are both needed where they are and aren’t very heavy. I can prepare a report to Sixth Fleet, but without specifics all but a Jedi commander will not act without more to go on. And as I said, I cannot see if calling for such help would aide against or add to the Shatterpoint I see. Normally I can see how my own actions would impact a Shatterpoint, but in this instance I cannot.”

“Do it anyway,” Padme ordered. “Get a message out from the *Adamantine* before you take the ship out to help tow the Troubadour. More forces on hand will be a very good thing, I think. I’ll provide cover.”

Mace nodded, and Padme turned as the Lord Governor made his way over towards them, quickly engaging the man in small talk, which segued into a series of questions about his career prior to taking the position as Lord Governor, and his wife, who was very notably absent.

The two Jedi faded into the background, although not quite to the point where they were actually using their Force powers to do so. Anakin remained there, while Mace left to give out that order then came back just as the party began to break up, that the Tauber system would be sending a pair of heavy cruisers and a wing of clone troopers. They would arrive within two hours.

It was around twelve o’clock at night local time by the time Padme led the way out of the ballroom where the soirée had taken place.

At first, Padme simply looked tired and wanting to go to bed but as soon as they were around the corner, her tiredness left her, and she smirked slightly over her shoulders at the other to. “Well, I believe we have far more circumstantial evidence of wrongdoing here other than we did coming in, which makes me very glad you were able to call in those reinforcements. I managed to drop the mention of the Vratix at least twenty times, and every time, I was given the runaround. But the manner in which they did so was quite telling.”

Her smirk segued into a grim scowl. "I believe we are dealing with yet another group of Humancentric people, although here, it is directed at the Vratix in particular rather than at every alien species. Specifically, the humans seem to disdain the very idea that the Vratix are sentient enough to rule themselves. Next to nothing is known about their hives from what I can tell, and the locals all seem to think, or want me to think, that creating bacta is just a natural occurrence among the Vratix, like Alderaan bees making honey. Further, there is a whole lot of backstabbing. These corporations do not like each other."

Anakin nodded grim agreement to that. "Yeah, I've heard of character assassination, but that seems to be the norm here, rather than something special. I even got hints of actual violence occasionally, although no one came outright and stated they were behind the recent spat of 'industrial disasters' that have shut down the new bacta processing plants."

"Agreed. Here, corporate warfare seems only a step away from open warfare. With the Navy here almost ready to split straight down the middle," Padme stated, her scowl deepening.

"Hopefully our presence here and the number of exercises I'm going to be running the locals through will keep that from happening, as well as the sudden arrival of reinforcements, although that might be inflammatory. I will have to lay the groundwork for their 'visit' now." Mace mused. "Do you believe that the navy will move against us if we try to enact... social reform, shall we say?"

"I'm almost certain they will, and I already mentioned that you wanted to use the Tauber system's task force as an opposition force in a few war games. Xu and the other officers were not happy, but acquiesced when I got the Speaker Primus and the Lord Governor to both agree on it as they had already about towing the two asteroid fortresses into orbit over Thyferra. I had to hint at Republic funding for more defenses, yet that is a small price to pay. But a thought occurred. Surely the Sixth Fleet knows how fragmented the Thyferran high command is? Why weren't we getting reports from them, let alone seeing more of a true Republic Navy presence here?"

Anakin coughed a little, looking apologetic as he burst Padme's bubble just a bit. "Yularen and the rest of the high command you regularly interact with are professionals, Padme. A lot of our fleet admirals are professionals, good strategists and tacticians. That doesn't mean all of them are, or that such officers are without certain... vices. I'll wager an audit of the admirals funds would be... fascinating."

The tone Anakin gave that last word caused Padme to snort, but she nodded understanding. She looked ahead of them to see Chewbacca and his wife waiting for them by a station car and turned back to the Jedi. "Well gentlemen, I hope that Chewbacca has something for me, or someone else does. Do you have any plans for the rest of the night, Anakin? I know Master Windu will be returning to the Adamantine."

"I'm going to be with some of the maintenance people here on warm welcome, and then fly my Aethersprite over to the moon base to do the same there. Like I said, I want to make certain that the local maintenance schedules and everything else are as good in reality as they are on paper. Considering how horribly stupid their strategic disposition is, I'm not taking anything for granted," Anakin drawled.

"While the Adamantine helps tow the Troubadour into position, Rex and I will be working on producing a number of military exercises to show exactly how the locals have not been serving their home system as well as they should have," Mace answered, smiling thinly. "When the Tauber task force

gets here, we will start the first such as soon as possible, and I do not doubt the outcome of them. Indeed, I will make it a point to make them as disastrous for the locals as possible, the better to truly imprint them on the locals' collective mindset."

"That was perhaps the most political way of saying they have been grossly incompetent that I've heard in at least a few months, well done." Padme snorted, then bid both Jedi farewell, before turning and trooping over to Chewbacca and his wife cocking an eyebrow at the large Wookie. "Can I take it that your presence here means you found something? Or did my other fisherman get a bite?"

Chewbacca chuffed laughter at that, smacking Padme on the shoulder with a blow that, would've probably sent her flying or just flat on her face several years ago. Now it only caused her to stumble, while Chewbacca's translated voice came out of the small box by his waist. "I wasn't able to get away from the landing port we settled down on very far without a few minders following me around so I didn't get any closer to where the newest bacta labs were supposed to be setting up than the public could. And even that caused my watchers to try to convince me to head back up here. So instead, I asked them about big-game hunting and some other stuff of that nature, to throw them off the scent. It didn't work. I'm sorry Padme, but I didn't have any luck at all."

That didn't fit with the almost jubilant body language that the Wookies were both giving off, which amused me. Padme had become something of an expert in Wookie body language, and the slap to her back would've given her the hint even if she hadn't been. Which means he knows that Zule succeeded. Excellent. "And where is our second fisherman?"

Chewbacca simply laughed again, while his wife said that, "Zule was able to come up with a rather big fish indeed, although not one that I would particularly ever wish to cook. We are not Trandoshans after all."

For a second, Padme didn't figure that one out, by which time they had entered the car and Chewbacca was driving them out into the local traffic. But then what Lowie was implying registered, and her eyes widened, and Padme's head whipped up to look at Chewbacca. "Tell me that you already cleared our rooms, please."

Chewbacca laughed again nodding his head. Padme sighed in relief, and leaned back, closing her eyes to get a bit of a nap. A nap that only lasted half an hour before they were pulling up and into the security-enforced parking lot to the hotel where she had been given a room.

The three of them moved checked in at the front desk, then took the elevator up to the topmost floor. There, Chewbacca led the way forward towards only door on this level, which Chewbacca opened, letting Padme and his wife in before closing and locking it behind them.

Zule stood from the sitting area as they entered, beaming at Padme with such a smile that Padme actually smiled back before glancing aside to the being that settled down on four legs across from Zule. "Zule, gentle Vratix. My name is Senator Padme, and I will be with you as soon as I can get these dratted shoes off."

"That bad was it?" Zule quipped.

"I was forced to dance, and then to troop around in these high heels for the past four hours. These shoes are made to put your calves on display and are so high heeled I think they would make good

lethal weapons. Whereas I prefer flats and to choose my own dance partners rather than have them chosen by local politics,” Padme stated bluntly as she leaned down to pull off her shoes, tossing them aside, unconcerned that both the Vratix and Zule had a very nice view down her dress top for a moment. *If Zule gets flustered at that, well, serves her right!* “What do you think?”

“This one does not know what to think about that, but that is not exactly new for those of us of the hives when it comes to human fashion,” the Vratix stated, each word accompanied by the clack as his mandibles met. “Although we do know that if you are uncomfortable with one’s clothing, one should change it, correct?”

“In moderation perhaps, although certain tasks and duties require certain clothing, just like they would require certain equipment or knowledge,” Zule stated, not bothering to look away as Padme finished taking off her shoes.

Padme snorted and harrumphed at the other girl’s gaze, before studying the bug alien across from Zule as she moved over to sit beside the Jedi.

The bug alien was tall, perhaps as tall as Chewbacca if he was standing on all four of his lower limbs. He was a large insectoid with large compound eyes and a smallish head on a long thin neck, with six limbs sprouting from his thorax. The upper pair looked triple-jointed with tri-clawed hands, with a hook-claw near the second joint back from the hand to assist in climbing. The middle pair was far thicker, than the upper one, looking almost as thick as Chewie’s thighs, and Padme found herself wondering how far the species could jump with those legs. The last pair of limbs was almost hidden behind the Vratix’s main body, and seemed to serve no purpose except to keep the bug’s thorax from dropping to the ground. Small, thin hairs covered the Vratix’s thorax.

What was most interesting was the coloration. The bug alien’s hairs were a solid dark blue at the moment, a sharp contrast to the light green of the rest of the bug-like sentient’s body. That color changed, becoming lighter as it spoke to Zule, before shifting to look at Padme, reaching out at with both tri-clawed hands towards her.

Another woman might well have recoiled at that. Indeed, most sentients might have, but Padme had worked with a bit over a hundred different alien species by this point among her fellow Senators, and she could tell that this was some form of greeting, the manner of which she had dealt with before from being who were blind from accident, or because their species simply had not developed eyes. Although why the Vratix was doing so was beyond her considering that this alien did have eyes. *And rather large ones too.* “Might I ask, is this a welcome among your people, or something else?”

“We of the hives believe that only touch is true. By the time one sees something occurring, it is already false, an image of the past. By the time one hears something, it has already happened, come and gone. Only touch tells you what is true of the now. When we meet new people, we wish to touch them in this manner, hoping to come to a greater understanding of the being we meet if not the race it represents.”

“Well, far be it for me to shirk from such a test,” Padme answered gamely, not mentioning the ‘it’ part. She knew that gender among the Vratix probably followed that of most bug species and was thing of seasons rather than a fact of birth.

Feeling the bug alien's fingers caressed her face as it stared at her. An impish part of her almost wanted to make a joke out of it, telling the alien to stay above her collarbone, but she didn't. Instead, she watched as the deep blue color that the alien's hairs once more shifted to changed once more into a light yellow. "Might I ask, your skin color changing like that, is that emotional, or sensory?"

"Emotional. We of the hives wear our thoughts on our skin, the better to tell the truth even though site alone would give you a lie. Amongst ourselves, we also use touch when communicating, we can discern if someone is nervous, worried, scared through movement of our thorax," the Vratix intoned.

"Fascinating. And I mean that truly. It is always amazing to meet new and interesting species, its part of what I like most about being a senator," Padme said as the alien finally shifted backward on his legs, his arms dropping to his side. "Might I know your name?"

"We are called Alro, of the Ashern. We speak for fifty-two of the ninety-four hives on our home, the world that you call Thyferra," the being answered. "Jedi Knight Ziss has stated that you wished to meet with us, to discuss why the hives are no longer represented in the government of our world. This question we would turn back on you. Why has the Republic once more forsaken the hives in favor of the humans who merely see to the distribution of our bacta, when it is we who create it?"

"The Republic is a monstrously huge place, and selling your bacta has given the humans of the corporations here in Polinth System massive influence. To put it bluntly, we did not realize there was a problem, because the local humans were hiding it." *And because no one was looking*, she added internally. *In fact, if I hadn't been assigned here to make a new trade agreement with the corporations here, and Zule hadn't remembered Jedi order history and thus figured out something was wrong from the reports we still wouldn't know.* "But I'm here now. And if you can tell me what is going on, I promise to do what I can to make certain that going forward, you and your hives are represented once more in the government of the Polinth System. There is a war on, and we will need to do this with as little disruption to the bacta distribution as possible."

"We understand this and agree. Creating bacta is to us a necessity, a calling that we cannot ignore. Indeed, far too many hives are willing to simply go along with things so long as they are allowed to keep doing it. That was the initial thought process that allowed the human colonists to become so powerful, nor did we fully understand the worth of our bacta to others. We do now," Alro stated firmly.

"In that case, start from the beginning. How exactly were the representatives of the Vratix ousted, and how have the human colonists abused their position to retain that power?" Padme began. Not knowing that certain events would completely overwhelm her current plans for the future of Thyferra. "Your word will allow me to assume authority here, and push for a full investigation. Any physical evidence would also help immensely."

Scene break

Anakin had always found that talking to grease monkeys in whatever space station or port they were staying in was always a good idea if you really wanted to understand what the common people thought. That didn't always mean you would like what they were thinking, but spacers tended to open up to even strangers if those strangers were knowledgeable enough about their specialties and willing to pitch into any work that needed doing. Such was the case on both fronts at the moment.

So the locals almost to a man feel racist tendencies towards the Vratix, Anakin mused mentally as he helped put an engine back in place in one of the local Aethersprites. It had apparently developed a cough, which, regardless of what type of engine you are using, was never a good thing. Apparently, one of the engine's thermal coils had been out of alignment. Ask them about any of the hundreds of other species out there, and they don't have a problem with any of them. But when it comes to the Vratix?

Since Anakin had used Chewbacca as an example, mentioning he had seen the giant Wookie and wondering aloud if the stories were true about them being liable to tear people's limbs off, he thought the genuinely affable response he'd gotten was a good barometer. Well, that, and he'd also mentioned how he'd also seen a Twi'lek dancer, but since he'd been talking to men at the time, the response to that had been... fairly obvious and not at all helpful. *And I might keep some of the ribald jokes they've made about 'that GDL leader, Potter' for when I see that pair next. Either it will be funny to see Harry lose his cool or just hilarious to see their response to them.*

From there, Anakin had dropped in the name of or specific examples of various races. Not enough to draw suspicion, but enough to get a feel for the locals' response to about a dozen species before bringing the conversation around to the Vratix. At this point, the tone of the conversation shifted dramatically.

It looked as if the locals had simply taught themselves over time that the Vratix were merely animals. Animals who made bacta, who worked with the various ingredients of it just like ants would build colonies. "They're just bigger bugs who need looking after," was the most common comment over the past twenty minutes of gentle Force-assisted probing, using the Force to make certain they didn't realize how open they were about their inner thoughts or their racism.

Now, is this sentiment prevalent throughout the local humans, or is it just because this space station is dominated by the major corporations? That Anakin had no way of knowing, but it did not paint a pretty picture.

He had hoped that there would be a simple solution here: that the Ashern rebels had begun to act out but were representing a majority of their hives, and the human population was on their side but had been supplanted by a rich oligarchy. Yet it looked as if that rich oligarchy, while most certainly in place, might have a larger portion of the human population behind their efforts to supplant the Vratix than he had hoped. *Which is going to complicate matters. I think that Knight Ziss and I are going to be busy figuring out how far that blind racism spreads, but I sense it goes much further...*

Anakin's thoughts were interrupted by the head of the work gang, who had some weird local title that Anakin hadn't bothered to learn, clapping him on the shoulder. "Well, Master Jedi, I have to thank you for your help, and I hope that your weird method of meditation helped you get over the politics you had to deal with earlier. And if you ever need a break from politics again, come down and work with Gang Favro once more. We're at least a full shift ahead of where we should be, thanks to you."

That had been the explanation Anakin had given the grease monkeys when he had come down to talk and volunteered to help them. That he had an engineering bent (which was true) and had been forced to deal with politics (also true). The laughing, commiserating looks he had gotten with his annoyed, hangdog expression had proven that was the right tack to take, as he had known it would. Regardless of species, most lower or mid-income people had a disdain for politicians.

“It did, and I might take you up on the offer. Senator Padme is a very determined young lady, and while she isn’t looking to gouge you all, she is also very certain that the current price for bacta is a little too high,” Anakin drawled, causing much laughter from those around him. Apparently, while they understood that bacta was the linchpin of their economy (and even that was underselling it) they didn’t have any personal stake in it. People working what others called menial jobs were more than willing to poke fun or cast aspersions on their so-called superiors, regardless of race.

Anakin laughed with them, and the group moved on to the next job, a small freighter whose captain had apparently paid for local service on his engines. But because the job had no set turnaround date, it’d been put on the back burner for several days.

As they closed with the ship, though, Anakin noted that the ship it already unloaded a decent amount of cargo in the form of large boxes that looked like they could contain a bacta tank. *Or a human... or droid...*

Anyone who was not a Jedi would have wondered about why that thought had occurred to them. Most Jedi might not have thought about it at all, blinded as they were to the future to a massive degree by the Veil. But Anakin, although he had dealt with the Veil his entire life, was still connected to the Force more than the vast majority of Jedi.

He suddenly held up a hand, the other hand filling with his lightsaber hilt. “Wait. There’s something wrong...”

The work gang had gotten used to the idea of a Jedi by this point, and all of them stopped, watching as he stalked forward. There was danger here, but from precisely where eluded him right up until one of the boxes ahead of him suddenly began to glow cherry red in a very small spot before a blaster bolt corrupted out through the hastily made whole.

Anakin’s lightsaber was on and flicking up to deflect the plasma bolt faster than he thought, and he pivoted, catching another bolt from one of the other large boxes.

Two guns, stubby rifles the likes of which Anakin hadn’t seen personally, appeared from another angle, firing over another pair of similar boxes that had been set on their side. A small ball droid hidden in the darkness near the roof floated down, apparently relaying data to the shooters so they didn’t need to show themselves.

In conjunction with the ball droid, those rifles gave Anakin a clue as to what these droids were. *Commando droids, programmed to be infiltration and assassination experts.* These droids had been seen several times since the war began and always caused trouble whenever they appeared.

As Anakin redirected blaster bolts back at them, the droids moved rapidly from cover to cover, far faster than the normal battle droid variant could, ducking around corners to fire at Anakin or sticking just their arms and guns out as he twisted in place, bringing his lightsaber around to deflect one of the bolts up into the ball sensor above them.

It fell as the gang of engineers and dockworkers finally realized what was going on. Most of them screamed and ran for cover. The shift leader grabbed at a communicating device and tried to shout a report into it.

But he should have waited until he was in cover before that, as two of the droids, who were still doing a good job of hiding under cover, shifted fire onto the man.

Only Anakin hastily creating a Force Shield around the man saved him from a burst of blaster fire. The gang boss's eyes widened as he watched the play of energies caused by the blaster bolts hitting Anakin's shield right in front of his face, freezing like he had just turned to stone in fear.

Anakin left the shield there, charging forward towards where two of the droids were hiding near one another among the boxes they must've used to somehow smuggle themselves onto the station. One lost its blaster from a redirected bolt of plasma, but then the other tossed several grenades not towards Anakin but towards where several of the work crew had taken cover.

Concentrating on a Force grab, Anakin was able to catch them in the air, but that halted his forward progress for a second, and then the lights of the hangar bay went out. Another commando droid must've been messing with the local computers out of sight, and Anakin snorted in annoyance, his lightsaber flashing around him. 'Everyone stay down, kriff it!'

Whereas the commandoes' automatic shift to night vision would've given them an edge on even clone troopers in that second, Anakin had the Force. The Force sang through his body as it always did in combat, and Anakin let it guide his lightsaber as he twirled, easily deflecting every shot that came his way.

As this happened, Anakin felt the Force whisper a warning and shifted his style subtly. His defense became wilder, each blow carrying more impact. No longer was he trying to hit the droids with those deflections, but rather deflecting them up into the air or down to his feet, his features visible in the light of his lightsaber and the brief flares of energy-on-energy discharge. There, he noticed small metal bullets melted around the edges but still deadly if they hit. *Well, that's a thing*, Anakin reflected, wincing as he put more of his Force Precognition into deflecting the incoming attacks, knowing that he didn't get the angle right, those bits of metal wouldn't be redirected enough, and it would only take one to a vital body part to put him down.

At this point, the Force Shield he'd used to protect the crew boss faded. The man hastily ducked to his knees, crawling forward towards where he hoped there might be cover to one side of his previous position.

Anakin felt that, and grinned. *Idea!!* With that, he covered himself with a Force Shield, hurling his lightsaber forward at the same time. "Catch!"

The Force Shield sprang into place, protecting him in a cocoon of impenetrable energy. Anakin had held such a shield during an explosion that demolished the building he had been in. No mere plasma bolt was going to get through it.

And as the commandoes tried, Anakin guided his lightsaber forwards. The blade of green energy cut one droid in two, then swirled around in the air of the hangar bay before diving down towards another commando droid when it fired again towards Anakin. Before it could change position enough to dodge completely, Anakin's lightsaber stabbed through the commando droid's hastily raised personal energy shield before the shield could fully spread out to cover the droid. The lightsaber's point stabbed

through the droid's chest before sweeping upwards, cutting chest, head and neck in half before flying back up into the air.

Commando droids were not stupid, nor were they programmed for suicidal action. The mission was all that mattered, but even that had caveats. If they could not calculate that the mission could be completed, they would retreat. Currently, all the commando droids remaining in the battle understood they had barely a three percent chance of taking Anakin on in this environment. Therefore, retreat was an optimal solution.

The command closest to the hanger bay's interior hatch quickly connected wirelessly to it, opening it and racing through. As it did, the light from the hallway beyond let Anakin see more of his opponents than an arm or a weapon for the first time. The droids were built around the same general body type as a B-1 battle droid. Their limbs were made to be more mobile, their chests more streamlined, and their 'stomachs', the thinner, almost spine-like segment, was thicker and more armored. Their heads were also different. Their eyes were bigger, their snouts far shorter, and the entire droid was painted in dark gray and brown. All in all, the droid commandoes looked like a more dangerous, far more advanced version of the normal B-1.

Only one of his fellows was able to join that first droid, its arm still trailing smoke and electrical flares behind it from where its blaster had exploded. The last of their squad was cut down by Anakin's lightsaber before it could reach the door.

The door shut again, leaving everyone in darkness save for the lightsaber, but swiftly, the workmen all pulled out flashlights. This included several men in the observation office who oversaw this hangar bay. Like the workers with Anakin, they had been stunned by the sudden violence, and further, they had been locked out of their system by a bug that the commando droids had input into their system prior to this ambush. But now, quickly, they began to reclaim control of their systems, and lights came on throughout the hangar, first a few, then all of them, while alarms started to blare.

Anakin held up her hand, his lightsaber floating back down into it, a light Force Push having turned it off in midair after the lights had come on. Settling it back onto his belt, Anakin closed his eyes, folding his hands into his Jedi robe as he gently probed the Force. When he did, he could still feel a pressure, a buildup of danger. *Is this what Master Windu warned us about when we arrived? Some local Cleft Point? But then who... no!*

When the workmen began to gable questions at him, Anakin overrode them with a Force-assisted shout, that, for all its volume, came out in a kind of deadly calm that did more than his sheer volume to convey his seriousness. "Ladies and gentlemen, now is not the time for questions. I am afraid that this was probably just the first of many blows to come, and I suggest you all get to your families or report to emergency battle stations."

With that said, Anakin turned and, filled with an urgency that was only partially buoyed from the Force, raced out of the hangar bay. *Padme!*

Scene break

As Padme had mentioned in an effort to put the local Lord Governor on the back foot, Thyferra had been a Commerce Guild member in long-standing for centuries before the Separatist Movement had

begun to gain ground, and Jedi Master Jorus C'baoth had come out as its public leader. The Lord Governor, the Speaker Primus, and, as Padme had discovered, the governing boards of the many corporations that ruled Thyferra through the puppet government had decided they did not trust C'baoth on a personal and strategic level. That feeling had forced them to break from the Commerce Guild despite the centuries of involvement they had in that body. Senator Amidala had used that point to wonder whether or not Thyferra was trying to play both sides. If they still had contacts among the Commerce Guild that they were selling bacta to, then it explained why Thyferra could not meet the new wartime quota for bacta at the price she felt was fair for it.

It had not occurred to Padme to wonder whether or not those same backdoors could be used to smuggle things into Thyferra. But that was indeed the case. The Commerce Guild had hundreds of backdoors into the local computer network and more than a dozen connections within the system that the higher-ups had not bothered to shut down. Why that was a question that would occur to many within Republic Intelligence, but importantly, those backdoors into the local network included codes to not only make it seem as if a few freighters had the right to be where they were but also to come and go well away from the normal hyperspace lanes in and out of Thyferra. Even in times of war, with the minefields dotting the system.

This, and the timetable for his attack being moved back had allowed Grievous to sneak in ten fire team's worth of droids. Those droids were immensely expensive given how intelligent they were and the number of weapons and abilities they were programmed to use. For every fire team of such droids, the CIS could build a brigade of B-1 type battle droids or a company of the B-2s. But they could have an impact well beyond even that high price tag.

Anakin had only stumbled across one such group, who had hastily decided to engage the Jedi when he came close to the freighter their fire team and two others had used to get onto Warm Welcome. Others were scattered around the space stations in orbit above Thyferra, with orders to assassinate key leaders, both military officers and governmental officials or to sabotage specific computer systems or power generators. Two of the defense stations around Thyferra lost their internal power, their generators ripped apart by implanted explosives. Six more lost their commanding officer, and the teams who did those assassinations got away cleanly, hiding on ships set to depart for the planet's surface.

The planet's shield generator, easily the most important defense of installation in the entire system, was only saved by pure chance. A guard broke off his scheduled patrol around the interior to step out and have a smoke at just the right moment to see the commando droids scaling down the interior of the defensive wall around the massive base around the deflector shield generator. He had hit the alarms, and the commando droids there were eventually overwhelmed by the defenders, although they killed at least five for every one of their own that fell.

Similarly, Anakin's actions had taken out the team that had been hastily reassigned to take him and Master Windu out. While the team assigned to assassinate the Lord Governor had been split in two. Commando droid fire teams were six droids each, keeping their numbers small while also adding another two to a traditional fire team. This gave them a fantastic amount of flexibility.

During the planning session for this operation, the fire team leader determined that three commando droids were enough to knock out the personal defenses of the Lord Governor's home. Now

they did so, overwhelming the guards within, and killing the Lord Primus and his two mistresses/pleasure slaves while they were still in bed before getting away cleanly.

The three the squad leader had assigned to take out Padme Amidala would not have such luck...

Scene break

Padme leaned back on her sofa, looking down at the copious amounts of notes she had made during the discussion with the Vratix, grateful that halfway through, Zule had begun to massage her shoulders and neck. While it would've seemed highly unusual to any human, the Vratix hadn't even batted one of its large eyes at the sight. Padme had enjoyed the sensation more because of the comfort it gave her after listening to the number of poisonings and 'accidents' that had removed **several dozen** Vratix from positions of power over the past two years then because her body was actually sore. Alro was amazingly blunt about it, and about the number of people that had to have been in on the numerous murders among the local police force.

Thanks to the amount of training she got with Zule, Padme was well up to staying on her feet for much, much longer than any of the locals probably thought. But the tales of murder and death were appalling... and frankly, Padme feared the local shoe style might have permanently damaged her back. Both made her very thankful for the massage, even if at times she felt Zule was more caressing than massaging.

Now that Alro seemed finished, she organized her notes, taking pictures of each with her datapad before handing the amount over to Sabe, who whisked in and out of the room, placing those notes in a small, personal safe they had brought along for important matters.

Turning back to the Vratix, Padme tried to smile, but found she just could not muster enough good feeling to do so. "Thank you for the detailed summary of events, Alro. I, on behalf of the Republic, I apologize that all of this has gone unremarked by the greater galactic community for so long. But now, with so many poisonings, even without any other evidence I should be able to convince or browbeat the Lord Governor and the rest into allowing a..."

Padme paused, looking up feeling Zule's hands halting their movement over her shoulders and neck only to then turn her neck to watch Zule stalk towards the door, her lightsaber in hand. She said nothing though, trusting Zule, reaching instead for the hidden blaster she kept on the inside of her thigh at all times.

An instant later, the door burst open, a small explosive device having been set against it. The debris and explosive wave crashed into the room, halting when it hit Zule's hastily raised Force Shield. Behind the Jedi, Padme rolled to off the side of the sofa she had been sitting on, pulling out her holdout blaster. It wasn't a powerful gun, but it would do to put down a droid or human before it ran out of gas. Alro followed, flinging itself forward and over the sofa Padme had been sitting on, landing inside the small kitchenette, putting the aisle there between itself and the door.

But they needn't have bothered. By the time Padme had her gun up Chewbacca, who had been leaning against the outer wall of the suite had roared a warcry and fired into the turmoil by the doorway. Zule shifted the shield away from where Chewbacca's bolt was about to pass through, allowing it to zoom through the still-expanding front of the explosion and into a commando droid out in the hallway

beyond. Then Zule was dashing forward, shield gone, lightsaber in hand to deflect several well-aimed bolts from the other droids out there.

Seeing the lightsaber had both remaining commando droids retreating down the corridor, firing behind them and dodging this way and that to avoid any return shots as Chewbacca followed Zule out of the suite. The eerie silence with which the droids moved was somewhat disturbing, but this was joined a second later as both droids reached down to their sides and pulled out a second set of guns, turning and firing back at Zule as she raced down the hallway towards them.

Zule used her lightsaber to deflect one then her eyes widened as she ducked to the side, having just barely avoided the small superheated slug of metal that had been hidden within the plasma bolt. "KRIFFF!"

Before she could get to her feet several more such bolts were coming towards her, and no longer thinking that she could deflect the bolts well enough with just her lightsaber, Zule was forced to use her Force Shield, covering the corridor from one end to the other. The Force Shield worked, absorbing the energy from the plasma bolt and the kinetic impact from the little metal darts within, and Zule stared at three of them that would've hit her body, now hovering in the energy matrix of the shield. "Double KRIFFF!"

Seeing this trick didn't work, the commando droids retreated out of sight while alarms finally began to sound off throughout the hotel as the internal sensors of the hotel detected the weapons discharges. Four smoke grenades and a flashbang followed, covering them from Chewbacca's return fire.

Only as they were finally out of sight did Zule let the Force Shield fade. Chewbacca helped her to her feet, lifting her with a single arm as he pointed down the hallway with his rifle in the other. Only when the smoke faded did he turn his attention away, staring down at the small, still melting bits of metal that had hit her Force Shield. "Did they know there was a Jedi here or not?"

"Not, or else they would have begun with that. I think we are just targets of opportunity, and they didn't realize I was part of Padme's normal security detail." Zule looked over her shoulder and was unsurprised to see Padme joining them, having replaced her little holdout blaster with a full blaster rifle, the same that the clone armies used. Behind Padme came Alro and Sabe, who was armed similarly as Padme, although the other woman did not look nearly as comfortable with her weapon as the senator did. *That just shows that there are Senators, and then there are Senators.*

When the other joined her and Chewbacca, Zule repeated her earlier words, adding, "I think we're not the only targets today."

"Get me to the command center. The military command center, not the governmental complex," Padme ordered. "With Master Windu still on the Adamantine I don't know who in the local command structure we can trust to be able to deal with this attack."

"Particularly if, as I'm beginning to fear, it's only one of many," Zule murmured, feeling for the first time the growing danger through the miasma of the Veil that Master Windu had warned them of. "We might be looking at a full campaign of terror here, and maybe enough droids have been smuggled in to just take over? Regardless, the command center's the place to be."

Padme turned, bowing from the waist towards Alro. "Honorable Alro, I'm afraid that we need to cut our discussions short. Will you be able to find a safe place for yourself? Or would you prefer to simply wait in my quarters? I rather doubt the commando droids would try a second attack in the same location."

The Vratix chattered to itself for a second, one of its smaller arms touching a small device at its waste hanging on his vest. "This one has a device that will be able to scramble any recording devices in the area and should be able to find a means down to the homeworld swiftly enough. If you wish to contact us again once whatever is going on is done, this one trusts that Jedi Knight Zule will be able to do so."

Zule nodded, repeating a few clicks and chattering noises which made no sense to the rest of Padme's people, but which caused the Vratix to nod, turn, and head back into Padme's room for some reason. But she wasn't about to take the time to question it, simply hefting her blaster rifle and gesturing Zule forward towards the elevator and the emergency staircase that government regulations across the galaxy made certain was always next to them. "Let's move. And I think we should take the stairs instead of the elevator," Padme announced dryly.

With Zule in the lead and Chewbacca bringing up the rear with his wife, who was also now armed with two blasters, one in each hand, the group headed downstairs. As they went, they dealt with almost a dozen booby-traps left behind by the commando droids, and found the entryway onto the main floor blocked by rubble from an explosion they had barely heard several floors above. But the two surviving commando droids themselves were gone. Zule quickly retraced their steps and found a grapnel rope left in a window on the second floor of the hotel. She wasn't about to trust that, but it seemed as if the commando droids had given up on a direct confrontation. For now. *Doesn't mean I'm going to leave Padme's side for a moment, though.*

Thanks to the two Wookies and the Jedi Knight, the rubble posed no real issue, only slowing them for a few moments after Zule returned. Indeed, they had taken longer to go down the stairs and deal with the

In the lobby of the hotel,, they found several groups of first responders at work on the other side of the rubble, but Padme waved them off quickly. She then smiled blandly at Anakin as he raced into the hotel, his eyes wide and his expression somewhat harried. "Hello again Anakin, I trust that you have had just as interesting a time of it over the past hour or so as we have?"

The race from the hangar bay where he had been to the hotel that was deep inside the large space station had taken Anakin enough time for him to recover somewhat to his initial burst of near-panic at the idea Padme might be in danger, to the point where he had remembered that he had a communicator. The communicator told him of several other attacks going on across the space station, and he had been forced to divert to help deal with one on the local power station. Without it, the space station would've lost gravity, shields, and power.

This made that power station the second-most defended place on the space station even in times of peace, but also the most important target. The team of commandos attacking it had been reinforced by the remnant of the team that Anakin had dealt with, which also factored into his thinking

once Anakin had also remembered that Zule was staying with Padme. Between his attack from behind and the defenders, not a single commando droid had escaped.

That left the five from the fire-team initially assigned to kill the Lord Governor of course. But now at high alert, the power station was hopefully no longer in any danger.

He nodded to the Jedi Knight, then fell into step with them, reporting what he knew. "They haven't been able to take out local communications, but at least two of their other attacks were successful. Two of the local defense stations are down, several others have lost their commanders. The Governor and the Speaker are dead, along with a good number of other people. I don't know if that includes the Admiral, though. I asked, but I was told I didn't have clearance to know."

"Which tells us someone within that communication loop is panicking, and that is not good," Padme murmured. Anakin nodded, and fell in with her party and they were quickly on way once more, with Chewbacca commandeering a random hover car to take them to their destination.

At the command center they found extremely nervous guards, but ones who were equally relieved to see them, letting them in quickly after Zule, Lowbacca and Chewie, who were not known to them, showed their identifications. The fact that there was a third Jedi on the space station caused some surprise both among the guards and among the officers within the command center as Padme, with the two Jedi flanking her, strode in.

The command center was a three-story room. The first floor was separated into four circular areas, each indented from the second-floor area where people entered or exited, with stairs leading down into them and up into handing area of a similar make. On the wall directly across from the entrance was a huge screen, showing the entire star system in detail. In the center of the room the raised area ended at a similar circular area, wherein a smaller holo-projector was set, with several chairs facing it.

Admiral Xu stood there, pacing at the back of what was obviously a flag observation area. His arm was in a sling, his eyes wild, and half his hair was missing from what Padme assumed had been a near-hit from a plasma bolt, which had served to flash fry his hair away instead of exploding his head.

As Padme and the others entered, the man was shrieking, "And I want those bastards found! There must be more of them out there! There has to be. There's too few droids reported dead for the amount of trouble they've made. And I want any evidence that points to Zaltin Corp to be brought to my attention immediately! If they think that they can get away with covering their perfidy in this attack by simply sacrificing a few of their..."

Xu's voice faded away as he turned towards the doorway, his eyes wild as he shouted, "I ordered that no one was allowed..."

Again, his voice faded as Padme strode forward. The younger woman's glare froze the man like a mouse in the presence of a cobra, before she began to speak in a calm, composed tone. While she was in no way a military officer, she knew one of the tenets of command was to remain calm and composed in any situation. "I was also attacked, and I believe that you are attempting to fit this assault into your prewar worldviews on the local power structure, Admiral, despite the fact these attacks were made by CIS commando droids. Has it not occurred to you that this attack could serve a larger picture?"

“Of course it has! But they would need an army of droids scattered throughout the space stations to try and take us over, or even down on the planet if they wanted to simply disrupt the creation of bacta,” Xu scoffed, recovering slowly from his surprise that Padme was there. He really should’ve been told by the group of first responders that Padme had seen in the hotel, but evidently, had not been. “It, it makes far more sense for those Zaltin bastards to have bought the droids and be using them as a *carte blanche* to take over! The Speaker Primus is no great loss to the them and...”

“What else has occurred throughout the system? Apprentice Skywalker told me that the Speaker Primus is also dead, and there were an equal number of attacks on several defense stations, and that two such stations are out of action, their generators destroyed. What else did the droids hit?” Padme smiled wintrily as she moved around Xu, crowding the man without seeming to as she took the seat where he or the Lord governor would normally be sitting during a military review. The move, along with how calm she sounded, began to do its work, and all of the nearby officers slowly shifted their focus from obeying Xu or panicking themselves to listening to Padme. “Specifically, were there any attacks aboard your mobile defense fleet? Or Luna Fort?”

Luna Fort was the unimaginative name given to the military base on Thyferra’s largest moon. Anakin had commented once he was stunned it wasn’t the center of their military command structure either, but the Thyferrans had determined to keep their military command center on the same space station that housed their governmental buildings.

“I understand that it is the largest military installation within the system, correct? A blow there to its shield generator or power station would be crippling.”

“There was an attempt there, ma’am,” one coms operator said instantly, putting the information on screen a second later. “It was stopped because they seem to have gotten their timing wrong. The droids there were still in the process of moving towards the generator when they were spotted by one of Luna Fort’s roving patrols. Similarly, we got lucky on Thyferra. The defenses there were able to spot the droids before they could infiltrate further than the outer wall.”

More data popped up on the main hologram screen, the original data shrinking to one side as other operators got into the swing of things, putting information from across the star system up for Padme to peruse. This took her but a few moments, and she thanked the workers for their efforts which served to further calm them down and bolster their spirits even as those reports painted an ugly picture. Two more space stations, the Xucphra’s Range and the Zaltin’s Homestead were reporting that they had lost their local governors. Xu paled hearing that from Range, which was the oldest and largest hold of Xucphra Corps, his home corporation.

Zule and Anakin quickly joined in, giving input on the various attacks that were being reported. They quickly began to put together an idea of how many commando fire teams were in the system.

Within ten minutes some measure of calmness was restored to the command center. Seeing that, Padme turned to Xu, hoping to bring him into the discussion by asking his opinion on how the attack had been accomplished and who would be taking over for the Lord Governor and Speaker Primus. “This is an emergency after all, and while I know that the charter says that the Speaker Secundus and Senior Judge should take over, I am afraid I don’t know if the fact that this is an emergency means that

their assumption of power will be delayed or hastened. Or if, in fact, you will be in charge until such time as the emergency is declared over.”

“I, I don’t, that is, I,” Xu muttered, looking down at his broken arm, then running his hand up to his hairline, stopping when he got to the point where his hair had been seared off. If Padme had to guess at the expression he was making right now, it looked almost like he was in shock at the idea that he had been hurt at all, which was not a good sign, and the loss of so many prominent members from the same corporation that he hailed from. “I, I suppose I’m in charge, but I, that is, Xucphra, needs to put together a quorum, elect someone new... Zaltin just can’t be allowed to get away with this.”

That ramble went on for some time. During which, unheard by Xu, several coms operators told Padme that the Senior Judge was dead, and several speakers – local mayors essentially for the various space stations in orbit around Thyferra – were missing. Hearing all this, Padme interrupted Xu’s ramble harshly. “Admiral Xu! You have Jedi Skywalker and Knight Xiss’ sworn statements that those commando droids were not sent against you and your family’s corporation! You have dozens of reports that the attacks crossed corporate lines! They were sent against you by the Confederacy. And there is no measure in the laws of Thyferra for such a quorum, especially in times of emergency like this. If you cannot assume command, then I, as a representative of the Republic Senate, can step forward and make appointments on my own recognizance.”

That seemed to shock Xu for a moment, and he bared his teeth, his body tensing as if he was about to attack Padme when one of the radio officers interjected. “Ma’am, Admiral, I have Master Windu on the line.”

That seemed to remove some of Xu’s gathered wind out of him. Padme took a brief second to simply look back at the man before turning aside, nodding her head towards the officer who had spoken up. “Could you bring his image up on the hologram here please, please?”

A moment later, Mace’s face appeared in the hologram in front of her.

“Senator Amidala, good to see you alive. We only just received some garbled reports of what was happening back in orbit over Thyferra, but I have sensed through the Force some disturbance.” Which, Padme knew, was Mace’s way of wondering if the Shatterpoint he had sensed was on them just yet or not quite yet. “Do you think I should return via a shuttle, or should we cancel this operation, and I can come back with the Adamantine? As you and my padawan are at the scene, you have a better understanding than I.”

One would be faster, but the other would bring the rest of the five hundred and first currently aboard the Adamantine into orbit over Thyferra. Where they could be used to support local relief efforts. Many of the explosions from the various power generators that had been destroyed had not been small or contained. Or perhaps the clone troopers could help prop up whatever authority the local government or Padme needed.

Thinking about that, looking over at Zule and Anakin for their opinion. Zule frowned but shrugged, not having an opinion but now feeling the same kind of danger that Master Windu had begun feeling hours ago. In contrast, Anakin held up a hand and then closed his eyes.

Xu scoffed, rolling his eyes and muttering about “superstition” under his breath. But Padme simply waited while Zule’s eyes widened in shock at the amount of Force she could sense Anakin was pulling on for a moment. *He, Anakin isn’t going to be able to push aside the Veil, but if he gathers so much of the Force to him, Anakin could still maybe be able to see something of the future.*

After a full minute of trying to sense the Force through the Veil, Anakin came back to the here-and-now, looking haggard. *I, all I saw was danger, death and fire. This isn’t over. Not by a long shot. Master Windu and I, Zule, we were so very, very wrong about the scale of this disaster. The CIS is willing to court disaster and we haven’t* Opening his eyes, Anakin gazed into the Hypercom screen at his master. “I think all of the ships assigned to the two towing operations should get back here as fast as possible. I sense this could be the start of a far, far larger attack on the system.”

Silence. Utter silence spread through the command center as every officer there turned to stare in horror at Anakin. Even Padme was stunned at Anakin’s statement while Mace’s eyes narrowed in the hologram, his jaw visibly clenching. The idea of a full military assault on Thyferra was appalling. Bacta was just far, **far** too important to risk any disruption to its creation. Like Tibanna gas, certain types of food or hyperspace drive parts, bacta was one of the most important cornerstones of life in the civilized galaxy.

She had thought that the commando droid assault was an attempt to decapitate the government and been prepared to see people whose loyalty was to the CIS coming forward to take up those positions, people who had been against the idea of leaving the Commerce Guild, who would then call for help from the CIS to help restore order or to defend against ‘Republic aggression’. Padme had been making plans to counter that with the support of the Ashern and an appeal to the Thyferran Navy.

But the idea that the CIS would endanger the flow of bacta by bringing in a full fleet to force the issue ahead of being asked to come in had not occurred to her. *But if they do, if the CIS come with overwhelming firepower, and Xu was the one in charge of the defense of the system, or his second in command, they might have won the planet without any further loss.*

Xu’s second in command, vice-admiral Yeulu, was built much along the same mold as his superior. He had yet to be found, although neither had any evidence of an attack on him. *Although that one attack on a Speaker from the city of Blueon didn’t leave anything but tiny pieces behind. If there was truth to that rumor about Yuelu and... no, stop that, Padme. Time enough to find him if he yet lives. For now, concentrate on what might be coming.*

Aloud, Padme said, “I agree. Whether or not it will be an invasion force carefully hidden by the illusion of a ‘relief mission’ or an outright invasion, I do not know, but Anakin is right. The sheer number of attacks we have had to deal with points to a far larger operation, and that kind of full assault is the worst-case scenario. We need to prepare for it.”

Everyone in the center continued to stare, alternating between the Jedi and the Senator now, their minds unable to process the fact that these attacks could be the start of an attack on the system. Who in their right mind would ever want to disturb the bacta trade. To the Thyferrans, the bacta trade was by far the most important in the galaxy. The idea that someone would attack their system, let alone try to attack Thyferra itself, was insane to them.

Seeing that, Padme shook her head and then looked towards Mace. “Master Windu, senior representative of the Republic Navy within the Polinth System, I ask you, are you in a position to take command of our available military forces?”

“I am.” The man on the other end of the communication answered firmly. “As senior Jedi and as senior officer of the Republic Navy within the system, I accept this charge. Begin to relay all capital ship readiness reports to me. Recall all capital ship task groups to Thyferra orbit. The *Adamantine* is assuming flag position for our accompanying ships and will be making all haste to Thyferra within five minutes.”

Mace’s brusque, calm orders galvanized the still-stunned locals into action, and all the communications specialists and tactical officers leaped to obey despite Mace not being there in person. As they bent to their work, Padme looked towards Admiral Xu, who was gaping like a stunned fish and now looked as if he was going to collapse. “Admiral Xu, you stand relieved. Please, get some more medical attention. If you are cleared to return, I’m certain the Master Windu will have several hundred or so jobs he would look like to throw you at.”

Padme tried to soften the blow, seeing the man’s body language, but by the scowl on Xu’s face and the florid coloring that rose into his high cheekbones, she had failed. He opened his mouth and began to shout at her, but Padme had already turned away, and within a few seconds, Chewbacca had reached the man. Clapping one furry hand over his mouth, Chewie wound his other arm rather delicately around his waist, lifting the man up and off his feet before turning away and carrying him off like a child out of the hatch leading into the command room. Zule quickly caught up with the Wookiee, hoping to explain things to the guards they met as they escorted the former Admiral to the medical wing of the military base.

While Xu had been shouting, Mace had turned aside, giving a few quiet orders to Rex, who relayed them to the other ships in the small makeshift flotilla that had been towing Troubadour deeper into the Polinth System. By the time Xu was out the door, all five vessels had disengaged their tractor beams and were now moving at full acceleration deeper in-system to join up with the rest of the defense fleet. Similarly, on the other side of the sun from that reinforced task force, the five dreadnaughts that had been doing the same to Golden Road also disengaged and began to speed in-system.

Once Rex was acknowledged as his flag officer and thus deputy for the detached unit, Mace turned back to address Padme and Anakin. He gave Anakin the job of helping the local communications operators get the word out about his assumption of command, as well as ordering the various military base’s starfighters into space. If there was an attack incoming, their starfighters could not be caught in their hangar bays, regardless of where that attack came from. Every moment of speed now would help.

“Before anything else, has a Hypercom signal been sent to the Sixth Fleet or to the Republic High Command back on Coruscant about the attacks going on here?” Mace asked.

“Yes, er, Admiral,” stammered the senior communications officer. “As per normal doctrine, we sent out reports of each of the attacks and received receipt of that communication from both Coruscant and the staff of Admiral Zillair. We received no response except for a recent operational blurb from the Sixth fleet, stating that they had recently been forced to send out aid to Transel and Kiffu. No word was given to me about whether or not they would send further help our way or what kind of help that would be.”

"I see. And it is Master Windu, if you please. While I hold the rank of general in the Republic forces, it is not a permanent rank and certainly is not permanent in this system," Mace corrected gently. "Senator Amidala, do you think you will be able to help coordinate the search and rescue efforts and so forth on the civilian side? And can I further assume that you will back whatever decisions I make in..."

At that point, the second blow arrived.

"Hyperspace footprint! Massive hyperspace footprint coming in from the outer system, epsilon six five-nine!" one of the sensor operators shouted. "Hyperspace footprint is too large to be any single ship or even a small group. By the size of their hyperspace footprint, I'd estimate at least fifty ships, depending on the size of the vessels."

Epsilon was the designator that was given for quadrants of space within a star system that was below the star system's normal plane, the plane where the majority of the planets and other astral bodies resided. The other numbers were designations of the different sectors of space for when ships were on patrol, although what they signified, unfortunately, was not universal, something Amidala knew because such a motion was often brought before the Senate. In this case, the numbers meant a sector of space well outside of the normal hyperspace limit, almost directly into the minefields that were supposed to stop such jumps.

Instantly, the information on the main screen updated. With the sensors of the various space stations, buoys and mines all tied together, Thyferra Space Control had a very good idea of everything that was coming in and out from the outer system. As Padme, Anakin and the returned Zule watched, a massive force of forty-eight Lucrehulks appeared out of space all at once, followed by more ships further out, well away from th.

As they did, the ships sent out signals to the mines that told the mines they were friendly.

Not all of those signals worked, thankfully. The mines used by all three sides in this war were incredibly fast to attack anything that entered their territory, IFF or not, and the ships only had a few seconds to warn them off. But enough was warned off that the majority of those Lucrehulks survived, with only one being destroyed outright. Several hundred mines, each of them with payloads that were three times the size of a capital-ship-sized proton torpedo, struck the vessel's shields, breaking them down and then the ship within.

Others were hit hard enough to knock down their shields, but that was all. And then all of them launched their Vultures.

Whole wings of them, the entire complement of the Lucrehulks which could be launched at one time. Anakin whispered to Padme that each Lucrehulk could launch nearly three hundred in a single wave. Those vultures began to burn the mines out of space even as the defenders quickly ordered the mines to attack despite the stolen directives of the Confederacy ships, which was just another sign of how badly Thyferra had been penetrated.

Padme made a note of it. Any other star system that had been a part of the Commerce Guild, Trade Federation and so on would almost undoubtedly be just as susceptible to this kind of attack unless warned ahead of time.

Scores, then hundreds of vultures died as the mines exploded rather than be destroyed, and seven more of the Lucrehulks were ravaged, their shields drained away by near explosions rather than the direct hits that the mines should have waited for. Yet even so, the Lucrehulks took those hits and then calmly renewed the Vulture screen as the number of droids in space dwindled.

Within twenty minutes, the attackers had seared a corridor through the minefield, having only taken a fraction of the losses they would have in a system like Rendili or Coruscant.

As the enemy ship moved forward, the scanners could finally peer past the bulk of the Lucrehulks to the vessels behind them, aided by the battered Lucrehulks jumping to hyperspace.

Judging by what the scanners were telling Padme, she could see that there was a massive force attacking them now, made up of many different ship types she had only seen intelligence reports on before this. Coming out of the minefield, the enemy fleet was basically at the tip of a triangle, with the other two points being the fortresses Golden Road and Troubadour, with Thyferra on a line directly between the two fortresses at the bottom of the triangle, on a straight line from the attacking fleet.

As she watched, the enemy fleet broke up into four different flotillas. One performed a micro-jump, getting deeper into the star system as they could, placing themselves near the two gas giants. This flotilla was composed of smaller carriers, Captor-class Trade Federation vessels paired with Diamond-class frigates. An older design that looked nothing so much as a plate set on its side and then cut in half, the design had initially not been used in this war given how few weapons it could mount, but had since been brought back into the war machine of the Confederacy to fill the role of smaller, faster vessels. Called a cruiser by some before the war began, they were frigates if they were anything in modern parlance, with few offensive weapons but a decent anti-fighter punch as well as speed. Their armor was supposedly good, too, although their shielding left much to be desired.

“That groups going for the space stations around the gas giant, the various fighter bases that the locals keep there,” Anakin announced with a scowl before any of the other analysts in the room could. “Those bases should have launched fighters already, right?”

His question seemed to galvanize the locals, who had been paralyzed once more by the sight of the oncoming fleet, and soon, reports came in quickly. The fighter bases that Anakin had mentioned had indeed also launched fighters moments before this attack began, but only their ready squadrons. It would take them time to scramble the rest of the fighters. And even as those bases woke up to their personal peril, the Captor class carriers with that group launched their own fighters.

Without landing craft or accompanying battle droids, each Captor class vessel could launch five squadrons of starfighters apiece. And there were twenty such small carriers in that flotilla. There were more than enough starfighters to wipe out the defenders within the various moons of Iqobal even if they had been ready and prepared for the assault, which they were not.

“Order all starfighters in the Iqobal sub-system to pull back. They are to make for Thyferra at their best individual speed,” Padme suddenly said, staring into the pickup at the Jedi Master. She got a nod from Mace, who was busy communicating with the various captains and other officers of the defense fleet, ordering them all to take up position over Luna Fort. With that nod, Padme turned back to the others, continuing her previous order. “Those fighters can’t do anything where they are now. But they can add to our firepower here in orbit.”

“Ma’am, we're getting jamming all across the board. We can punch through it, but it's going to make communicating difficult, and it's also on the Hypercom,” the chief communications officer said, having taken a few moments to speak to his operators in the various partitioned segments of the room.

“That's one of the problems of all of us using the Hypercom and keeping it open, I suppose,” Anakin grumbled, shaking his head. “Master Windu and I did the same thing when we attacked Andar 4. Can you punch through it?”

“Yes, sir, although we're still getting no reply from Sixth Fleet. It looks as if they're being attacked all over as well and just don't have anything to spare, so they aren't responding to us,” the local responded.

Padme, Anakin and Zule glanced at one another, knowing that was not normal Republic Navy doctrine. Even if they didn't have anything to send to Thyferra, they would still have replied. The Sixth Fleet would then have passed on the request to any local defense fleets that were within four hours of hyperspace travel away to see if they could send aid instead.

This might simply be another sign of the Confederacy's espionage service, but it had to be set aside for now. *There will be time enough to examine that thought later. If we survive this.* With that thought, Anakin turned back to the main display.

Two more forces of the enemy had broken off from their main group by this point. Now they, jumping ahead, coming to the edge of the normal hyperspace limit. From there, the two groups each headed directly towards where the two asteroid fortresses that had previously defended the two entrances into and from the star system via the Hylian Way.

Both of these two flotillas were composed of five dreadnaughts, ship-to-ship killers. Not many of them had been seen before, but here, there were twelve of them in the enemy fleet. The dreadnaught divisions had then been separated. While two remained with the main fleet, the others formed the core of two disparate task forces, backed by two Lucrehulks providing starfighter escort along with twelve frigates and fourteen gunboats.

Already, Anakin could see what would happen. The escorting ships would peel off and allow the dreadnaughts to simply pummel the star fortresses into submission. The asteroid fortresses were tough but, like the local dreadnaught, were designed with weapons intended to fight smaller capital ships or starfighters, not ships of the line. They might have been able to fight a group of Lucrehulks, as even the variant of that ship used in this war wasn't the best when it came to ship-to-ship action. But against dreadnaughts, the fortresses had no chance.

It would take the Seps time, but those flotillas would remove two of the largest defensive installations within the system. And even if the five heavy cruisers assigned to the Golden Road and Troubadour had stayed to help defend them, it wouldn't have mattered against that way to firepower. All that would've happened would be to have lost ten ships for little gain.

“Commodore Polro, what are you doing?” Mace's voice cut into Anakin's musing, speaking to the officer in charge of the other group of five heavy cruisers, the ones assigned to the Golden Road. Both his voice and that of the man he was talking to were picked up by the communications here in the main

command center, which was acting as a relay through the ECM hash that had begun to impact the Hypercom and local communications.

“We will stay. We will fight with our comrades! We are not cowards, hail Zaltin, the true masters of Thyferra and bacta!” The Commodore shouted back.

“Commodore, if you continue to cut speed, I will have you relieved,” Mace warned. When Polro made to cut the communications line, the command center relayed Mace’s next words to every ship in his formation. “Commodore Polro is hereby relieved of command. I will not allow him to lead your ships to needless slaughter. Captain Triska, you are a senior officer remaining among the five ships assigned to towing the Golden Road. Assume command of your detachment and get them back on course to meet up with the rest of the fleet over Luna Fort.”

For a moment, nothing happened, then three and then the fourth of the five ships assigned to tow Golden Road began to pull away. But looking at the tactical screen, Anakin could see they would probably still be intercepted by the starfighters sent ahead of the dreadnaught heavy force that was moving towards the Golden Road. *But they might be able to avoid action against the larger vessels of the enemy formation. Heavy cruisers have no place tangling with dreadnaughts in anything like an equal number.*

The *Dazzling Zaltin* did not slow its deceleration as its fellows had. It was soon turning around, heading back to the Golden Road.

“Fool! Loyalty is one thing, but refusing to see the odds ahead of you is another,” muttered one of the comms officers.

Thankfully, that kind of stupidity didn’t seem to have wound his way through the starfighter corps. As the starfighters among the moons of Iqobal were launched from their bases, they formed up and quickly moved away from the moon and the incoming wave of vultures. They could’ve done a decent job of gutting that vulture force, Anakin reckoned, but they would’ve probably been lost to a man, along with their bases. This way, the men of those bases would either be forced to surrender and hope the CIS was feeling merciful today or would simply be lost, as they would have regardless.

As he watched, the first few vultures from attack group Alpha, as it was designated, began to hit the outermost bases. A second later, they also began to fire into the shields protecting the first civilian structures within those moons. Small mining installations, a science installation, and a hydroponics station were all blown out of space within the next few moments. But there were still more within those moons that would undoubtedly feel the attention of the Sep fleet. Yet there was nothing to be done there, and Anakin turned his attention back to the larger strategic picture.

The enemy fleet’s main fleet was composed of twenty remaining Lucrehulks, another two dreadnaughts, forty-two Munificent class cruisers, and a hundred frigates along with clouds of gunboats. The CIS still lacked a true destroyer class, a ship between a cruiser and a frigate in size.

This fleet was making straight for Thyferra. And ahead of them came the infamous CIS Vulture swarm.

Seeing that mass of starfighters bearing down on his current position, under any normal circumstances, Anakin knew precisely where he could do the most good: in the cockpit of the starfighter.

But now was not normal. Now, Padme was here, the woman he still had more than a passing interest in right at ground zero for the incoming attack.

“Senator Amidala, I think we need to evacuate,” Anakin hissed into her ear, his words formal but insistent. “Specifically, you, Chewbacca and his wife. We can commandeer a local freighter. Get you out of the system now. Chewie’s a pathfinder. He can calculate a way to hyperspace for you deeper into the gravity well than any local navigator could. You can’t be here if the CIS occupies the system.”

“No.” Padme didn’t even look up from where she was now working with several of the locals as she answered. Right now, they were trying to shut down civilian traffic in between the space stations, directing every ship that could take part in the evacuation process shifting the civilians from the various hab stations down to the planet’s surface. Hopefully, they would be safe there, at least until the CIS occupied the surface. But judging by how many civilian stations they had already destroyed in the moons of Iqobal, it was very doubtful that the CIS fleet wouldn’t do the same to all of the orbital structures over Thyferra.

“Senator, you’re much more...” Anakin began again, but Padme turned, glaring at him.

“If you think for one moment that I believe myself more important than anyone else, you have a woeful understanding of my personality. Yes, I understand that my own well-being could be considered important by the Senate and the Republic as a whole. But I will not trade my life for the hundreds of deaths that my leaving could cause. The local governmental system is shot to hell right now!” she growled out. “The people who aren’t dead thanks to the commando droids are panicking, including many of the people who should be running the various evacuations. It is only my calm voice and the fact that they do actually have evacuation procedures and plans for their various civilian stations that are stopping full-grown riots from occurring in practically every space station around Thyferra right now. If I leave, that semblance of control dies.”

“I could take over for you,” Zule said repressively. “There’s no cowardice in running, Senator... Padme.”

“And you would, like Anakin here, be much better served out there fighting rather than holding down a desk position, although, with the commando droids out there, you will note I’m not insisting on that.” Padme sighed. “If there was anyone among the locals we could trust to keep a level head and not put his own family or corporations’s needs ahead of everyone else, I would leave in a heartbeat. But there isn’t.”

A part of Padme knew that the two Jedi were right. Her position as part of the Peace Party was incredibly important within the power dynamic of the Senate. Furthermore, as a member of the Senate Military Oversight Committee, Padme was in possession of quite a lot of intel that the Confederacy would cheerfully torture her to get about the Republic military.

But she was also telling the truth when she said that none of the locals seemed at all able to see past their own corporation’s well-being to the greater picture at hand. While Anakin and the others had been watching the military side of things, Padme had stomped on several of the higher-ups of the various corporations. They had been trying to use emergency frequencies to order their own people around and even to commandeer shuttles out to their private yachts in order to escape the system that had been assigned to the evacuation efforts. And she knew that at least a few of them were bypassing

entirely the various evacuation lines on other civilian space stations around Thyferra to get down to the surface faster. Every shattered, slaughtered civilian installation only made it harder to keep a lid on the civilian's panic.

There was also another part of Padme that she really didn't want to acknowledge in words that likened this invasion to the Trade Federation invasions that had struck at her home planet of Naboo. The one Padme later learned had possibly been launched by the Sith Lord who was behind this conflict. Padme had been forced to run away back then because that had been the only avenue available to her if she hoped to save her planet. But even now, more than a decade later, that act still haunted her. The number of dead still haunted her. *I'm not running. Not this time.*

Scowling, Anakin looked over at Zule, gesturing to Padme. "Come on! You know that as a member of the SOC, all the secrets she's gotten her head, we need to get her out of here."

Zule gritted her teeth, a part of her agreeing with the younger man, but an even larger part of her understood why Padme wouldn't leave. "We'd have to knock her unconscious to get her out of here. And I don't think she would ever forgive us. Would you?"

"I would never talk to either of you again and order you back to the tyrant's bane, Zule," Padme answered coolly before turning around again to give out still further orders, reports flowing from one area of the command center to her and then back again. "I say again," Padme said a second later. "If you think you can come up with someone local who can do this job as well as I can and who has the authority to override the locals who are still trying to run roughshod over the evacuation orders, then please do so. Meanwhile, Anakin, I think you would do far more for the battle to come if you were in the starfighter."

At that point, one of the communications officers shouted for her attention. He had been working closely with Master Windu when another one had come up to him, whispering in his ear. "Your pardon, Senator, Admiral, that is Master Windu. Er, the enemy is announcing something on an open channel.

Possibilities went through Padme's mind like lightning, and for a moment, she wondered aloud if there was any way they could stop that from happening, but if it was already going over an open channel, there was no way that was going to happen. "Put it on the main screen. Let us see what we have to deal with." She then addressed the comms specialists she had been working with. "Open communications with the local tactical police squad commanders. They might need some new orders soon."

Right now, like the rest of the civilian police force aboard Warm Welcome and indeed across the other space stations where the humans of Polinth System lived, the Tipplesies, as they were called, were helping the rest of the police force, organizing and controlling the various evacuations. However, such evacuation plans always allowed for a tiny bit of leeway if terrorist activity occurred while the evacuation was ongoing.

An alien face appeared on the screen, or was it a robot? At first, Padme couldn't quite decide which. Then she noticed around the eyes that there was some actual flesh there, a bit in the neck and lower mouth portion behind what looked like a metal mask fused into his flesh. *A cyborg then, but one without a lot of flesh left behind. Yet that mask, it speaks to something beyond a simple robot. It looks*

like it is meant to inspire fear, yet the shape of it, the erroneous flanges to the side, that is not something a droid or even most cyborgs would wear. And those eyes... those eyes are the eyes of someone with nothing to lose and a deep anger and hatred. I don't need to be a Jedi to see that.

When the creature spoke, it was in a rasping, almost mechanical voice, but not even the most sentient-sounding droid could have instilled the mAHsoka in the man's words that his tone contained. "I am Grievous. You will surrender this system. If you do not instantly surrender, including whatever Jedi remain among you, I will slaughter you all. Not a single sentient will be left alive in this system."

Scene break

Grievous smiled internally. While he would still kill sentient on Thyferra, those were his orders and his delight, sowing confusion among the enemies was always a good idea. Even one caught so badly off balance as this one. Already the two massive asteroid fortresses that should have been the linchpin of the system's defense were being pounded under by his dreadnaughts and their so-called secret starfighter bases had all been destroyed, having only been able to launch half of their starfighters. He had also spread out enough of the small captor class freighters to house teams of vulture fighters, which were even now preying on any ship that tried to escape the gravity well of the star enough to go to hyperspace. But with the number of planets situated within the system, the normal hyperspace limit for civilian traffic was quite a ways out from Thyferra itself. And that was going to let his little hunter-killer teams catch quite a harvest.

He was a little annoyed that the ships that had been towing the space fortresses deeper in-system hadn't stayed with them and more annoyed that that had been done so in the first place. That had always been a possibility: that someone competent would come around and point out that having your strongest defensive fortresses well away from what needed to be defended was foolish. But running into it was still annoying.

Beyond that, everything seemed to be going well enough to plan. "Now, I wonder if any of the people over there will be stupid enough to believe that I really will allow them to live if they surrender to me?"

Scene break

After Grievous's message, everything in the command center on Warm Welcome was pure bedlam. The dozens of communications officers handling every other space station reported that someone aboard them was trying to get in touch with Grievous, trying to surrender. Ship captains who had called in to report readiness now argued with Master Windu that they should surrender, or, barring that, that the local defense force should surrender, and Senator Amidala and her Force should try to escape and hyper out on their own.

But Anakin could see that they'd already taken too long for that. They'd have to fight their way out past the hunter-killer teams sent out into the outer system, and with the Adamantine where it was in-system, that wasn't going to happen unless they left Master Windu behind. And despite his earlier words to Padme about how she should run, Anakin had no such thoughts about himself.

Padme growled angrily, moving through Zule and Anakin back to where she had been sitting originally. She had vacated that spot because Mace had taken command of the military side of things

from the *Adamantine*, and she had been more than capable of handling the civilian side of things from one of the communication areas within the command center.

In the flag area each chair had a set of buttons that linked to the entire local communications system a few things that only the Admiral or Lord Governor was supposed to. This included a command override, which, by Republic law, every Republic system needed to have in order to allow for proper communications during emergencies. Communication bandwidth could often be overridden on the local level, but that system allowed for the user to literally use all the local coms to get his or her own message out.

This Padme used now, shutting down communications across the star system, causing no end of consternation among the defenders as they tried to organize themselves, as well as angering quite a lot of important local magnates who had been trying desperately to surrender or to give out orders to their own people. She held that communications blackout for a few seconds and then used the other side of the override, speaking to everyone within the star system, the incoming enemy fleet and civilians and defenders alike. *Time to show the CIS that there is another side to cruelty, how your enemies react to it.*

“Ladies and gentle beings of Thyferra. I am Senator Amidala. Those of you who follow your news should know that I was within Polinth System because I was here to broker a new wartime deal for bacta. **I am still here!** I will remain here throughout this battle come what may. And it will be a battle, ladies and gentlemen. Because the Republic Navy does not surrender to the enemy unless they know for certain that they will be treated according to the rules of war. Rules of war which have been thrown out in this war several times. General Grievous is even more likely to simply order prisoners slain or escape pods shot at than other CIS officers. I have read about the attacks that have plagued the Sixth Fleet’s command zone, and this being is well known to Republic Intelligence as a brutal,, bloodthirsty commander. He has ordered escape pods to be shot up, even while his forces are retreating from a hit-and-run attack, and has destroyed whole civilian space stations before.”

She waited a moment, then continued softly. “Is this the kind of person that you believe you can trust to treat your families and friends well if the CIS occupies Polinth System? You will note that he has already ordered the destruction of civilian installations in this very attack, wiping out Hydrponics 1, the Hanging Gardens of Crsytobel, Mine Geofu, Mine Delermo along with the military bases among the moons of Iqobal,” Padme listed from memory the names of the various hydroponics and mining installations which had been destroyed. “Hydro Station Patri, Mine Wolvu, Hydro Station Culd and the asteroid fortresses of *Golden Road* and Troubadour are also under attack even now. Even as he offers to accept your surrender with one hand, such barbarity continues with the other!”

A pause to breath, and Amidala continued, in her element, giving a speech to an audience, unseen though it might be. “I ask you, do you truly believe Greivous would be willing to honor that agreement? Nor has he offered any surety that you would be allowed to escape the system. Even now, other forces under Grievous’s command are hunting those of your fellows who have already tried to escape. Can you trust Grievous to keep his word?”

Again, Padme fell silent for a few seconds, letting that sink in. “To those defenders among you, I ask you this. Will you trust Greivous, or would you rather try to defend your foot homes, your families, your livelihoods? To the civilians among you, I ask of you, would you sooner trust this creature, this being who has brought fire and death to your star system, who has already done so across more than a dozen

star systems in this war, or would you rather stand with the Republic? I give no guarantee of victory or safety, only that we will fight alongside you, that we, that I, will die here with you if need be.”

Center, locking gazes first with Anakin, then with Zule, then with practically every other person who had turned to stare at her from their various stations around the command center. “Will you stand, and fight for your star system, for your people, or will you stand by and trust in the words of a tyrant? Those are your choices.”

Once more, Padme fell silent, waiting.

She did not need to wait long.

The first voice came from the small task force from Tauber, which had remained in orbit since reaching it barely forty minutes before the droids launched their attacks. And if there was no real joy at being stuck here at ground zero for the biggest attack the Jaso Sector or its neighbors had ever seen, then there was a grim determination to do what was right. “Task Force lona will obey lawful orders from the Republic representatives.”

“This is Commodore Harkins. Light cruiser division 2 stands with Thyferra and the Republic.”

“This is DS 15, our weapons are live and our shields are online. We will defend our homes!” Was followed by a chorus of other defense station, even some who had lost their commanding officers, calling in, fury and determination in their voices.

“Lunar Fortress, online and ready to fight!” Roared another voice, the first female voice among them, but sounding just as angry and determined as all the others.

Another signal came from the planet, one that she had not anticipated. “This is Alro of the Vratix. The United Hives stand with Senator Amidala and the Republic.”

This drew whispers of shock and more than a little disdain from many of the other people in the command center, but a few noticed something, quickly pointing it out to their fellows. “Look at this. The bugs, they, they’ve been doing something...”

Thyferra didn’t really have a true power grid like other highly advanced star systems did, a series of thousands or even millions (on ecumenopoli) of power stations all linked into the same grid. The hives of the Vratix and the space needed for the ingredients to bacta simply took too much space up across the planet for that. The planetary shield generator thus had only seven power stations that could send their power into it.

Yet it appeared that sometime in the past, the Vratix had built their own power generators and connected several of them to that system. Never having used them before, they did so now, heightening the power available to the planetary shield generator by an appreciable amount.

For several minutes, Padme kept on dealing with other people calling in, telling her that they would obey Master Windu in the coming battle or Padme. And slowly, the defense of the system stabilized, and the various evacuations resumed.

Staring at her, Anakin slowly shook his head, looking over at Sara. “I don’t know how Padme did that.”

"I don't either. Politics and public speaking like that are things that are beyond me for the most part. *It does seem as if it's something Harry or Aayla could do and it shows again why the two of them are in love with Padme and vice versa.* "You know that we're never going to get her out of here now. My place is here, defending her against any commando droid who tries for her. What about you, padawan?"

While wincing a bit at the mode of address, Anakin nodded glumly, then raised a hand in the Jedi manner of farewell. "In that case, I think I'm going to do more good in a starfighter cockpit. Hopefully we will all see one another again once this battle ends. The Force be with you Knight Ziss."

With that, and one more look towards Padme, Anakin left the room, heading for his Aethersprite.

Scene break

Behind his mask, Grievous scowled at first as he heard Padme's words, then smiled. *Good. It is always better to fight an enemy that knows the stakes. And a senator who also is also known to be on the military oversight committee is a prize worth having.* He turned slightly, gazing towards his four Magna Guards. "Gather your fellows. When we get into orbit over Thyferra, I will have a task for you."

Scene break

While the civilian traffic was still being forced to ground, or in the case of a few ships, were making runs for the outer system that were almost certainly doomed to fail, various starfighter squadrons from the bases around the planet and from the lunar fortress formed up. The groups that had launched from the bases within the Iqobal subsystem were only slowly trickling in towards Thyferra now in a disorganized mush, but Anakin could leave organizing them to their own officers for now. He had other fish to fry, and as his Aethersprite began to pick up speed, Anakin felt the Force surround him.

He could feel the pulsing life essence of the other pilots who were flying around him, four wings of Aethersprites, on a specific mission to intercept the Vulture swarm heading towards the five heavy cruisers under his master. Similarly, another four wings had been sent out in the opposite direction to try and intercept the Vultures being sent against the four heavy cruisers that had retreated from the attempt to tow the Golden Road to a new position. *It's a gamble, Anakin acknowledged, But a good one.*

Vultures were very rarely organized in anything but huge swarms or smaller squadrons, so Anakin didn't know if they even had wings per-se. The Republic, in contrast, organized at every level: wingmen pairs, squads, squadrons, wings. Each wing of the Republic had six squadrons of twelve starfighters, making up seventy-two Aethersprites. So right now, Anakin was leading two-hundred and eighty-eight sentients against what the CIC had said were about four thousand Vultures. *But better we start taking bites out of their total numbers now, and better we blood some of our starfighters against a smaller swarm than what the main enemy force has put out. The enemy lost a lot of vultures to clear out the mines, but they still have a vast advantage in numbers.*

The enemy had also taken a gamble, Anakin reflected. If he had been the enemy, he probably would've sent all of his main force's Vultures flooding towards Thyferra, rather than try to use them to pick off the two separate forces of heavy cruisers. He understood why they had done it, though. Those cruisers represented a very large chunk of the local force's capital ship component, while the defense

installations around Thyferra were geared to stopping starfighters and small ships. The Vultures would have been gutted, with possibly little to show for it.

But it would allow the Aethersprites, with their greater overall straight-ahead speed, to first intercept and then retreat back to reinforce the defensive envelope of those ships, taking a toll on the Vultures with both tactics.

Then again, this is the Confederacy. They don't care about their Vulture fighters, and why should they? From the Republic intelligence reports I've seen, they can produce seventeen or so for every five Aethersprites or three Arrow fighters in terms of material and price. And from experience, I know those Lucrehulks with their main force will have eight hundred or so Vulture fighters in reserve... if they aren't configured to land troops, anyway.

That doesn't mean that they're not going to pay for it, though, Anakin thought, a hungry grin appearing on his face.

The sheer number of Vulture fighters that the Confederacy could put out in their Vulture swarms had appalled Republican analysts at the start of the war, but it was simply another aspect of how heavily the Confederacy of Independent Systems leaned on robotics when it came to their military. Those numbers were precisely why the clones were so necessary. The Republic simply could not match the number of droid combatants the enemy could put in the field in any decent time frame. It was also why the GDL barely had any land-based military to speak of and had pushed so hard to specialize in small capital ship classes.

More than one battle had been decided from the get-go because the local commanders hadn't realized how effective the jack-of-all-trades Vultures could be in capital-ship assault. *Which is why how well that gunboat of the GDL works took everyone by surprise. I've seen reports of those. I could wish we had a few squadrons of those here, or better, the frigate version that they are apparently trying to work on.*

That was the last thought that Anakin allowed himself to have on anything but the battle to come, releasing it into the Force as the Force filled him in turn, the Jedi closing his eyes as he felt everything around him, everything in front of him and what portions of the future he could see. *I'm not going to die here, Padme's not going to die here, not if I or the Force have the strength to stand against these kriffers.* "This is Skywalker, callsign Sky-One. If anyone has a problem with me leaving the strike, speak up now."

No one did, and Anakin's smile turned thin and grim. "Good. Now, this maneuver has been performed time after time in this war. Aethersprites have a longer lock-on range than Vulture fighters. It isn't much, but it is there. When we come into our range of the starfighter swarm, each of us will launch two concussion missiles at a single target, then flip and burn. We will **not** engage in dogfighting just yet. Simply use our concussion missiles on them and turn away."

Starfighter pilots being arrogant kriffers to a man, Anakin expected to deal with a few shouts of disagreement. But there were none, and he continued. "When we turn, we'll be at our most vulnerable. The Vulture fighters will keep coming and will try to catch us. Do not, I repeat, do not engage in dogfighting. Simply maneuver so that you cannot be fired upon."

Early on in the war, the Aethersprites had been refitted with box launchers of concussion missiles, giving them much of the ability of the Arrows the GDL used. Unlike the GDL, though, they didn't have much in the way of ammunition for those, with the box launchers only having four concussion missiles apiece in comparison to the Arrow's eight. But two of them paired together would be enough to shatter a Vulture fighter's shields and the fighter behind those shields. And with the addition of the astromech droids that most Aethersprite variants had, the starfighter could lock onto more than one enemy at a time, firing its concussion missiles in succession. A single pass could, in this instance, kill up to five hundred and seventy-six Vultures.

The flight out took a good forty minutes, even as fast as Aethersprites could go, to reach Master Windu and the flotilla with him. Space was vast, even in a single-star system. But soon, they were streaking past the *Adamantine* and the four local heavy cruisers with it and moving to engage the incoming Vultures. Twenty minutes later, they reached their lock-on range.

Trusting Artoo to have locked onto one target, Anakin used the Force to figure out which of the Vulture fighters at the head of the swarm needed to die quickly, locking onto one in particular. ECM being what it was, the Force was a much better way of finding which Vultures were squadron leaders, not that it mattered much. And in a larger battle, it was nearly impossible even for Masters to figure out which ship was the flagship of an enemy fleet. There were just too many minds, too many sentients, and far too many obfuscations and steps in that chain, a fact made worse by the fact the CIS knew of such techniques from C'baoth.

"All squadron leaders, declare if you have lock-on..." Anakin waited and then got a series of affirmatives, each squadron being told in turn when their men had locks.

The next second, several hundred concussion missiles were fired from the wings of starfighters, and they were turning and burning away.

Explosions rippled through the front of the Vulture swarm, but the Vulture swarm kept on coming, just as Anakin had warned. Now coming around, the Aethersprites lost much of their momentum, not being as able to almost flip in space as the arrows could, but having slightly stronger shielding.

Those shields, however, didn't allow them to get away completely unscathed.

Seven of the Thyferran starfighters with Anakin exploded in the next few seconds. More than a dozen had waited too long to pull away and soon found themselves locked in the deadly dance of a dogfight while their fellows continued to pull out of their initial assault, making a long, curving turn back towards the heavy cruisers.

And it was here that the relative inexperience of the Thyferran starfighter pilots proved most harmful. A similar number of clone troopers caught in a dogfight with the Vultures would have at least killed two or even three Vulture fighters for each of their own that went down. The new V-19 Torrent didn't have an Aethersprite's straightaway speed but was incredibly agile and had just as good shielding and even better concussion missile launchers than the GDL arrow fighter. Thyferra, however, didn't have any of those. Only the squadrons that came with Senator Padme's defense flotilla did, and the one squadron that their mothership could launch had remained stoically around the *Adamantine* at the heart of the heavy cruiser formation. The others had been retained over Thyferra, along with the gunboats and

frigates for now, answering to Senator Padme while some of the frigate's onboard personnel were helping the locals to help keep a lid on the panic on the various civilian space stations.

None of the local starfighter pilots who entered that dogfight survived to leave it and only accounted for less than half of their own number. *Hopefully, that kind of exchange won't happen every time we get stuck in with the Vultures. Or else this isn't going to be fun.*

The Aethersprites around Anakin and Anakin himself were able to meet and integrate with the defensive envelope around the heavy cruisers before the remaining three thousand plus Vulture fighters could catch up to them. The Vulture fighters swarmed over the heavy cruisers, who lit up space with their anti-fighter fire, and Anakin led the locals in helping the Torrent's close-in defense. For the next few moments, Anakin used the Force to guide his flight, murmuring out words of encouragement to this or that starfighter pilot he felt was in danger, while the Force guided his own piloting to an incredible degree, aided by his own insanely high reaction time. Vulture after Vulture fell under his fire, and within fifteen minutes of the battle, he had killed enough Vultures to be an ace six times over, if he wasn't already one.

He could also hear Master Windu giving out crisp orders to the various starfighters, keeping the heavy dreadnaughts in a defensive formation while also not slowing their pace toward Thyferra and the waiting forces there. *We're doing well enough here, for now,* Anakin mused, shooting another Vulture out of the sky. *But this was the easy part.*

Scene break

That portion of the battle was indeed going in the defender's favor. The Vulture swarm ran into a well-organized, well-maintained web of defensive fire backed up by the Aethersprites Anakin had let out, not even knocking down their shields for a moment.

The battle wasn't going nearly as well for the other force of heavy cruisers sent out to tow the Golden Road. The four heavy cruisers were still fighting it out with the Vultures that had swarmed them and had lost the majority of the Aethersprites sent out to help them. Worse, the destruction of the military bases throughout the moons of Iqobal had been completed, and the Captor class and the Diamond class frigates with them had split apart, moving out of the center of the system, reinforcing the cordon at various points around the star system.

Watching this from the command center, Zule shook her head, whispering a word of advice to Padme for a moment on something she had seen on the civilian evacuation side before shifting over to give a command to one captain in particular, knowing Master Windu was too busy with his own small part of this campaign to see the larger picture. None of them were capable of the Battle Precognition that would have made such things second nature. "Captain Jace, this is Jedi Knight Ziss. I am formally releasing the rest of Senator Padme's guard flotilla to you. Take your ship and them, and go assist task force Apellion."

The captain of the only true dreadnaught that Thyferra boasted answered crisply, his face appearing on the communication screen for a moment as he did. Life his admiral before him, Darno Jace looked the part of a military man, but unlike Xu, there was obviously something a little deeper to Jace because he seemed entirely unruffled by the situation, staring back into the pickup levelly. "We are on our way. I take it we are then to fall back to Thyferra with task force Apellion?"

“Correct. We do not want you to get stuck in with the enemy any more than we need to. The main enemy fleet is still coming on towards Thyferra, and we will need you and your ships here.”

“Understood. *Barrage* out.” With that, Jace ended the call, and Zule turned her attention to helping the shattered remnants of starfighter squadrons from Iqobal organize themselves while also preparing a defense in depth over Luna Fort. That defense would look decidedly odd since the heavies that would anchor the center of it weren’t there yet, but still.

And then, Zule turned her attention to the battles that had already begun over the Troubadour and Golden Road. *Zaltin’s Glory* was already taking a pummeling and would undoubtedly fall soon. Against the firepower of five dreadnaughts, they couldn’t do much else, even if only one such ship was concentrating on the heavy cruiser while the others hammered the asteroid fortress.

Even there, though, the enemy had made a small mistake. While the gunboats and frigates providing cover for the dreadnaughts stayed out of the fight, the vultures were continuing to try and take part and really were not doing much but dying. The Troubadour only had a few weapons systems that could hit the dreadnaughts at the range those same dreadnaughts were most effective. The vultures, though, were dying in droves. *I wonder if that’s a case of doctrine trumping thinking or just unconcern? By the time Troubadour and Golden Road fall, those Lucrehulks might be the next best thing to empty of Vultures.*

While she was doing that, Padme’s calmness and eye for detail helped to quell what remained of the panic from this assault. The evacuation began to speed up, with the troublemakers removed or taken into custody. One of the commando droid fire teams had been found and destroyed on one of the defense stations as it arrived, and another had been found on a civilian habitat trying to leave. That team was still fighting a running firefight through the habitat, but it wasn’t making anymore trouble. *Which means that the chief threat from the commandoes is here.*

“Chewbacca.” At her call, both Chewie and Lowie, waiting by the door, came towards her, and Zule started to listen in as well. “Check on the defenses around the base here. In particular, keep in contact with our ECCM teams. The commando droids that attacked us and the Lord Governor are at least still out there. Others also had time to escape the other habitats and could maybe join them here.”

Chewie nodded, and the two wookies moved off, talking to one another. Lowie was soon handed a communicator, and Chewie left, heading out to survey the command center’s defenses.

Padme took a brief second to watch the dreadnaught leave orbit, having traveled entirely around the planet before doing so. Now it was piling on the speed faster than any ship that size should be able to, recalling that Anakin had mentioned that the vessel didn’t actually have a hyperdrive but instead had a standard subspace drive built to twice the regular size such a vessel would have.

“What did Anakin call it, an escort-class dreadnaught? Well, we’re about to see how good it is in that role,” Padme murmured to Zule, who nodded back.

The gunboats and frigates from Padme’s initial guard flotilla were able to keep up with the larger vessel easily enough, and around thirty minutes later, they met up with the battle ongoing around the four dreadnaughts led by *Apellion*. All four of those ships had taken punishment from the Vultures, and most of their starfighters had died by this point. Armor had been torn away, guns silenced, and shields

in various sections were gone. But they were still gamely moving towards the planet and away from the two Lucrehulks that had been pushed towards them by the enemy Admiral in the hopes of finishing them off.

Those hopes died now as the *Barrage* and its escorts opened fire into the Vulture swarm around the ships. Several hundred quad laser cannons made short work of the remaining thousand-plus Vultures. The heavy dreadnaughts fell into formation, falling back towards the planet with their smaller brethren around them, and the Barrage took up position at the rear as if daring the enemy to send more vultures out toward them.

Meanwhile, Mace and his force were already merging into the main defense fleet's formation, which Zule had set up at the outer limit of Luna Fort's planetary-class ion and turbolaser batteries. The heavy cruisers under Mace joined the two from Tauber and the three locals who had been recalled from patrols around the inner system. They now formed the center of the battle line, with the local light cruisers out to either flank. The entire fleet hovered deep in the gravity well and range of the moon base's guns.

On paper, the local light cruisers, which looked like bulky cigars with rows of arrowhead-like 'wings,' looked a match for the Munificent class except at long range. There, the Munificent class's spinal mounted turbolaser cannons would have a distinct advantage against even the heavy cruisers, although the class had proven to be an example of what Padme had heard described as a glass cannon.

Once a Munificent's shields were down, its armor simply could not sustain much of a punishment. Moreover, the war had shown it had severe design flaws, weaknesses along its length that, if hit by a concussion or proton torpedo or even sufficient turbolaser strikes, would shatter the ship.

Anakin and the other Aethersprites fighters with him docked with various ships, quickly reloading their concussion missile box launchers, and were back out in space, forming up with the squadrons of Aethersprites that Zule had reorganized from the moon along with the four squadrons of Torrents that had been sent out with the *Barrage*, who Captain Jace had sent ahead of his force. They hadn't really been needed there, and Jace had recognized that almost at once, turning them around even as the gunboats and the *Barrage* finished off the enemy vultures.

The two dreadnaughts in the enemy's main formation were the first to fire, followed by the Munificent class as the Lucrehulks continued their way forward, launching another five hundred Vulture fighters a piece, creating yet another swarm. And this time, the enemy did not break that swarm in two, instead keeping it together under the guns of the main host as they moved forward.

For several moments, the defenders could only take fire from the two dreadnaughts and the Munificents, dodging wildly in place, shifting this way and that. One of the light cruisers was not lucky enough to evade all that fire and took four shots from the heavy turbolaser cannons of their counterparts in quick succession, which broke its shielding, and left it ruinously exposed. The Confederacy's fire shifted to that vessel, and despite one of the other local light cruisers trying to put itself in harm's way, the ship, the *Good Price*, soon exploded under the enemy fire.

But the enemy had finally come close enough for the locals to reply, and under Mace's direction, they did so. The heavy cruisers and light cruisers completely ignored the two dreadnaughts as Anakin and the defending Aethersprites boiled forward to engage the Vultures.

Mace knew that pounding the enemy dreadnaught's shields down would take far too much of their time and effort while the rest of the enemy fleet would mangle them in turn. Instead, Mace had the local light cruisers concentrating on defending his own Torrent starfighters as they roared in, getting in close with the Munificent class ships. Sending starfighters in against Lucrehulks was never a good idea, considering how much of their offensive firepower was geared toward stopping starfighters. The Munificent class had a significant amount of anti-fighter guns, but not nearly as much, and the enemy had left several divisions of the Munificent class exposed on the flanks in an effort to try and wash up and over the defender's battleline. Yet as they attempted to fire 'down' at Master Windu's fleet, the Torrents raced 'up', engaging them in turn and forcing them to try and evade rather than just sit and fire like the snipers they were made to be.

While the Munificent class stayed back to use their long-range advantage, the Lucrehulks and the two dreadnaughts came on. This soon brought them into the envelope of the planetary-class turbolaser and ion cannons on the moon. And unlike even the heavy cruisers of the defenders, those guns had enough punch to matter even against dreadnaughts. One dreadnaught found itself being struck by hammer blows of energy from Luna Fort as four of its batteries could range on it all at once.

That dreadnaught's shields flickered but held as it twisted around desperately, trying to put some more distance between it and the lunar base. The other dreadnaught didn't take any fire but shifted back with its sister ship, shielding it as one of the Lucrehulks took two hits from a planetary-class ion cannon, which almost completely knocked out its shields.

Instantly, Mace shifted fire to that one ship from all the heavy cruisers in the battle line. The Lucrehulk's shields swiftly failed, letting the next two shots from that same ion cannon lance directly into the Lucrehulk. Systems all across its hull flickered, died and even exploded under the impact of the ionic energies released, and Anakin, ever the opportunist, shifted his own fire and one of the local Aethersprites. Before the Vulture fighters could stop them, the two of them had flown directly above and behind the enemy capital ship. Four concussion missiles flew, impacting its engine, which subsequently exploded, cracking the ship into pieces.

Anakin was able to evade and dodge through the dogfight away from that bombing run. The local him wasn't so lucky, his ship being caught dead to rights by several Vultures, who smashed his shield down and then riddled his starfighter with laser bolts.

"All ships, fall back," Mace ordered.

It took Padme a second to realize why Mace was ordering that. She had become so focused on the fact of that one Lucrehulk that she hadn't realized the rest of the defense fleet had lost two more of the local light cruisers and numerous gunboats. Shields were flickering across the rest of the fleet as well, and Mace had realized that they would probably lose more capital ships if they tried to stay where they were.

"Retreating further down and into the moon base's defensive envelope allowed them to either force the Munificent class to follow them into that envelope along with the larger vessels or to pull back out of the fight and shift around the defense fleet, which would allow the other defense space stations to get in on the action. Given that's where I situated a majority of the defensive satellites, that would be

a very bad thing, but of course, they can find the satellites just as easily as they could the mines,” Zule explained, scowling a little. “I wish I was on Luna Fort.”

Padme looked at her quizzically, and Zule shrugged. “It’s got a planetary shield generator, but it doesn’t have many power stations, which means the enemy is probably going to launch a land assault on it.”

Scowling, Padme nodded. It was common knowledge that planetary shields could be taken down in a few ways. One: constant, unrelenting bombardment. A bombardment that would last hours on end for most planets, maybe even days, and would put the attacking fleet within range of the defensive guns on the surface. *Which Luna Fort has just proven yet again is a very bad idea for any attacking fleet.* Two, blast through a small, specific area of the shield with enough power that the shield couldn’t reform fast enough to stop you from sending in landing craft and assaulting the shield generator over land.

This was the normal method, which would allow the Confederacy to use their vast numbers of combat droids to good effect, especially on a planet like Thyferra, which didn’t have a standing army. Padme imagined that would be the tactic they would use here.

Similarly, the third tactic was to smash the shields hard enough that the operators were forced to shrink the area the shield protected so that it covered a smaller area. On planets or military installations that didn’t have the power to call as on a fully industrialized planet, this was more than possible. This would allow the enemy to land forces at their leisure, which could march overland to engage the defenders of the shield generators and subsequently destroy or capture them.

Looking at the overall strategic display, Padme scowled, seeing that the dreadnaughts the CIS had tasked with destroying the two asteroid fortresses had finished their job. Only one of them had been damaged in any way, possibly some kind of building defect? Regardless, it was retreating now toward the outer system while the others were shifting towards attacking Thyferra directly from the angle they were currently at rather than moving to link up with their main force.

“Captain Jace, you are not, repeat, not to remain with defense Stations 1, 7, 13 and 19,” Zule ordered, showing she was looking at the same data for a moment. “Keep falling back over the planet until you link up with the mobile defense force. You’ll do the most good there.”

Captain Jace answered crisply, and once more, Padme and her companion turned their attention to the main battle. One more of the defending ships had been knocked out, one of the local heavy cruisers apparently. The *Adamantine* had yet to come under any direct fire from enemy capital ships, but its shields had taken some hits from Vulture fighters.

The dogfight was a vicious swirl of activity that Padme refused to get drawn into again, instead concentrating on the capital ships. There, the fact the light cruisers had mainly focused on killing the Vultures was giving the defenders a slight edge, as were the hundred or so anti-fighter satellites that Zule had spread out through the formation.

The enemy was paying for the assault now across the board. Seven Lucrehulks had peeled away from the battle, battered and with their shields off-line, most of their systems dead. The two dreadnaughts had shifted up and over, keeping out of the lunar base’s firing range. Many of the Munificent previously sent to wash up and over the defenders had run into the one-shot satellites

around the two defense stations there. Both those defense stations were in danger of dying, but between them and the one-shot satellites, they had taken out ten of the enemy ships, with another fourteen showing heavy damage.

As Padme watched, four more Lucrehulks plunged straight down towards Luna Fort. Above them, the Munificent class to a division turned their spinal mounted turbolaser batteries down onto the shield protecting the moon.

Already, that shield had compressed tremendously, allowing the attackers to wipe out several of the distributed defensive batteries. Padme could see the icons for landing ships suddenly appearing from the Lucrehulks coming closer to the moon, flying down even as one of their motherships exploded behind them from concentrated fire from the remaining defensive batteries on that portion of the moon.

“We can’t save the moon base, can we?” Padme asked the room at large.

While the other operators in the room were too busy to give her an answer, Zule shook her head. “No. But the bright side is that defending Luna Fort as we did slowed the main enemy force down so that they couldn’t use their Vulture swarm against us here in orbit over Thyferra while all of the civilian traffic was still moving around. The civilian traffic is dying down tremendously, and look, seven of the nineteen civilian space stations are reporting that they have finished their evacuations.”

Though civilian space stations didn’t have much in terms of defenses beyond shields, a few scattered quad lasers and normally up to six turbolasers around their hangar bays, built way back when Thyferra had yet to truly develop its own defense force and had to worry about pirates. A small, cynical part of Zule felt that, with the civilians evacuated to the planet, those space stations would probably serve better as targets than actual true defenses.

With a start, Padme realized that the battle over the moon base had taken a good six hours, which, coupled with the time they had saved by getting that ball rolling quickly after the initial round of terrorist attacks, had undoubtedly allowed them to save hundreds of thousands of people by evacuating them down to the planet. *That, and the sheer amount of in-system craft they have on hand here. Without the number of dedicated freighters to simply move bacta from the surface and up into space, I doubt we would’ve been able to evacuate even one space station, let alone seven by now.*

“Do you think we will be able to get any of the others evacuated?”

Zule winced, shaking her head slightly. “Probably not more than one more before the enemy pushes past Luna Fort and into attacking range of the space stations directly between the moon and Thyferra right now. We might be able to get a few more completely free of civilians from the other side of the planet from the main attack, but given that the two forces of dreadnaughts are moving in from other angles, I wouldn’t bet on more than two or three at most by the time the battle shifts entirely into orbit over Thyferra.”

Padme cursed, knowing that if a single one of the remaining civilian habitats were destroyed, it would result in a loss of life that would haunt her dreams and make the military losses thus far seem pale in comparison. Such space stations were the homes of upwards of five hundred to nearly three million inhabitants, depending on their size. Here in Thyferra, the locals preferred to build entirely new stations rather than enlarge existing ones, but even so, the losses of the two asteroid fortresses had cost

the defenders sixty thousand men and women. The butchery in the moons of Iqobal and Ferxani had already murdered almost a million civilians.

Feeling vulnerable for a moment, she leaned in, whispering into the other girl's ear. "Do you think I was wrong? Do you think grievous would have really honored a surrender? This, this wanton butchery is..."

"No," Zule answered bluntly, shaking her head and leaning in to whisper in turn, an arm slung across Padme's shoulders for a brief hug. "You can't feel the Force as I can or the other Jedi. I was trying to get a handle on that creature's emotions when he gave that offer. That creature is seething with anger and hate, so much that even non-empaths like I could feel it when I looked at him, despite the range between us. He would never have treated the people here well. It would only have resulted in a slower rate of deaths."

Padme winced at that but leaned into the other woman's hug as Zule went on. "No, our best option was to fight. You were right about that. We can hope that Sixth Fleet or someone else out there is going to respond to our requests for help if they were even able to hear them through the enemy's ECM, anyway."

Scene break

Anakin grimaced as he pulled out of an attack on a Lucrehulk, flinging himself upwards as the power of the enemy's defensive guns suddenly powered up once more. The shields didn't, but someone over there had obviously prioritized getting guns online having seen how one of their fellow Lucrehulks had already been destroyed by starfighter attacks once both shield and defenses had fallen.

It didn't save the ship. One of the local light cruisers pushed ahead of its fellows out of formation and up and around the enemy Lucrehulk, daring the fire of several other Lucrehulks to rake downwards with its broadside, which impacted the Lucrehulk's aft portion. After more than a dozen barrages, the engines cut out, and the ship was soon tumbling through space.

But the light cruiser paid for it. Even as it killed the maimed Lucrehulk, its shields collapsed in segments from return fire from the same vessel and a few others while Vultures pounced from everywhere. Anakin and the others who could get there did their best, but it wasn't enough. Soon, the ship exploded, a one-to-one ratio that the defenders, despite the difference in tonnage, could not afford.

Anakin dodged incoming fire as several Vultures tried to come up behind his starfighter, then performed an engine stall trick, causing his ship to lose all forward momentum suddenly, flipping upwards to take on one of the Vultures from below. Several shots impacted the Vulture's shields. They must have been already battered from an earlier moment in the dogfight because they flared out of existence within a second. One shot hit home in a wing, tearing it off and sending the rest of the Vulture cartwheeling through space.

Not caring what happened to it, Anakin twisted the yoke of his starfighter around, firing at a second Vulture and then another, firing again and again, uncaring of whether or not he actually destroyed them. He would have to lock on and keep his fire on target for far too long, risking being destroyed in turn for that in this kind of crazy cluster kriff.

“Anakin, I am relaying several IFFs to you. Break up out of the dogfight down and then back up on the attack vector I’m sending Artoo,” his master’s voice spoke from his communications gear for a second.

“Do you have the data, Artoo?” Anakin asked, even as he twisted around again, dodging still more incoming fire and killing another Vulture and then wounding a second, leaving it to be finished off by a Torrent fighter that had just flashed by.

His homebuilt astromech droid answered in the affirmative. A second later, Anakin followed Artoo’s course down and through the dogfight, reflecting that the overall battle was not going very well.

Fort Luna had fallen pretty quickly after the enemy had been able to land troops, although it had also been able to put three of the four Lucrehulks that had landed those troops out of commission, joining nine other Munificent class ships that had been shattered by the defensive fire of the moon base. But that left far more such ships, and the dreadnaught-heavy task forces hadn’t even entered the main fight just yet. One group of dreadnaughts had just hit the outer shell of space defense stations around Thyferra at another angle he knew but Anakin had no idea how that battle was going. The second group was going to hit another part of the sphere of defensive installations soon.

Or maybe they had already? Anakin had lost track of time a bit. Not that it mattered much, all he could do was handle what was in front of them.

Anakin could sense his master’s intent and with the Force guiding him, he was able to easily push his way out of the main dogfight. Soon, he was coming down towards the last of the Lucrehulks that had unloaded their troops onto the moon’s surface, which had been left behind by the main enemy formation enough that none of the other capital ships could range on him and the other starfighters that Mace had pulled together for this attack run.

Except for the Munificent class and their spinal mounts, anyway. But none of those ships tried to pull away from the main battle, instead sending long-range fire against the shields of the heavy cruisers at the heart of the defensive formation. One of the ships from Tauber and another from the Thyferran fleet died within the next few moments.

The Lucrehulk threw up a hail of defensive fire, but Anakin guided himself through that fire, raking the enemy ship’s shields, only to find that they weren’t at full strength. Even better, from below, many of the Lucrehulk’s guns had also been knocked out and were powerless right now. “Engage with concussion missiles, then fly close, rake its engines!”

The Torrent fighters following him obeyed, all of them still retaining their concussion missiles, which was probably one of the reasons why Master Windu had chosen them for this job. The shields only went out in one place despite how low-powered they were, but Anakin was able to get in, and he zoomed along the bottom of the C-shaped ship, blasting two of the shield nacelles into pieces. Then, the Torrents joined him. It took more than ten minutes, and a group of Vulture Fighters tried to interrupt them, but eventually, the Lucrehulk’s engines were spluttering, shattered ruins, and Anakin and the two surviving Torrents pulled up, coming up and around towards one of the defense stations.

Built to far larger specifications than the Golan class defense stations the GDL preferred, these stations had heavier shielding but not much in the way of offensive punch against enemy spaceships

except proton torpedoes. They were doing a number on the Vulture starfighters, though, as was the Barrage. The gunboats and frigates, along with the Barrage, had already begun to wipe out whole squadrons of attacking Vultures that entered their range, making it easier for their fellow capital ships, doing quite a bit to offset the amount of losses the locals had taken to their own starfighter wings. The Barrage had also begun to situate itself between any of the heavy cruisers whose shields were in danger of failing.

“Anakin, move toward DS 4. That space station has enough concussion missiles to refill you and the other squadrons I’m sending your way. Your job will be to help hammer the dreadnaughts that are coming into contact with the planetary defenses over the northern pole,” Mace said crisply. “They’ve already wiped out a few stations but are still moving to join the main battle.”

“Roger, Master. Although against dreadnaughts, I don’t know how much we’re going to do,” Anakin warned. Anakin fully trusted in his abilities and the Force, and maybe if the dreadnaught in question didn’t have shields, he might think he could take it on, but as it was?

“That you will have to discover for yourself, but if you can slow them down even a little bit, that would be most helpful.”

For the first time since the battle began, Anakin could sense real strain in his master’s voice. The overall battle was not going their way, to say it mildly. The locals were performing amazingly well. People who were fighting for their homes and families often did. But the Confederacy military machine kept on trundling forward, Greivouss responding and countering any of the so-called advantages the locals had. He wasn’t as good about it as Master Windu, but he didn’t have to be, given the disparity in their numbers.

Anakin took a brief moment to go to the bathroom while his fire was being reloaded with concussion missiles, wondering as he did where their reinforcements were. By this time, forces from as far away as Coruscant could have gotten here through the Rimma Trade Route, the same route they had all used to get here in the first place. *I cannot imagine that no one has noticed they can’t contact people in Thyferra. The kriff is going on!?*

By the time he was back in the cockpit, the battle had shifted once more. The other group of dreadnaughts had hit the defensive envelope of the planet on the other side. Instead of moving around Thyferra and engaging new defense stations for several moments, they proceeded to batter against the planet shield there.

Thyferra’s planetary shields had risen to the point where they covered many of the defense stations. More than one of the local capital ships had moved under that envelope to allow their own shields to recharge, making this a valid tactic.

As Anakin watched, the Barrage shielded one of the heavy cruisers until it passed through the shields, then moved back, exchanging fire with a Lucrehulk and failing to do much but drawing its fire away from another heavy cruiser. That cruiser unloaded several proton torpedoes into the enemy ship before retreating as well, putting a defense installation between themselves and several of the Lucrehulks.

Anakin led his starfighters in against the dreadnaughts as ordered, watching the hail of antiair fire coming their way, shaking his head. "All starfighters in formation with me, slave your targeting computers to mine. You'll never survive to get through that weight of fire."

This wasn't a process that the Torrent or Aethersprites were designed for, like the Arrows of the GDL, but they could do it. And Anakin had trained the clone pilots on doing so, having anticipated situations like this. *Although not one starfighter against five dreadnaughts. Thank the Force that they aren't all close enough to support one another with defensive fire. This is going to be bad enough.*

The Force singing through him, Anakin dived deep into the enemy's defensive envelope, dodging fire by the skin of his teeth, taking a few shots on his shield, but able to predict where the attack would be coming from with unerring accuracy every time. Soon, he had a lock on the massive capital ship and shouted, "Firing! Artoo, ready to switch power to engines!"

Two of his concussion missiles flashed out, followed by every concussion missile that the rest of the squadrons sent his way had on them. But they didn't hit on the precise point he was aiming for. Rather, they rippled across the shields of the enemy vessel. Most of that shield held easily, but one portion seemed to flicker, and Anakin, his engines boosted and shields down for a second, was on it in an instant. The Torrent fighters that could aim at the same point shifted their targeting to that specific area as he did. Seventeen more concussion missiles hit, with one going wild for some reason, knocking a small portion of the energy web that was a deflector shield out of alignment right there for a brief second.

And in that brief second, Anakin flew inside. *Heh, I haven't done this since the Battle of Naboo, but why mess with what works? "Shields back up, Artoo!"*

Even with the Force, Anakin took hits from the antiair fire from the dreadnaught, but Artoo had been able to shift the power back to their shields. Then Anakin was below it, coming in towards its hanger bay, which was slung underneath the dreadnaught halfway along its length. Again and again, he was forced to dodge fire yet it couldn't stop him, though, and seconds later, Anakin was flying into the hangar bay. There, he began to fire his lasers directly into the structure of the ship, cutting into the ship as he hovered there.

The dreadnaught was built to last. Even as Anakin destroyed significant portions of its interior, emergency doors closed, segments were cut off completely from the rest of the ship, and the capital ship twisted, trying to shift into a position where one of its fellows could aim into its hanger bay. A suicidal act and a move no sane captain would ever think of. This made Anakin wonder as to if the dreadnaughts were crewed by sentient beings or droids. Regardless, warned by his fellow pilots, Anakin was forced to twist around and boost out, skipping down into and through the planetary shield for a second before he could come back up out of the enemy ships' range.

"Master Windu, I think we can take it as a given that these dreadnaughts have enough antiair fire that we won't be able to get through them without some insane tactics. If there were more Jedi here, we might," Anakin breathed deeply. Worse, their shielding's insanely tough. Tougher than even a Lucrehulk's, I think, or maybe they just have more shield generators? I don't know, but I was able to punch through one and did some damage, but not enough to put it out of the fight."

“Join up with my formation, Anakin, and then you and the rest of the starfighters will be falling back into the defender’s hangar bays. We’re about to all retreat underneath the planetary shield,” Mace ordered, wincing. “The battle between Fort Luna and Thyferra is lost now.”

Scene break

A hissing voice echoing from a recorder, a message and a threat all in one. “There is a chance a large victory for the CIS can become the greatest victory for the Sith. The Vagaries of the future have shown me... opportunity. I will trust you, my future Lord Inquisitor, to take advantage of what chance provides. If in so doing you steal a victory from Dominus, so be it. Do not fail me.”

Scene break

While Padme and Zule worked to try and punch a signal out into hyperspace with increasing desperation, the defense fleet continued falling back, now entirely entering the protective envelope of the defense installations in orbit around Thyferra in position to take part in this battle. As it did, the Munificent class ships, now well back of the enemy frontline and out of range of the defense stations, turned their massed fire onto those stations, trusting in the remaining Lucrehulks and the two dreadnaughts to close in.

Both CIS dreadnaught had moved forward now that they had no fear of the moon base’s defensive fire along with the rest of the main enemy fleet and were currently hammering the planetary shield hard, hoping to knock it back so that the defender’s capital ships were once more left on their own. This showed once and for all that the idea of not placing any guns on the planet’s surface itself had been a bad move. Even with the surprise of the numerous generators the Vratix had built without the human-led government knowing about them, it was only a matter of time though before that shield was forced to retreat.

That had implications, a lot of them for the war going forward. Padme knew intellectually that there had been far more planets with a full energy grid that could not afford to build shield generators, hence why the GDL’s diplomatic efforts had concentrated on supplying such. But seeing the planetary shield of Thyferra slowly being hammered down, well... that was disturbing. *I know that there aren’t as many power stations down there as there should be, but even so...*

Yet it still took the enemy several hours of punishment for the planetary shield to be hammered down past the interior line of defense stations. This time let the defenders rest, repair some of the damage the capital ships had taken, and rearm all of the remaining Allied starfighters... even if it still wasn’t enough time for reinforcements to arrive. And when it finally began to be battered down, the remaining vessels retreated with it, letting the defense stations fight it out with the CIS fleet.

Although not entirely alone. The rearmed fighters proved deadly once they were launched again, not at the heart of the enemy formation but out away from the enemy formation, where they were able to form up and come back down from behind the main enemy fleet. Six more Munificent class vessels were destroyed by the starfighters at this point, one almost entirely by Anakin, along with several hundred Vultures, although the defending starfighters also lost tremendously. When they flashed through the enemy formation and back under the planetary shield, they were down to only around a thousand starfighters against at least four thousand remaining Vultures of the enemy.

According to Zule, though, that seemed to be it with the main enemy fleet. The Barrage had proven to be a very deadly anti-fighter platform, as well as the local defense stations. Even more luckily, the enemy didn't seem inclined to bring in its reserves from the Captor class vessels scattered around the edge of the system. Even though all attempts to leave the system had rapidly dried up.

For forty minutes after the shield continued to hold, allowing the defending capital ships to rebuild their own shields, do still more repairs, and continually fire back through the shielding against their enemies as the defense stations did what they could. One more Lucrehulk was forced to retreat, pulling back entirely from the battle as its shields failed, although had the enemy needed it, it could've remained in the fight relying on its armor and anti-air fire.

But that was the only victory scored in that time, and when the planetary shield generator was hammered back down past the outer atmosphere of the planet, the attackers regained every advantage. And had also destroyed five more defense stations.

At that point, Grievous once more earned his infamy.

Padme and everyone else in the command center watched in horror as two of the dreadnaughts in each of the detached enemy formations turned their firepower entirely on the civilian space stations around them. Four of the civilian space stations around where the group of dreadnaughts that had followed Captain Jace's ships back into orbit were soon shattered, broken into thousands of pieces.

The two dreadnaughts that had done that then turned their fire not against the still-fighting defense platforms in their range but against the planetary shield. "Are they going to launch an invasion while we're still contesting the orbitals?" Padme asked, her voice dead as she wondered how many thousands had just died. *I know we were able to evacuate at least one of those stations entirely, but still... Grievous just ordered the deaths of hundreds of thousands at a minimum.*

"I..." Zule fell silent, watching closely, then breathed in deeply, her normal red skin paling noticeably. "I don't think so."

Padme looked at her in confusion, then turned back to the plot, watching the main battle as one of the defending heavy cruisers was lost, followed by two more reporting heavy damage. The enemy dreadnaughts were brutal, and with the fire from the Lucrehulks backing them up were simply not going to be stopped.

A part of Padme wondered if she should order the defense fleet to flee, to fight another day. But she knew they wouldn't go, and frankly, they probably wouldn't even survive to escape the planet's gravity well.

Then she whirled away from staring at the main screen, instead looking at the small hologram at the center of the flag officer's area. "Where are reinforcements!?" she growled, looking over towards where she had last seen the chief communications officer, who was running around helping his subordinates here and there rather than at his own station. "Staff Officer Peel!"

Peel turned, racing up the steps toward her, and when she asked the question of him, he shook his head sadly. "I don't know Senator, I, I really wish I did. We were able to punch through the enemy's ECM and got off a full report of the battle to Sixth Fleet around an hour ago, but we haven't heard back

from them or from anyone else. If they were in any position to send help our way, we would have. Or there could be some reason they haven't responded."

The man's eyes paled suddenly, looking past Padme at the main hologram. Padme whirled, watching as a portion of the yellow line around the planet that denoted the planetary shield faded out under the bombardment of one of the dreadnaught formations. The same one that she had been observing a moment ago. Looking around that area, she could see that only one of the defense stations was still in the fight, duking it out with two of the dreadnaughts while their three brethren fired down into the planetary shield.

And then when it faded... The dreadnaughts kept firing.

There was no sign of landing craft, no sign of any reserve of Vultures being launched down into the planet's atmosphere to hunt and destroy the power stations that powered the shield generator. Instead, they were simply firing downwards. Aiming at several of the bacta manufactory plants, the hives of the Vratix, and the areas where the civilians had been let down outside of the few cities on the planet. Anywhere on the surface, they could hit from that angle.

This weakened the planetary shield as two or more of the power stations funneling energy into it died, but that barely registered as Padme slumped into her chair, staring with wide, horrified eyes.

"By the Force... This isn't an invasion," Zule said, her breath coming out in a long, drawn-out sigh of pain even as the defenders lost their last light cruiser and the *Barrage's* shields started to fail while four of the gunboats they had arrived with died to the fire of a Lucrehulk they'd gotten too close to. "The CIS don't want to take Thyferra. They mean to just remove bacta from the galaxy, and everyone on Thyferra with it..."

Just as that horror started to sink into the minds of those in the command center, and the command center itself started to take fire from wandering Vultures, Zule felt it, a shift in the Force. The arrival of aid unlooked for. A grin suddenly blossomed on her face, completely at odds with the horror that she was seeing as she felt precisely who it was that had arrived. *I don't know how, but...* "They're here!"

Padme looked at her, drawn out of her own despair at the sound of the other woman's suddenly joyful voice. Then she whirled around as a friendly icon appeared in orbit over Thyferra, her eyes wide with sudden hope.

Scene break

Grievous smiled thinly, feeling honest joy as his ship once more twisted around, bringing an undamaged shield quadrant to bear against the enemy's fire. The battle had been tougher than he had anticipated. The senator's words had apparently done a good job of rousing the defenders, who had been quite well-led, far better than he had anticipated from Xu, given the intelligence data he taught had on him. How they had fallen back, how much they had used their satellites, the moon base's guns, all of those had come as a surprise.

But it was coming to a close now. While there were still fifteen or more defense installations in orbit, the planetary shield was down well past the atmosphere now, and the majority of the defending capital ships were gone. They only had the one dreadnaught and four heavy cruisers still operational,

and in the ship-to-ship engagement, the Thyferran dreadnaught was next to useless. All of them were being battered into pieces by Greivous' own two dreadnaughts and the Lucrehulks with them. *While my other dreadnaughts will deal with the defensive stations without any further losses. The losses we have sustained in starfighters and ships were more than I expected to pay but far less than I was prepared to. And with the other attacks I launched throughout Jaso Sector, the Sixth Fleet has no ships to send. Our agents elsewhere will have muddied the issue enough that I will have time to finish this excision.*

Grievous was about to order his ship to concentrate fire on the dreadnaught on the other side, deciding that he had enough of that ship when one of his sensor operators blinked, then stared at his controls before shouting, "General Grievous, ship incoming from hyperspace! It's appearing in orbit!"

Scene break

The *Tyrant's Bane* flashed into the system, all the Jedi aboard locked into a Force Gestalt as they pushed deep into not only the gravity well of the star system itself but deep into Thyferra's own gravity well, riding the waves of that gravity in a way that only Force users could do. This was no calculation; it was not just a thing of understanding how gravity wells could be used against one another or ridden. At this level, the ability to jump straight into orbit over a planet was using the Force to, in a way, convince the rest of the universe that your ship itself was not affected by gravity or perhaps using the Force to almost siphon off the gravity energy off and away.

It was not easy. In a star system as densely populated with gravity-causing anomalies like planets, asteroids, moons and so forth as the Polinth System, it was amazingly hard. Fourteen Jedi across the ship fell out of the Gestalt, overcome by the effort. Two others on the bridge collapsed as the ship appeared, finally releasing its hold on the Force, and the *Bane* screamed in agony, each and every piece of metal letting loose a metal shriek, the engines almost overloading. Yet it had worked. The *Tyrant's Bane* was here, alive and angry.

Ahsoka was not one of the ones who had collapsed. Despite being a padawan, she had been able to withstand the pressure and now made her way toward one of the main gunner stations as the Jedi who had been there fell to the side. Laying him out took her a second then she was taking his place as the ship continued to shudder.

Harry and Aayla were at the center of the Gestalt, with Harry basically lending his power to Aayla, who was a better navigator than he was. Between the two of them, they took in and directed the energies coming from the other Jedi. But now, as the vessel emerged out of hyperspace, Aayla gave over control of the Gestalt to Harry.

Aboard the practically broken *Adamantine*, Mace felt it. Even while locked in deadly starfighter combat Anakin felt it, and Zule also. They felt the hand Harry was reaching out to them through the Force, and responded.

The next second, Harry pulled his hand back and then thrust it forward, the Force singing in his veins in the veins of every other Jedi in the star system. And reality responded.

Suddenly, the ships of the enemy were flung backward away from Thyferra, hurled through space through no power of their own. The main fleet was pushed back so hard that they practically flew away from the planet. Two Lucrehulks smashed into the debris of their fellows as they went, shields

failing on the impacts for a few moments, while two Munificents found themselves crashing into one another even as they were hurled through space. Shields flickered and failed across the entire main body of the enemy fleet before whatever was pushing them finally faded away, allowing computers to begin to separate the fleet again so that they weren't in danger of smashing into one another as every sentient on that fleet wondered what the hell happened.

Harry spoke calmly into the silence that had descended on the bridge as the non-Force users stared at what the Jedi had wrought. "Helm, bring us about, close with one of those dreadnaught flotillas around the circumference of the planet."

"And I am very, very glad to be wrong about Thyferra not having a planetary shield. Without it, I think we would not have arrived here in time despite the Force's warning," Harry added mentally.

While Aayla fervently agreed with that, Harry continued to give out orders aloud. "Arrows and Falcons launch, sweep this space clear of enemy Vultures. Aayla, get in contact with whoever is in command of the local defenders. We will want our starfighters red into their IFF before we launch our own Vultures."

Gone were the days when the *Tyrant's Bane* hid its fangs. The panels that had hidden the secondary weapons all across the ship had been left behind in Serenno, and now, the four turrets, two on top and two on the bottom of the vessel, also popped out from hiding. Planetary-sized twin turbolaser batteries hummed as power was fed into them.

Within seconds, the *Tyrant's Bane* had shifted position around the planet, and it and the CIS dreadnaughts opened fire as one, the dreadnaughts completely ignoring the remaining defense station they had been battering into submission. Even the three dreadnaughts that had been firing at the plant's shield turned their attention toward the incoming *Bane*.

It would not save them.

Scene break

As the defenders gathered themselves and found new heart from this unlooked-for release from defeat, Grievous snarled to himself as his flag officers scurried to figure out what happened. To him, it was obvious. The Jedi had used hyperspace tricks like that before, and even Force tricks, too. Although pushing away an entire fleet from their target like that was new. Still, they hadn't hurled Grievous and his fleet entirely out of the system, just almost. And they weren't the only ones who could make use of hyperspace tricks. "Order the dreadnaught task forces to rendezvous with the fleet."

The fastest way to do that would be to simply turn and race for the edge of Thyferra's gravity well. Jumping from there to where his fleet had been pushed would damage their hyperdrives since Thyferra itself was deep in the gravity well of Polith. But they could do it.

"Dreadnaught Division Three and its accompanying ships are probably going to be massacred by the *Tyrant's Bane*. But we will finally learn what kind of secret weapon they have on it, at least. We have enough ships to defeat that ship, whatever the truth of its abilities might be."

When the *Tyrant's Bane* opened fire with its main weapons, Grievous snarled angrily, the sound an electronic rasp. Yet he was already thinking things through even as the dreadnaughts in reinforced

Division Three, having been given one of the ships from the First Division built around his flagship, opened fire on the enemy vessel. Within moments, he saw the readings appear. Saw how strong the shields on that ship were. And understood that some of the possible plans made up for encountering and countering the Tyrant's Bane would be needed.

"Send out orders to the Captor class vessels we have on picket duty. They are to pick up their Vultures and rendezvous with the main fleet. We will need them to replenish our Vultures." The defenders had taken a severe toll on his starfighter craft, particularly the enemy dreadnaught in the final stages of the battle before this. But that was what the Captor class vessels were for, to give him a final reserve to call upon.

Within minutes, he became somewhat stunned by how many Vulture fighters were coming out of the Tyrant's Bane. *How can they have so much interior space with how much of that space needs to go to the power stations for those generators and weapons?*

In the end, the how of it didn't matter. There was a way through every shield, and he knew it. "Taking that ship out will cost us dearly, but if that is the Tyrant's Bane, then Potter, the leader of the GDL is aboard. Killing him is even more important than removing the sole source of bacta in the galaxy," he said aloud, enjoying the words and the taste of them in his mouth.

Scene break

The five dreadnaughts and the two Lucrehulks under attack from the Tyrant's Bane did not go easily, although their smaller ships were swatted out of the sky almost contemptuously. The five ships spread out, firing at the Tyrant's Bane from every direction they could, trying to force the vessel to spread its shields thinly, only for that to fail. But they each had about as much anti-ship firepower as three Lucrehulks did, a bit more in the way of shielding and far more armor. Even when the shielding of one was pierced, it kept on firing until the ion cannons of the Bane finally knocked out enough of its systems to silence its guns. It took four full broadsides from the main turbolaser batteries to shatter the ship, and even then, it didn't explode, simply coming apart.

"Say what you will about the CIS, they make good ships sometimes," Harry murmured mentally. He wasn't about to speak anything like approval aloud. Not when he and the other Jedi aboard could feel the death, the fear of the Thyferrans.

Neither did these dreadnaughts run. Even as Aayla contacted the local defenders, and his tactical officer reported to Harry that the other force of dreadnaughts was retreating directly away from the planet, probably to make a micro-jump to someplace else, the four dreadnaughts they were already engaged with kept firing, kept hitting the Bane as hard as it could be hit.

It didn't help them. A planetary-scale shield generator could, when its circumference was shrunk down to that of a single ship, withstand practically anything thrown at it. Those shields didn't even flicker as proton torpedoes, concussion missiles, turbolaser batteries, and ion cannons hammered them. Within forty minutes of arriving, the Bane wiped out the whole task force.

A second later, the Bane twisted around, shifting to face towards where the enemy fleet was reforming and coming in again. As it did, the main hologram in front of Harry split, then split again,

showing the face of Padme and Mace to one side of the space directly around the Tyrant's Bane, which itself was quickly replaced by a display of the star system as a whole.

"Count Potter, you arrive with aid unlooked for but certainly welcome for all that. How did you know we were in distress?" Mace began without preamble, even as behind him, someone slapped a bandage on his wounded back. There were also burn marks across his face, and something seemed to have struck him in the nose, judging by the blood flowing down his face. Judging by the report on the Adamantine that Aayla was reading, it was evident the flag bridge aboard the ship had been practically destroyed by this point.

"We felt it through the Force. It took us quite a while to figure out what the Force was trying to tell us. After that, it took us even more time to figure out that the darkness was here in Thyferra."

"I am not about to mention our force constructs, even to Mace, not over any kind of comms," Harry said to Aayla mentally, who agreed, both with that sentiment and how tired they all were. Riding so deeply into the system's gravity well had been a trial for Jedi and ship alike, and pushing the fleet back as they did had been harder.

Both of them were still good to fight, though. While seven more of the other Jedi aboard the ship had fallen out of the Force Gestalt after the Force Push.

"I'm sorry we got here so late," Aayla said aloud, shaking her head. "But as Harry said, it took us quite a while to figure out what the Force was trying to tell us. And even longer to get here from where we were."

There hadn't been a direct line from where they had been staging prior to Operation Trident and Thyferra. They'd had to stop twice and realign themselves in order to get around various hyperspace traps set by both the CIS and Republic, not trusting the Republic ones to let a GDL ship through without questions.

"Do you think the Bane is up to this?" Padme asked, frowning worriedly. "This battle, you might not have noticed yet, but Thyferra has been bombarded from orbit. The planetary shield failed, and they kept on firing. I have no idea how many thousands of Vratix they've already killed, to say nothing of the losses the Thyferrans took in orbit. Even destroyed many of the civilian habitats!"

Every being aboard the bridge of the Bane grimaced or winced at that as their species allowed, while Ahsoka's eyes widened in horror, not having felt the death and fear before now as the more senior Jedi around her had. Civilian habitats like that were sprawling, massive things fit to dwarf even dreadnaughts, and almost all of their internal capacity was given over to civilian housing. They weren't built to any kind of single standard, but Thyferra was known to keep most of its civilian population, is human population anyway, living aboard such habitats and in only a few cities on the planet so that as much land could be turned over to bacta production as possible.

How many sentients could be living on one would be only known to the locals. But it had to be several million or more.

"If you can resume the evacuation down to the ground, do it. If any of the enemy capital ships or enough starfighters get past us, the civilians are more likely to be safe down there than in the habitats,"

Harry said. "We're going to head out after them, but that doesn't mean that none of their ships can get past us. Any ships that are able to fight can come with us, but I recommend most of you stay behind."

For just a moment, Mace stared back at Harry and Padme in the pickup. Ahead of him in the Force, a Shatterpoint still loomed. The one he had been feeling ever since arriving in this system had shifted, no longer possible in its original form, but it could become still larger in some fashion or smaller depending on the outcome of the battle now that Harry and Aayla were here.

Merged into that Shatterpoint was another vision, not just for the galaxy as a whole, but for him, Mace Windu, personally. *Much has been hidden from me about the future, like it has for all Jedi for more than a decade now, the Veil blinding all. But now... now I see clearly, yet find myself unable to effect the vision I see. Ironic.* "May the Force be with us all, my young friends. Let us finish this."

Mace agreed with that, and the Barrage and one other extremely battered heavy cruisers formed up behind the Bane, using its bulk and shielding. All of them had their shielding at full power again, but only the dreadnaught could really be called ready for battle. The last two heavy cruisers couldn't get their shields back up.

Still, they were game, and this time, the enemy Vulture swarm was completely demolished by the Vultures from the Bane. Thanks to the various Force-enlarged areas within, their shields were stronger, and they had far more in the way of concussion missiles. With the remaining Tridents, Falcons, and Aethersprites in support, the Allied Vultures tore through the enemy starfighter formation, leading the way.

After the previous phases of the battle, the enemy was down to twenty-two Munificent class ships, fifteen Lucrehulks and seven dreadnaughts. Several of their vessels had been ordered to retreat at various stages throughout the battle, but that still left a very powerful force left.

Soon the Bane also fired at the enemy formation, targeting two Munificents with its main guns to start out with. Both exploded under a single salvos, before the battleship moved onto one of the enemy's dreadnaughts.

However, the enemy had some tricks of their own. Moreover, the Confederacy cared not a whit for their troops. Or even their capital ships. Grievous was among the worst of the Confederacy admirals when it came to caring about the lives of his men in pursuit of his goals. That was why, as the Confederacy fleet entered engagement range, four Lucrehulks cut a ramming course for the Tyrant's Bane, popping out escape pods at the same time, ironically trusting in the soft-heartedness of their enemy to not gun them down.

Harry felt the intent of this attack the moment they started to move and instantly redirected the fire from the main guns. This allowed the enemy dreadnaughts they had been hammering to recover, but they couldn't help that. "All ships, four Lucrehulks coming in to ram the Bane. Any starfighters who can range on them are to do so. Master Windu, if I could ask you and your ships to fire on them as well?"

One of the enemy's Lucrehulks lost shielding, it's shields having already been badly battered throughout the battle, and again from the massive Force Push. Soon after, its engines exploded, destroying the ship entirely. The next Lucrehulk took several battering blows from the planet-sized twin turbolaser batteries and seemed to be redirecting all of its energy into its shields as it slowed.

This worked for a time, but Harry switched the main guns to another Lucrehulk that was still closing while the Barrage interposed its own bulk in between a fourth Lucrehulk and the Bane. It took a tremendous amount of fire from the other vessel but allowed the Bane to destroy two more of the Lucrehulks attempting to ram it.

But many smaller vessels were also charging forward, a dozen Munificent class, practically all of the Diamond class frigates brought in with the Captors. The Captors themselves were nowhere near, having been sent to the outer edge of the system where the enemy fleet had jumped into the system.

The Barrage came under tremendous fire at the same time, with four of the enemy dreadnaughts turning their fire on it. And while its shields were up to the task of defending itself for a while, it lacked any real ability to hit back at the current range the titans were hammering it from.

A few of the enemy ships got through to crash shield-on-shield against the Bane, at which point all of the ones that still retained concussion missiles or proton torpedoes began to launch them as fast as furious as possible at the same moment that their shields clashed against the Bane's.

Shields were not designed to be like lightsabers: the shield bubble couldn't really survive continuous contact with another shield for very long before the thicker bubble popped the weaker one. The shields on those ships all exploded, but in so doing, they greatly weakened the Bane's shields. Still more rammed into the vessel from other directions, even as the first few to successfully ram died under the Bane's fire.

"I'm thinking that the enemy knows precisely how important the ship and whoever is on it is, Harry," Aayla said mentally, her eyes widening as still more of the enemy ships crashed into the Tyrant's Bane's shields.

Meanwhile, the enemy dreadnaughts and Lucrehulks kept on firing, uncaring a friend or foe.

"I don't think we can take much more of this Count Potter. The shields are being overloaded!" One of the Verpine bridge crew shouted. "We'll have to take them offline, or else..."

Or else shield generators would explode from the feedback. Harry knew that and, though he was reluctant to do so, nodded. The ship was about to take a hell of a pounding, but the enemy fleet had been taking at hammering in turn. More than a dozen Munificent class ships had been shattered against The Bane's shields, leaving only five left in fighting condition. Eight of the Lucrehulks in the enemy fleet had also been destroyed, although they still had twelve more. B

"ut if they kill you, Harry, they'll count even the loss of this entire fleet a victory!" Aayla harshly reminded Harry mentally.

Harry grimaced at that but understood that she was right. Yet he still would not order the Tyrant's Bane to try to flee to hyperspace. Now, only were the hyperspace engines just not up to that task given the heroic efforts they'd put forth to get the first place, but it wasn't in Harry to just leave behind loved ones and civilians alike. *Importance to the cause is not the same as important to me, I guess.*

Even as he felt Aayla's rueful agreement, the shield came down, and the ship began to rock with heavy hits. But the interior space of the Tyrant's Bane wasn't the only area that had felt the touch of

runes. The armor had also been heavily reinforced as well, with runic scripts written into the interior side of each and every piece of armor that covers the vessel's exterior. That armor wasn't nearly as good as a shield would've been, but it allowed the *Tyrant's Banes* pain to keep in the fight, and bringing down the shields on their own would allow them to bring them back up when they had a chance.

"Gunners, keep any of the enemy ships away from the shield nacelles. Helm, start maneuvering. Bring us in closer. If the CIS wants a knife fight, we'll give it to them. Main batteries target the dreadnaughts. One of them has to be the enemy flagship."

Aayla frowned, reaching through the Force, trying to determine the psychological and sociological center of the enemy fleet. This was a difficult task in the midst of battle, with all the orders being shouted around and all the effort being made to hide that very thing since C'baoth knew that Jedi were fond of removing the head of the beast, so to speak. Worse, Aayla had already pushed herself hard. The Force Gestalt had collapsed before their shield had, and even with Harry's help, she was not making any headway.

The main batteries targeted one dreadnaught in particular, and the secondary weapons all targeted targets of opportunity. A second later, Harry grimaced as the *Barrage* suddenly exploded. One moment, it was still there, its shields still up, then one aspect of those shields had flickered, and the next, the entire dreadnaught had simply exploded, sending bits of debris everywhere. Captain Jace and his brave crew were gone.

The enemy dreadnaughts split apart, pushing forward and around the *Tyrant's Bane*, bracketing it in their fire while the rest of the enemy fleet did the same. One of them reeled away, its shields gone, systems flickering from continued blasts as the ion cannons of the *Bane* lit it up now that its shields were gone. Four more furious blows from the main cannons finished it, taking vengeance for the *Barrage* as they hammered into the enemy ship's engines, causing them to explode violently, taking more than half of the vessel with them. But the others continued to pour fire into the *Bane*, and slowly, secondary systems were going offline, the turrets exploding under the withering hail of fire as armor was dented and blown apart.

The last two heavy cruisers still in the fight, the *Adamantine* and the *Vociferous*, also took a tremendous pummeling as they tried their best to shield their large would-be savior. They hadn't been targeted up to this point, but their shields were no match for the sheer weight of fire coming at them.

Soon, both ships lost their shielding, and even as they began hasty corkscrew maneuvers, moving away from the Bane to try and save themselves, their hulls began to take a pummeling on top of what they'd already received. A second later, just as a homebuilt astromech droid beeped to indicate an incoming message, both ships practically exploded as one. The *Vociferous* exploded in a series of small detonations while the *Adamantine's* engines blew out all at once, turning the whole vessel into expanding debris.

Four escape pods had gotten away from the local cruiser. Only one had gotten away from the *Adamantine* before the ship exploded. Master Windu had not been on it.

Aayla, Harry, Zule and the Jedi aboard the Bane felt it. The passing of one of their own, the Veil seeming to boil with hateful joy for a moment. A Light had just been extinguished, and the universe was a darker place for it.

Flying his starfighter, Anakin gasped as the apprentice bond he'd made with his Master suddenly disappeared, and a feeling of despair filled him. He didn't even have to look at the rest of the battle to know his Master was no more.

Twisting around violently, Anakin growled low, a fury rising within him, overwhelming his despair and grief despite his best efforts to hold it in, ignoring Artoo's warbles for now. "Cut the kriffing chatter, Artoo! I need to concentrate!"

Anger at his Master's death, at the senselessness of this assault, fueled him, and he reached for the Force, grabbing at it with everything he had. This time, the Force yielded up its secrets. What ECM and Aayla's force power hadn't been able to achieve, Anakin, in his rage and fury, did. The Veil of the Dark Side helped him slightly instead of impeding him, not that he realized it then or after and a second later, he felt where the mind behind this battle was.

He was banking towards that enemy ship, two Vultures disintegrating in his wake, on a third smashed out of his way as he went. All around, the starfighters were winning their aspect of this battle, and for once, the weight of starfighters was well on the defender's side. Vultures homed in on Munificent's, shattering, shielding and breaking the backs of those powerful but flawed vessels. Elsewhere, Vultures in their masses homed in on the Lucrehulks or dreadnaughts, dying under the withering hail of the enemy fire in their dozens but still coming on, hammering shield with concussion missile after concussion missile.

With the Confederacy ships concentrating so much of their fire on the Bane, the starfighters were able to do a lot of damage, but they wouldn't be able to do enough on their own to turn the tide, not even now that another one of the Confederacy dreadnaughts was reeling out of formation, shifting back and down to put several Lucrehulks between it and the deadly fire of the Bane's main guns. One of those ships almost immediately exploded, its shields having barely been at twenty-five percent, unable to withstand a single Barrage from four twin-linked planetary-sized turbolaser batteries. But the other survived just long enough for the wounded dreadnaught to move out of the formation and away out of range of the Bane's guns, where it waited, doing what repairs it could as its shields slowly regenerated.

But that was not the ship that was Anakin's target. One of the other enemy ships, one of the ones that had slipped directly behind the Bane and was trying to hammer its engines, was. He began an attack run on it from above. He only had two concussion missiles to spare, which wouldn't be enough to make its shields even blink, but he knew that this ship was his target. This ship, this ship was the soul of the enemy formation, the mind that had killed his Master, and Anakin would never let it go.

Yet even through his anger, Anakin knew he was not alone. Laser cannons began to work on the enemy's starships shields with little to no effect, but that wasn't the point. "Here!" He barked through his communication system. "This ship. This ship is the one with the enemy admiral on it!"

Scene break

The Bane was being hammered. A lot of its secondary weapon systems were offline, and even as Aayla picked up Anakin's signal, one of the turrets along their belly exploded, taking with it a fourth of their true offensive firepower.

She almost turned to look towards Harry, but he had heard Anakin's words through her ears. "All remaining turrets," Harry barked, pulling up the data of what ship Anakin was attacking and designating it on the main screen. "Fire on that ship. Don't stop until it's dead or fled!"

Something ruptured on the top of the ship, and one of the chief weapons officers hissed in annoyance. "There goes our artificial gravity well projector. Well, at least we weren't using it anyway."

That caused some grim snorts of amusement or the Verpine equivalent, as still more of their secondary systems were knocked out of action. But the main guns had been given their orders, and the Vulture fighters were also swarming the targeted ship. One barrage, then two, then three cannonades slammed into the enemy dreadnaught, even as it wildly twisted around and tried to bring other shield squadrons to bear towards the *Bane*.

The *Bane* twisted around, bringing its wounded aft portion towards some of the enemy ships but also pushing and boosting forward towards the enemy flagship as their turrets spoke again, and the enemy flagship's shields went down across more than half of its length.

"Do we still have shields?" Harry asked.

The Verpine tech in charge of the repair teams looked over at his screen, then nodded, and before Harry could even ask, brought the shields up once more. They were at barely seventy-five percent, but three-fourths of a planetary shield's output was still a lot.

Scene break

"No! How did they figure it out!? How did they know which ship I was on!" Grievous snarled, even as his flagship captain ordered a full boost maneuver, pulling up and away from the *Tyrant's Bane*. "We were routing every single command through five other ships at all times. How!?"

Worse, the enemy ship's shields just popped back up into existence. And now it was following his flagship, hammering out against enemy ships as it came but still trying to range on Grievous' own flagship with its main guns.

And the *Malicious* was no faster than the enemy ship. Hastily, other ships interposed themselves, blocking incoming fire from the hell-ship that the GDL had somehow made, but Grievous knew that he would not escape. Even if he ordered all the remaining ships to try to ram the enemy Lucrehulk to try to bring its shields down again, that would only work for a short amount of time while the enemy ship fired at his own every chance it could.

But he noticed something that gave him hope that if he could not get away cleanly, then at least he could provide the hell-ship a far larger target to go after. All four of his remaining dreadnaughts and six of his remaining large hoax were between the hell-ship and Thyferra. Which had already lost much of its defenses, all save his planetary shield generator, which was still not pushing up past the outer edge of the atmosphere.

Quickly, he designated those ships and gave them new orders. Not to their living crews but to the droids aboard them. Droids, which would obey him over their own officers. Moments later, their fire slackened, and they turned, heading towards Thyferra.

The remaining six Lucrehulks and the sole remaining Munificent class continued to put themselves in the way of the enemy hell-ship's fire. Two of the Lucrehulks moved in close to his ship, shielding them with their bulk and anti-air fire from the irritating starfighters that were still attacking him, taking a tremendous toll on the enemy Vultures, although Grievous noticed that even they seemed to be able to take more of a pounding than they should.

How that was possible, he didn't know, but he vowed that he would have someone in the CIS intelligence service (CISIS) killed for their inability to discover that secret. *Yet if I can escape, the knowledge we have gained will be immensely worth it. And half of Thyferra is already burning. We might not have wiped the locals out, but we have done enough.*

A second later, Grievous took some grim satisfaction in watching his trick work. The Bane twisted around, needing to bleed off a lot of its forward momentum to head back toward the planet and the enemy ships closing with it. Those ships might be doomed, but together, they might be able to knock down the planetary shield enough to do still more damage to the populace. *That will have to do, curse them to the deepest depths. How did they discover what ship I was on! If not for that, I would've had a total victory here and a bigger one than even destroying the source of bacta entirely.*

"And will someone kill that last Aethersprite!" He growled aloud, staring at the single Aethersprite that was still attacking them along with several wings of Vultures. For some reason, the sight of that one ship, different from its fellows yet still attacking so tenaciously, niggled his Kaleesh warrior's senses, infuriating him beyond all reason.

Scene break

Anakin had barely a few seconds to realize that a lot of the enemy fire was suddenly concentrated around him before the Force shrieked warnings in his head. He pulled out from his last attempt to hammer the enemy's shields enough to get through them, twisting up and away as several Vulture fighters interposed themselves, obeying core programming that the Verpine technicians had given them to always place themselves in danger for manned starfighters.

"Dammit! I will get you, whoever you are! The galaxy is not large enough to hide you from me! I will have my revenge!" Anakin bellowed as tears threatened to fall from his eyes.

Scene break

By the time the Bane realized what the enemy Admiral had ordered, it was almost too late. The enemy fleet once more moving toward Thyferra was almost out of their range by the time they had turned around and moved after them. Then it became a stern chase, with one of the Lucrehulks dying quickly, followed minutes later by fire hammering into another, which turned at bay, twisting around to bring new shielding to bear every few seconds.

The Bane didn't bother finishing it off, pushing past it, shooting it as it went, but moving to close with the rest of the enemy fleet even as that fleet moved to once more intercept Thyferra. Three more Lucrehulks fell out of formation, being battered into wreckage. The Bane continued on, desperately trying to claw its way back toward Thyferra before the enemy fleet could get there. But the Bane did not succeed.

The four enemy dreadnaughts remaining within the enemy fleet reached orbit over Thyferra and began to fire down into the planetary shield with their broadside while prow and aft weapons targeted a few of the nearby civilian habitats or defense stations. Everyone aboard the Bane's bridge and indeed in many of the other compartments within its vast bulk watched in horror as the planetary shield was hammered down, beginning to blink out of existence in places.

"Padme told us that a few of the power stations must have been hit when the CIS launched their planetary bombardment before," Harry whispered while the guns of the Bane spoke again, destroying one of the last Lucrehulks between them and the four enemy dreadnaughts. The other two Lucrehulks in their way suddenly decided that they'd had enough of this, breaking out and away from the Bane upwards, leaving before dreadnaughts to their fate.

Harry almost expected them to follow now that the enemy flagship was close to the normal hyperdrive limit, but they didn't. Instead, while their starboard batteries continued to pound into the planetary shield and then down to the surface, their portside batteries opened fire on the Bane. But whereas the shield of the planet had taken a pummeling, the Tyrant's Bane's shields simply shrugged off their fire, returning fire. Having lost a second main turret in the same round of attacks that destroyed the gravity well projector, only two other main turrets were still in one piece. Thus the Bane took quite a bit of time to pound the enemy dreadnaughts into pieces, but pound them they did. By the time they had, the planetary shields had been holed in significant places below the four dreadnaughts, and the surface beneath those holes in the shield had been ravaged.

Forest, field, farm, city. It didn't matter. Whoever had set these dreadnaughts on this task had simply told them to kill as much of Thyferra itself as they could, and they did, right up until they exploded under the fire from the Bane.

For one long silent moment, the bridge crew stared at the debris of their enemy, shocked and horrified by what had happened, as Aayla murmured mentally to Harry an idiom that they had both fought numerous times before. *"What a sentient creature might balk at, a droid programmed to obey will not. I would wager anything that those ships were almost entirely crewed by droids. The same goes for the rest of the CIS fleet. If we were not here. If we had not arrived in time..."*

He nodded slowly, the pair of them spending an interminable amount of time within their own head space as the two of them took strength from one another. Then Harry stood up, moving over to his padawan, drawing her into a slight hug against his stomach, pulling her away from her own readouts, away from staring at the main screen. Ahsoka hugged him tightly around the waist, not even trying to control herself as the horror of what they had seen today overrode all of her Jedi self-control, and she began to sob.

He looked over at Aayla, speaking aloud for the benefit of the crew, ignoring the fact that nearly a hundred friendlies had just appeared out of hyperspace. *Too little, too late to take part in the battle. But hopefully, they would help with the rebuilding to come.* "Thank you, one and all. I know this was the toughest fight we've faced yet, but the Tyrant's Bane came through it. Now comes the even harder part. Let's make certain that as many civilians and Republic Navy personnel get through this as well. Get in touch with Padme, Aayla, and whoever we can find down on the planet to tell us where they need the most help. The battle is over. Now we have to pick up the pieces."

End Chapter

In war, the objective is to destroy the enemy's ability to make war. That means wiping out civilian populations. In that, the CIS might have a better grasp of war than the Republic or GDL can allow themselves to grasp. They will certainly lose the propaganda war, but well... droids. And no internal voices of dissent any longer. And mind control a la Dominus. So the battles here will be striking worlds far, far harder far earlier.

In other news, I think I use the word 'station' far too often in this chapter.

Now, onto Mace's death. I am always astonished that in the original, not a lot of Jedi were seen dying in space battles. It always struck me as odd, since I have always felt that was where most of them would be the most vulnerable, outside of pilots like Anakin, Plo Koon and so forth. So amidst the death and carnage of the battle in Thyferra, I decided to add a personal element.

So there we go guys. Hope you enjoyed it. And go commercials!