

I leaned back, letting Raven enjoy the shifting of energies that began rushing over her hull as she slipped into hyperspace. A loud sigh slipped from me, relieved to finally be away from Coruscant; or more accurately to be free from interactions with the Banite Sith that now ruled the Republic as its Co-Chancellors.

A series of whistles and pops drew my attention, and I turned to see R2 and HK standing behind me.
“Agreement: The astromech is correct, Master. You seem unnaturally pleased to be departing the system.
Query: Was the attention of the females not to your liking?”

I chuckled and rolled my eyes. “No, HK. There was nothing wrong with Padmé or Miraj. I’m just glad to finally be able to slip away from being drawn into politics. Again.”

HK’s photoreceptors mimicked Human reaction by blinking. “Analysis: You continue to proclaim to dislike politics, Master, yet on multiple occasions you have shown an ability to convince others to do as you wish. The clear examples of this are with the group designated the Lokella and the gathering of forces assembled for the liberation of Naboo. In the words of the Creator, you have the knack for getting things done and gathering others to help you.”

“Both of those were based on combat situations, HK. I much prefer leading others into battle than standing inside a gilded suite and speaking with others who lack the resolve to back up their words. At least on the battlefield, it’s clear who you are fighting and what you need to do.”

“Affirmative: That is indeed true, Master. The Creator also spoke of preferring the battlefield to deal with the internal matters of the Jedi and Republic. At least when he chose to return to their Order for the whining meatbag.” I bit the inside of my lips, knowing he was speaking of Bastila and, as amusing as it was, not wanting to have him impersonate her again. “Request: Might I suggest we find some pitiful group of meatbags? Ones that would improve the galaxy by their removal. It may well alleviate some of your stress.”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “As tempting as the offer is, I’ll pass. We need to collect Anakin.” I reached into my robes and pulled out a small datacard. “I need to give him this.” Turning the datacard over in my fingers, I continued. “It’s the schematics for the 3P0 series of protocol droids.”

Technically, the information on that datacard was classified and trademarked information, belonging to Cybot Galactica. However, as the series had been in existence for over a hundred years, and were close to ubiquitous throughout the Republic – or at least the developed parts of it – they weren’t as secure as CG might wish. Add in that, if you went down a few levels into Coruscant’s under-levels everything and anything was for sale, acquiring the schematics wasn’t that difficult. Nor expensive.

What I saw on those levels, even when only a few dozen below the glittering surface of the Republic Capital, were more signs that the Jewel of the Republic was nothing more than a sham. On the surface, it was everything it claimed to be, but the moment one looked at it with anything approaching an inquisitive glance, the façade faded away, revealing the rotten, corrupted core that was the heart of galactic governance.

I had used that corruption to my advantage here, but it had been hard to not scourge many of those I encountered from existence. Or at least more than I already had. It wasn't my fault that several groups, seeing a Mandalorian in beskar, thought they could kill me and take my armour. Nor was it my fault that, after their pathetic attempt at an ambush had failed, even if by some miracle of the Force, Republic security investigated the matter, there was nothing left of that scum to identify them.

At the mention of a protocol droid, R2 whined amusingly loudly and the smile I wore grew wider. Even though C-3P0 would never exist in this timeline – not with the project I had in mind for Anakin – it seemed R2's issues with that droid, or at least its series, existed with my R2 as well.

"Translation: The astromech is concerned you feel we are unable to handle anything you might need a droid for. A sentiment I completely agree with, Master."

"If I intended for Anakin to build a basic protocol droid, then I'd have found something like these," I waved the datacard in the air, "years ago. No, what I want him to do, given his fondness for technology, which you can both attest to, is create something superior. And, with what I hope he will create, I think you will both be interested in offering suggestions for what will, from the outside, look like a simple and pathetic protocol droid."

HK's photoreceptors flickered again, and I swore I could hear the circuits in his brain sparking as he processed my words and deduced my intentions. "Speculation: This new droid would be designed for far more than just service, would it not, Master? Perhaps intended for covert insertions and eliminations."

I clicked my tongue as I used my free hand to create a finger-gun and shot the ancient assassin droid. "Got it in one. Which is why, among other things, I want Anakin to alter the kill switch all 3P0 series droids have. Oh, there would still be a physical one on its frame, but it wouldn't shut down the droid. The true button would be located internally where only Anakin, I, or if you managed to damage the external shell, either of you could target it."

Leaning forward, I continued before HK could complain about the possibility of him being replaced. "I know you were designed for assassinations, and are scarily good at it. However, in this era, your frame is rather unusual. Add in that the cover art for the second book of the *Knights of the Old Republic* series will have you on it, and it will be hard for you to quietly slip into place that I might need you to go for those gentle removals of undesirables."

"I don't expect I will have much need of such removals, but I'm not naive enough to believe there will never be the chance that I won't prefer that to other methods. Converting a 3P0 model into something that was

something more than capable of carrying out such actions without being detected nor traced back to me, is a smart way to prepare for those moments. With your programming and R2's growing skills with circumventing systems, I believe both of you would be extremely interested in helping my son with this project."

When I stopped, R2 let out a long, deep whistle. My smile widened at hearing that and then seeing HK, in an organic gesture, placing a hand on his chin: or at least what would be considered his chin. "Conjecture: While any such droid would be massively inferior to myself, there is wisdom in your words, Master. Having support," R2 beeped angrily, "Correction: Further support on such missions could, conceivably, increase the odds of any mission being completed with all objectives achieved. Addendum: There are many missions on which the Creator and previous Masters sent me where, while I completed the assignment, it would have been far more efficient to have capable support." His hand came down from his chin. "Retraction: Based on your statements, Master, I rescind my concerns about adding another droid to our collective."

R2 beeped in agreement. "I'm glad you approve," I said, slipping the datacard back into my robes. "However, which of your suggestions are applied to the project is entirely up to Anakin," I continued as I spun back around, returning my focus to Raven's displays. "I'm sure that, once he gets over his excitement of my challenge, he would be more than receptive to your suggestions for this potential droid he might be creating."

"Musing: Yes, Master. I already have seventy-nine potential improvements that could be made to the external design to improve the droid in a variety of ways. Contemplative: Does this interest in the creation of a covert insertion droid you wish for the Young Builder to create pertain to something that occurred on the Republic capital, Master?"

"Not directly," I replied with a shake of my head. "I'm just simply thinking ahead to possible instances where it might be useful to have such an agent in our ranks. As you well know, I prefer to meet my opponents on the battlefield, but I'm nowhere near stupid enough to believe that ideal is shared by the majority of those who would seek to challenge me. There will be cases where, as you discovered with Revan and others, the removal of a target is easier to achieve without the need for large-scale combat."

Against anyone on my level or beyond, I doubted even a group of droids as skilled as HK would have much luck. Certainly not against a well-trained Jedi Master or Sith Lord. However, even on Coruscant, such sentients composed an insignificant percentage of the population. More often than not, my targets would be non-Force users. Obvious targets currently would be those like Sate Pestage who were so close to Chancellors Palpatine and Damask that they had to know the truth of who those two truly were.

I knew that someone as loyal as Sate wouldn't be an easy target, but I knew HK could take him out and make it appear an accident. Yet HK was known to the Sith, so his being anywhere near Sate's location if the attaché died might draw questions I'd prefer to avoid. That was one place where a third droid, one unknown to anyone outside my closest circle of friends and family, could operate with ease.

There would be other times, such as long-term undercover operations, or scouting in places I might not be able to enter, where a seemingly innocent-looking protocol droid would be useful. One such potential place was within the Jedi Temple. A droid wouldn't be able to enter the Vaults, but they would be able to access

computers that I might otherwise not be able to. Well, if I didn't want anyone linking me to a theoretical data breach at any rate.

The same logic could be applied to others, such as high-ranking figures in organisations, mega-corporations and the like that would form the CIS. Sliding a droid loyal to me into their ranks had the potential to be extremely useful. Which was perhaps why, if Anakin completed the project I had for him to an acceptable level, I might have more than a single droid made. Not that anyone else bar me would know of that, at least for some time.

"Observation: This project is an unexpected decision by you, Master. However, it is one I greatly approve of. Not only does the ability to insert an agent into enemy forces, either for deep reconnaissance or target acquisition or removal, but for helping to improve the skills of the Young Builder. Query: If this was not brought on by events on Coruscant, might I ask why it has come to your mind now?"

"Just acting on several expressions I heard in my youth. The most apt are 'it is better to have and not need than need and not have,' 'if one seeks peace, they must prepare for war', and 'sometimes you need a turbolaser, sometimes a surgeon's blade'. While we aren't at war now, I can sense one coming. The storms I sense growing in the Republic might not lead to all-out war, but there will be places where I will have to intervene. As I know, even with both of you, Anakin, Simvyl, Fenrir and Raven at my side, I cannot be everywhere at once."

"Assessment: Again, there is logic in your words, Master. It continues to please me to see your awareness of the dangers that exist in the galaxy."

"I'm glad you approve."

"Addendum: While the expressions expected meatbag inefficiency, they are accurate. I must, however, admit to being unfamiliar with the last one."

I chuckled. "It was one my grandfather used to say. At the time, I didn't understand it, but as I've matured I've seen the value in those words."

What I was avoiding here was that those words, in a more primitive form, had come from my grandfather in my former life. I'd heard similar examples of it from others throughout both lives and found giving it some personal spin worked well. Oh, I was sure I wasn't the first sentient in the galaxy to express that thought, not even in those words, but I had yet to hear it from another.

"Query: I am curious why a former Chancellor of the Old Republic would use such a phrase."

“As am I, HK. Sadly, I’ll never be able to ask him when and where he learnt it. I do hope that, if Anakin is up to the task, we might see the expressions in action in a few years.”

“Assessment: I believe we will, Master. The Young Builder is extremely gifted with improving the superior form of droids. I have no doubt he will be capable of emulating my Creator as you hope.” There was a pause before he continued. “Contemplative: With permission, I would like time to consider further concealed alterations that could be added to this droid.”

“Go ahead, and take R2 with you. He might not have your understanding of what could be of use, but he might have ideas you fail to consider. Or at least considered less important than others.” There was a series of beeps from R2 and a second later I heard the cockpit’s door slide open and then close.

Knowing I was now alone, I leaned back in my chair. Raven could handle flying herself along the current hyperspace lane. As my eyes began to close, my mind drifted back to events of Coruscant, starting with the premiere of *Fellowship of the Ring*.

Just as with the original sources, the novel had been changed for movie format. From what I’d read of some early reviews, there had been some complaints regarding that, but overall, the reviews were overwhelmingly positive. Padmé and Miraj had said as much at the main afterparty for the premiere, with both saying the casting for Aragon was good, though I suspected both ladies felt I would’ve been a more suitable lead.

The actor, along with the rest of the cast, were well received, but in my mind, they weren’t on-par with the cast when I’d seen the movie in my former life. That was likely a bias on my part, along with a feeling that I was disrespecting the work of Tolkien by re-publishing his work in this galaxy, but it was an opinion that no one would ever hear of.

After the premiere, I’d run into my publicist, Shokvo, in the corridors of the theatre. From what he was saying, it sounded like the movie was going to have a better opening week on Coruscant than first thought. Much of that came from the fact the Co-Chancellors had both attended it, turning the movie into something of a requirement for anyone in the corridors of power to observe. Using that, the early screenings across the Core were selling out rapidly. So much so that the latest projections had me earning at least three hundred million credits by the end of the week.

If the movie had the legs of other movies that had debuted to such success, then within a month I could be looking at north of a billion credits from my cut of the production. According to Shokvo that was only the lower end of the current projections, and didn’t consider any merchandise that would be sold because of the movie. Even if that was where it stayed and carried through with the other two productions, then I was looking at having at least five billion credits to my name simply from the holomovies within three years. When added to my current, and still growing, take which was a little north of one-point-three billion credits from my novels, and the expected interest in turning the *Knights of the Old Republic* series into holonovels, then I could see my net worth top ten billion credits long before the Clone Wars began.

That number, or any of them really, sounded impressive if compared to my former life. However, in this life, in this galaxy, it was but a drop in the ocean. Damask Holdings, for example, had a profit margin of nearly a hundred billion credits last year, held assets worth over fifty times that, and had a market capitalization of nearly a quadrillion credits. And Damask Holdings was, while incredibly powerful, not even in the top one hundred companies in the galaxy.

Truthfully, seeing how much mega-corporations such as the Trade Federation and Techno Union were worth was frankly, terrifying. They could offer bounties for someone's head that would easily be worth more than the entire GDP of many mid-sized Republic worlds.

Yet even though it barely scratched the surface of the financial might of my likely opponents in the coming wars, several billion credits had some use. **Cash in Hand** had long since been completed, but beyond gathering the credits I had little use for that many currently. Save for preparing for what was to come. I had around three hundred million in my Inventory, with the rest spread out between Clan Shan accounts with supposedly isolated Mando'ade banking institutions, several dummy accounts, and the primary account for payment for my work.

While I was going to be busy with training alongside Anakin for a while yet, I planned to hire a suitable Mando'ade accountant, if such a thing existed, to begin investing in companies that would be useful for the coming decades. Mandalmotors and Incom were two such companies, as while they were major ship producers they weren't as massive as KDY, CDC, and SST, but that was a benefit. Investing what I had would grant me more influence in the companies than those larger ones, and using smaller companies, while limiting the ability to create technology and warships – once those were needed – they were more likely to be ignored by the major players in the lead up to the coming war.

Returning my thoughts to the planet I'd just left; I wondered what the next moves of the Co-Chancellors would be. The reveal of Master C'baoth's plan to send a mission into the Unknown Regions was an interesting one. If it had happened in the other timeline, then Sidious would've worked to ensure the mission failed. He couldn't have a colony protected by Jedi existing after he executed Order 66. More than likely, the mission had suffered some form of failure, costing the lives of everyone onboard it.

In this timeline, however, with the threat of the Vong hanging overhead, I wondered if that would still be this project's – Outbound Flight was the working name for the proposal – fate. I knew the Vong didn't come from the Unknown Regions, yet for all I could be certain of that, and make that clear to the Co-Chancellors, they couldn't simply take my word on the matter. That was why the plan for Outbound Flight would, if they took on half of the suggestions I'd given them during our discussions in the days leading up to the premiere, be far more likely to succeed. Or at least succeed in part.

The Jedi on the mission would still, in the eyes of the Banite Sith, have to die. That was a certainty. The trick was ensuring it happened slowly, to not draw the attention of the High Council enough that they requested sending more Jedi to support the project. I didn't know how the Banite Sith were going to manage that, but I knew they would.

I could also admit to being curious as to what existed in the Unknown Regions. Half of the stories and rumours I'd heard and read about the large expanse of unexplored space were terrifying, and that was being kind. I doubted there was anything out there that, if it arrived in the known galaxy during the Clone Wars or after, could challenge the military might on display, but I'd rather nothing from that region ever emerged into the Republic's borders. Working to take down the Banite Sith and train the Chosen One was hard enough to do without races that harvested the souls of others, or living, sentient, slime. Those things could fuck off back to whatever hell-inspired holes they'd crawled out of.

Now, while I'd managed to avoid too much interaction with the Co-Chancellors at the afterparty, others had approached me to speak. Thanks to **Observe** and the Force, I knew most of them were only doing so to see if I might offer some route into the confidence of one or both Chancellors. Those beings I politely dismissed, though some didn't take the gentle hints and as this was a public location where I had to behave, I couldn't persuade them to leave in the manner I might've liked. In those cases, I was saved by my constant companions for the party; Padmé Amidala and Miraj Scintel.

As I'd feared, once the premiere was over, Miraj had sought me out hurriedly, ensuring she and her parents attended the same afterparty as I, Padmé, and the Co-Chancellors. Walking from the theatre with two royals at my sides had drawn a lot of attention from the media waiting outside, though thankfully no call had come from the Temple regarding the situation.

At the afterparty, the two royals had spent the entire time I was there either at my side or close enough to it that they could reinsert themselves into any conversation I was involved in. While that was useful for extracting me from people who wouldn't take the gentle hint that I didn't wish to continue speaking with them, at others it was a hassle.

The pair hadn't instantly hit it off, both seemingly seeing the other as a challenge to having my attention. As the evening had worn on, Padmé had brought up that I had given her a lightfoil and taught her the basics of using it. Miraj, seeking a chance to prove she was better in some way than Padmé, had insisted they spar before they departed Coruscant. I had tried to dissuade them from the spar, making clear that I didn't think it was a wise choice to do so, however, Padmé had agreed.

That spar should be happening about now and about the only upside to it happening, beyond me making sure I wasn't present for it and thus wasn't forced to pick sides, was that Chancellor Palpatine and King Medas had made clear to both ladies that they would only be sparring and not outright duelling. I did note that while Medas had made that clear to his daughter, he approved of the duel, which given the Zygerrian mentality that the strong should rule the weak wasn't a shock. All I could hope was that however the spar went – and I expected Miraj to win as she was older, stronger, better trained, and Zygerrians were physically superior in many useful ways for a spar – I hoped it didn't evolve into something more than a polite rivalry.

I wouldn't deny that there was a part of me that was amused and, if I was being entirely honest with myself, pleased to see females fighting for my attention. However, I didn't want them to start despising each other as both, if I played my cards right, had roles to play in the way I was trying to shape the future to my advantage. Plus, if things went badly, it might result in diplomatic fallout between their planets, and by extension Chancellor Palpatine. While I might enjoy the annoyance that issue would cause him, it would be something he

would hold over me, and I feared how he might, without revealing it, use it to have me help the plan he and Plagueis were slowly bringing to fruition.

A nudge through the Force from Raven, had me opening my eyes. “I’m okay lass,” I said gently, placing my right hand – the natural one – on a section of her skin. “Just thinking about things, nothing to worry about.”

The panel around my hand flickered with various light patterns and I felt Raven’s relief that I wasn’t troubled too deeply by events happening on the planet we’d just left. Raven was perhaps the only female who was close to me that I didn’t fear growing jealous over the attention I received from others. That, perhaps, might be because she was in many ways more like a daughter than a partner; or perhaps she understood that because of the bond we shared, she would never be challenged when seeking my attention.

Closing my eyes again, I pushed thoughts of Coruscant and those I’d left there aside. When I woke I’d need to start planning out the next leg of my and Anakin’s training. Until then, I would enjoy some, hopefully peaceful, rest.

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I moved toward Anakin’s cabin, and once there pressed the buzzer to let him know I was outside. After nearly ten seconds, when he failed to respond in any way, I pressed the buzzer again. Once more, Anakin didn’t respond. I knew he was fine; I could sense him easily through the Force, his thoughts centred on a particular matter – one I suspected I knew – but he wasn’t responding to my call.

“Raven,” I said softly to the ship, and a second later the door hissed open. “Thanks.”

Stepping inside his quarters, I saw him sitting at his desk, leaning intently over a clutch of datapads. Moving closer, I saw that, as I’d suspected, he was working on the project I’d given him not long after we’d left the Lokella system. The top pad contained the schematics of the 3P0 series droids that I’d given him. One of the others, based on the detailed weapon descriptions mentioned, had come from HK, yet it was the one in Anakin’s hand that drew my attention as I moved closer.

Much of what was on the pad was beyond me, even if my **Mechanics [Droids]** skill was in the low **Master** tier, but from what I could see, he was hard at work altering the internal circuitry of the droid in ways that, even with my limited understanding, knew would be both more efficient and much more expensive. Cost wasn’t going to be an issue, though I hoped the finished product didn’t end up costing more than a freighter, as that would be a large amount of credits to sink into something I might not need. At least for the next few years.

Looking back at HK's pad as I came closer, I saw that while most of the displayed suggestions seemed logical, many likely violated some Republic statute. That was to be expected of HK, as he felt such statutes – and I agreed in some cases – were merely suggestions that could be followed if one wished. Much of them also went far beyond what a droid designed for espionage, infiltration, and even assassination might need, but I knew HK was simply being thorough in the options he offered to Anakin. The other pads were either a collection of publicly available details on other types of droids, which I assumed were being used by Anakin for new ideas for his droid, or files that I couldn't make heads or tails of.

"Anakin," I said once near him, however, his focus remained on the pads before him, his fingers tapping away at the one he held, or sliding through technical displays on the others.

I wanted to speak with him about our intended destination of the Shapers of Kro Var. The planet was classed as being in Wild Space, and as such there were no commonly used hyperspace routes that led to their system. The closest I could get was taking first the Corellian Trade spine and then slipping over to the Great Gran Run. That, amusingly, would take us in the general direction of Endor, however, we'd be turning off those better known – relatively speaking – hyperspace routes onto ones that were barely used. I'd make sure to stop on a world in the sector to confirm the maps I'd gained from the Celebratus Archives were accurate because the last thing I wanted to do was get lost in the depths of nowhere, or worse, from faulty navigational data.

"Anakin," I said again when he failed to even acknowledge my presence. As before, he failed to respond and when I spoke the third time, my hand reached out for his shoulder, and I gave a gentle nudge through the Force. "*An'ika*."

I wasn't sure which of the three actions I'd taken broke the spell he was under, but he jerked back and blinked. "Huh? Cam? When did you get here?"

"Just a moment ago," I replied with a grin. "I know you're enjoying your project," I gestured with my hand, slipping it from his shoulder and indicating the datapads on his desk, "however, I was hoping to speak with you about where we're heading, and learn what you learnt from Master Dooku while I was away."

I'd not spent time on **Matel's Gift** beyond collecting my son. While I could have done so, I was concerned Dooku would wish me to spend time there, refining my training under his gaze. As useful as that might be, and how I wasn't opposed to it, I wanted to move on to the next sect I wished to train with.

"Ah, um, okay." Anakin put down his pad and looked up at me, though his eyes seemed conflicted. "I mean, Master Dooku's very skilled but, well.... he's not you."

My grin grew as I moved over the room, figuring I'd use his bunk to sit since he occupied the only chair in the quarters. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Anakin chuckled and then shook his head. "It is. I know you're not my father b..."

"We might not share blood, *An'ika*," I cut in, "but I am your father. The Jedi and Republic might not accept that, but I swore a vow when I adopted you and brought you into my family, into my clan. I would move the stars themselves to keep you from harm, and destroy anyone or thing that threatened your safety."

I spoke with conviction, making clear I meant every word I said, and I sensed Anakin's mind shift back to his ordeal at the hands of those shabyr lizards who had dared take him from my side. Even with that group dead and sent to their god in disgrace, the urge to unleash hell upon the entire species still burnt brightly within me. The only reasons I'd not done so, were first that I'd struggle to protect Anakin if I unleashed a blood feud on an entire species, and that such an action, as I was now, wasn't one I was capable of completing.

"I..." He gulped though there was no fear in the action. "I know." I nodded, pleased he understood that and that he wasn't going to dwell on his experience. At least not currently. "Um, I didn't do much training with Master Dooku. He wanted me to spend time meditating to gain more self-control."

"Oof," I muttered remembering many such lessons and meditations on the matter, from both Dooku and Fay. Normally after I'd done something reckless or dangerous, which was an almost amusingly common occurrence.

Fay had expected me to meditate on how I might've resolved those situations more peacefully, or at least without inflicting so much pain onto others, while Dooku focused more on making sure that, when such situations occurred in the future, I reacted with more consideration and thought before rushing into the fray. The lessons from him had sunk in better than Fay's, but I knew that if placed under stress, I still moved too quickly at times, not thinking if there were other ways to approach the situation.

"What about the others? Did you spend time with your sister?"

"Yes!" Anakin snapped back excitedly, any discomfort with his time training with Dooku washed away by the joy he felt when thinking about his sister. "I mean, she can't talk or really play with me, but just sitting with her and Ferox..." His voice trailed off as a wide and honest smile spread over his face. One that was infectious. "Oh! I, um, spent time with Miss Vosa as well," he added once he'd recovered from his bout of joy.

My brow rose at hearing that. I knew Vosa was interested in Anakin, and had tried to help save Shmi when the station had been attacked, but I was still reluctant to have her near him. Her interest wasn't, thankfully, as deranged as it had been toward me, but she had sensed his power when Shmi had died.

Dooku might've been accepting of her being near Anakin, but I wasn't, and I'd be sending him a message asking for his reasoning on the matter. He might've been, and in many ways still was, my Master, however, Anakin was my responsibility.

"Yeah, she wanted to see what I'd learnt." One of his hands grasped his pad in a sign he was concerned about something. "She, um, she didn't seem happy about what I'd learnt and offered some suggestions to help me grow stronger."

"I would be interested in hearing and seeing what those were later," I said as calmly as I could manage. Anakin didn't have my issues with Vosa, even liking her for trying to save his mother, but even then, with his willingness to see the good in everyone, he knew I didn't want her around him. The fact he'd at least told me about the interactions he'd had with the former Bando Gora leader was a sign he enjoyed and wanted to keep my respect and trust. "Moving on, what do you know of the Shapers of Kro Var?"

"Um... Just what was on the datapad you gave me," he replied. I leaned forward, wanting for him to continue, and from the way he shrunk into his chair, I suspected he'd forgotten much about the Shapers. "Um, they use the Force to control what they consider the elements. Fire, water, wind, and earth."

That was accurate, though the files had added that while most Shapers focused on only a single element, some could shape more than one element while the most powerful of their order were rumoured to be able to control the base elements and more powerful ones. Those reports hadn't been confirmed by the records I had access to but, knowing what I did of the Force, it should be possible for anyone with sufficient training to control the elements and more natural forces.

Now, we'd not be staying with the Shapers long enough to learn how to shape all four base elements, but I felt we'd get a good understanding of their techniques. Perhaps even gain insights into using such things that were missing from Jedi teachings.

"What else?" I prodded when Anakin stayed quiet after his initial statement.

"Uh... The Jedi consider them a Dark Side cult but because they're isolated and don't move around the Republic, the Jedi generally ignore them."

"True enough." If the Jedi were truly interested in bringing balance to the Force by defeating the Dark Side, they'd move to remove cults like the Shapers, or the Nightsisters of Dathomir, especially as to most of the Order, the Sith were gone; assigned to history as a failed order. Instead of doing that, the High Council, and through them the rest of the Order, allowed themselves to be guided and ordered around by a Senate that was so corrupt that it represented a challenge to the Jedi's belief of balance.

Thinking about the Nightsisters, my thoughts returned to when I had considered learning from them. Or at least one of the other clans of the Witches of Dathomir. The idea had quickly been dismissed as every clan believed that males were little better than slaves and breeding stock. While I would be interested in learning how they tamed rancors enough that they could be ridden, I had no interest in spending the rest of my life in chains.

Anakin's face scrunched up as he tried to remember the rest of the data on the Shapers that I'd shared with them. Wanting to see how much he could recall; I stayed silent as he ransacked his memories. "They... um... they dislike the Jedi."

"Yes, but why?"

"Because of how they... how we use the Force."

My lips twitched at his slip. I was training him with an inclination toward Jedi philosophies, but a little over a year since I'd adopted him, it was clear that path didn't hold as much appeal as he might've expected a few years prior.

"Specifically?" I asked, figuring I could use this discussion or at least the time before it became about the exact details of our time with the Shapers as a teaching moment. There was more value in learning, remembering, and then recalling something than having it stated over and over to you by others.

"Because we can move things with a gesture."

"The gesture isn't technically needed," I replied gently. "Or at least, I don't think it is. To me, it's very much about training yourself to do something without thinking. Much like the concept of muscle memory, and how repetition of the various velocities means that, when battle comes, you know how to move your lightsaber without having to think heavily about it. You can immerse yourself in the moment, focusing on everything around you and trust yourself to know how to react and when." I raised my hand. "To me, this," I flicked my fingers up, raising the datapad with the 3P0 schematics on it into the air, "shouldn't need the gesture to be done, though I still do it because it is what I expect to happen when I wish the Force to obey me."

I had been experimenting with moving objects without gestures, simply because of the potential advantage it would offer in a multitude of situations. It was doable, though without the gesture the action was more difficult. I was training myself to find it easier, as the ability to manipulate objects without the telltale sign of a Force user doing so, had great potential use, at least most of the time. On Kro Var, such an act would be problematic at best.

“Returning to the Shapers, they believe that using the Force in unseen ways is abhorrent. So, the more common abilities a Jedi might use of Telekinesis or Telepathy are downright outlawed in their society. If we are caught displaying those powers, then at best we face life imprisonment. At worst, they’d try to execute us.

As Anakin gulped, one hand rising to his neck, I knew that they’d not kill us on the spot. Instead, we’d be prepared for some form of custom for executions. That would take time to arrange, so we’d be imprisoned for a short while, which would be more than enough time for HK, R2 and Fenrir – who the last I saw him was resting in the central area of the ship – to free us.

“Yeah,” I said, gesturing to Anakin’s hand that was near his throat. “That is why, while we are on their planet, we won’t be mentioning that we’re Jedi. Not at any point in our training. As far as they are to know, we are *Mando’ade: buir bal ad*. I expect that they will train us, but that we’ll have to do so without our armour as the Shapers retain a distrust of technology. We’ll likely have to do our training in simple robes they provide.”

“What about your arm?” Anakin blurted out, bringing up a point I’d already considered before coming here.

“We’ll have to see what they decide. I hope they will understand that I need it, and I’ll lean into that by hiding the fact I’m comfortable with my right hand as much as my left, but if they demand I remove it, I will. They shouldn’t see a problem with me losing a limb in combat, they are, after all, a warrior culture. I’m sure they’ve had far worse happen when Shapers battle to settle matters. The odds they’ve not seen worse injuries than mine are about as good as a Wookiee marrying a Trandoshan.”

As intended, Anakin laughed weakly at the bad joke. It was clear both from his body language and through the Force, that he hadn’t fully recovered from his ordeal at the hands of those lizards, though I didn’t think he ever would entirely move past it. Such traumatic events had a way of leaving long-lasting impressions on someone no matter how mature or strong they were.

Ideally, he would release the feelings linked to those memories into the Force, and I should teach him how to do that. However, I knew he wouldn’t. He took everything far too personally, much as I did, and it would be hypocritical of me to say he should do that when I didn’t. Yes, I couldn’t because of **Eidetic Memory**, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t learn to let go of much of the anger as it formed.

“What about HK and R2?”

“They will remain on Raven, as will Simvyl. He has some Force potential, as all sentients do, but I don’t think he’d be able to learn to draw on any element in the time we’re going to be present. That doesn’t mean he’ll be idle, as I expect he’ll focus on the training he received with the Matukai and Echani. However, that is up to him. All I’ll ask is that he keeps an eye on Raven, and along with HK makes sure no one decides to do anything funny to her.”

I doubted anything would happen, but since Raven was unusual, there was always the chance that someone might take an undue interest in her. HK and Simvyl would have clear rules of engagement if such an event occurred, and even if HK disliked them, he would obey them.

“Now, we still have several weeks until we reach Kro Var, but I want you to practise for our time there. There will be no mental usage of the Force until we arrive.”

“What about during lightsaber training?”

“Any external mental use of the Force,” I clarified, my smile widening at him seeing the mistake in my words. It hadn’t been intentional, but it was good to see his mind was alert to flaws in orders. “Drawing the Force inward, as we learnt to do with the Matukai, shouldn’t be an issue. Not least as it’s highly unlikely that the Shapers could sense us drawing the Force inward. *Haran*, I’d be shocked if they didn’t do something similar themselves.”

Anakin nodded, understanding my words, though he stopped a moment later and then frowned. “Won’t they ask about why we’re coming to them for training?”

“They will,” I responded with a chuckle. “Which is why we’ll be shifting the truth of certain events slightly.” I leaned forward, so he could hear the tale, based heavily on half-truths, that we’d be spinning for the benefit of the Shapers.

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I watched as Raven’s ramp descended, my eyes alert to any threat that might be outside. I couldn’t sense anyone that close, but that didn’t mean I was going to lower my guard. “Remember, no sudden movements.”

“I know,” Anakin responded with an annoyed sigh. Given I’d been making clear the rules for him to follow while we were here, focusing on the story we’d be spinning and how to conduct ourselves during the first few days, several times a day over the last few weeks, I could understand his irritation. That didn’t, however, mean I wasn’t going to slip in one final warning.

When we’d arrived in-system, it had been clear the Shapers didn’t have much in the way of a centralised government or technology. There was no station in orbit, nor any single channel to speak to someone on the planet. Once in upper orbit, Raven’s sensors had detected various groupings of people dotted around the planet’s four continents. There wasn’t anything bigger than a small city – by Earth standards – on the planet,

but I'd avoided going to such a centralised location, as there was more chance of running into another visitor who might recognise me.

Instead, trusting the Force to guide me where I wanted to go, we'd flown over the most uninhabited continent. Most of the people there lived in mobile groups, seemingly travelling from one location to the next. There were a few large structures which, based on the scans, seemed to be temples or monuments, but I avoided them as well on the chance they might be sacred.

In the end, the Force had led me to what appeared to be a permanent settlement of around a thousand sentients. As we'd flown over, I'd sensed their reluctance and concern at our arrival, and as such I'd landed Raven a few kilometres from the settlement. We'd remained here waiting, and now, about three hours later, a group of Shapers had approached.

None carried blasters or anything as advanced, preferring blades and other simpler, but not ineffective, weapons. Seeing that, and thinking I could use it to my advantage, I'd removed every weapon I visibly carried bar my beskad. My gauntlets and replacement limb still had everything installed in them, though to hide the fact I had the replacement arm, I wore black gloves over both hands.

I had considered adding the Sith war blade Hego Damask had gifted me as well, but I dismissed the idea. To the naked eye, the blade appeared to be nothing more than an old, but finely crafted weapon. However, one trained to sense the Force as Shapers might well be, should be able to detect the Force within it, a hint that the Force had been used during the blade's creation. Thus, it remained in my Inventory, which was true of anything linked to the Jedi or Sith that might give us away. Even items I'd kept in hidden compartments on Raven were in there, as I wasn't taking any chances.

"Observation: I have already computed the most efficient pattern to remove potential threats, Master. Along with the next three hundred and forty-two. If your oratory skills are insufficient to persuade the local meatbags that we come in... peace, I stand ready to assist."

"I think I'll be up to the task," I replied, ignoring the subtle hints at my potential inability to speak my way out of trouble, and HK having to be peaceful. "And don't activate any of those plans until I command it."

I knew he wouldn't act without orders, but I wanted to be sure. Plus, he and R2 would be remaining on Raven while Anakin and I spoke with these Shapers. My son's part, or at least his ability to convince the Shapers that his story was a hundred per cent truthful, was going to make or break our odds of being trained with this tribe.

If he wasn't up to it, it wasn't a huge matter. There were other tribes to which we could head. I just hoped things didn't turn sour in our first encounter, as while I knew I could take everyone out there with ease, I didn't want to place Anakin in danger.

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“When the Trandoshan came close to me, I panicked,” Anakin said slowly, hints of fear and anger in his tone, body language, and unintentionally emanating through the Force. “H-he was going to kill me, so I wanted him gone. I brought my hands up to protect myself, but...” he looked down at his hands for a moment, “something happened. I felt something react to my wishes and the world exploded. Dust and sand were thrown up, and when it cleared enough I... I saw the alien had been blown away and had a metal pole sticking out his chest.”

I stood at Anakin’s side, one hand on his shoulder for comfort as he detailed events on that planet. Or at least the events we were basing our reasons for coming here around. He’d done well, steering clear of my Jedi training, slipping around it when he spoke of how we’d met, the Lokella, the death of his mother, and then my adoption of him under Mando’ade law.

The biggest shift was the one he’d just made, suggesting he’d used either the wind or some form of explosion to knock back and kill that Trandoshan, and while I kept my eyes on my son, I tried to watch the Shaper who was standing with us in the building we were in. The building was at the edge of the settlement and was where the scouting party who’d come to Raven had brought us. at least after I’d convinced them we’d come to seek training with their people.

“How exactly did you manage to push back a being much larger, and I assume stronger, than yourself?” The question came from Aranaris, a member of the villages’ tribal council. He wasn’t that old, looking to be in his forties or fifties, but he was a council member. I suspected that was why he had so many tattoos over his upper body. Almost all seemed to be stylised flames, though around his waist the tattoos appeared to be more akin to rocks.

The men who’d brought us here had all had tattoos as well, though they’d only had flames ranging from those covering their arms to the leaders of the group having them over their chests. I was curious about the reason for the tattoos, both in number and style, but that could wait until, provided things went well with Aranaris, we were accepted for training.

“Um,” I felt Anakin gulp and as he looked up at me, I offered a nod of encouragement. Even without the ability to sense the Force, anyone could tell he was hesitant about the question and possibly slightly unsettled. Whether that came from not trusting himself to fool Aranaris, or because of some lingering issue with killing the lizard, I couldn’t say, but I felt the elder would believe it was the former, and thus it would help sell Anakin’s story. It might also, if we were lucky, have Aranaris dismiss any small flaws in the story Anakin was spinning. “I don’t really know sir. I mean, I wanted him gone, but at the time I don’t know how it happened.” He looked up at me again. “Thanks to my father, I know now that it was the Force coming to my aid, but at the time I was too shocked to think about what I’d done.”

“When my son reacted as he did, I was little more than a hundred metres away around a large pile of debris,” I said, cutting in and shifting Aranaris’ attention to me. “The sensors in my armour detected shifts in air pressure and temperature, which had me pushing myself faster to reach him.

“When he came into sight, I saw one Trandoshan impaled on a metal skewer, his flesh burnt and smoking and his life all but over. Another was poaching Anakin, my son kneeling on the ground staring at his hands in shock, which took all of my attention. I understand your people distrust technology, but if you wish I can provide a recording of what I saw that day.”

The recording was one I'd worked on with the droids, altering recordings and data to show what we wanted it to show. The odds were Aranaris wouldn't want to see it, given the Shapers' distrust of technology, but I wanted it ready on the off chance he did want it. The distaste of technology had extended to us, and Anakin and I had only been allowed inside the settlement, so to speak, after we removed our armour. We still wore the underweave and I still had my arm attached, and my beskad was at my hip, but the rest was back on Raven.

I knew Bo and others wouldn't have been happy about me removing my armour to gain entrance to the settlement, but this wasn't training a Mando'ade could do. Well, except perhaps for Naz and those like her who had enough Force Potential to conceivably learn some Force disciplines.

Aranaris looked at us carefully, judging our words. What I didn't sense was him searching for the truth in the Force, which was a relief. While I knew I could hide the fallacies in our story from him, I wasn't certain Anakin could. “It sounds as if your son can control the cleansing flames,” He said slowly, measuring his words. “Not an uncommon display when one with The Gift is in danger. Still, I must ask why you came to us instead of heading to others with understanding, however flawed, of The Gift. Such as the Jedi.”

I scowled for a split second before dismissing the expression. “I won't get into the full history of my people and the *Jetii*, but it is best described as a lack of trust and in some cases respect between us. Don't get me wrong, many *Jetii* have the potential to be great warriors, but instead of embracing that, they choose to remain loyal lap dogs of the *Tsad Droten*: The Republic.

“They placed themselves in servitude of the Republic, as deeply flawed as it is, after the same conflict that galactic records show drove your ancestors to this world.” Aranaris nodded, knowing at least some of what I spoke of. “A few centuries after that, as my ancestors united under a strong leader, the *Jetii* feared what we might do. Without investigation of our motives, they convinced the Republic to strike our worlds, reducing much of the surfaces to barren waste.

“We were making no moves toward war with anyone. *Haran*, we were just emerging from a period of multiple civil wars over who should lead us. Yet the *Jetii* chose to attack without provocation. They sought to destroy our culture and crush our will, but they failed to understand something. All *Mando'ade* follow a code; the *Resol'nare*. Sentients have and will continue to die for causes, but ideals never die. Something the *Jetii* should understand, yet chose not to when bombarding our worlds from orbit.

“Some of my people, after the events of the *Dral'Han* as we called it, chose to abandon our ways, and follow the Republic. They are *dar'manda*: traitors. It is only now, over eight hundred years later, that we have cast off the yoke of those traitors and reclaimed our worlds in the name of the *Resol'nare*!”

I paused there, taking a few breaths to restrain some of the anger I'd let slip out as I'd spoken. While I didn't hold the hatred of the Jedi and Republic that many Mando'ade did, I understood the sentiment, and it was easy to draw upon the rage that was buried deep inside me to suggest I hated the Jedi.

Once calmer, I squeezed Anakin's shoulder. "Even if that history, and far, far more, didn't exist between my people and the *Jetii*, I wouldn't ask them to train my son. They would take him from me, deny me the chance to see him ever again claiming it was their right to train him, and that our ways were insignificant compared to their beliefs."

"Your people place that much importance on a child even if it doesn't share your blood?"

"Yes. To us, family isn't simply those you share blood with. It's those who fight beside you in battle, those who you choose to risk everything to protect, and who would burn the stars from the sky to help them." I looked down at Anakin and smiled. "When I first met him and his mother, they were slaves. I managed to free them easily enough and take them to a group of similarly free slaves. However, a little over a year ago, an attack funded by the Hutts," Anakin scowled at the mention of the giant slugs, "resulted in the death, among others, of his mother. Sensing his need to become stronger and gain vengeance, I adopted him and have been training him in the ways of my people ever since."

Aranaris listened attentively as I spoke, hopefully catching the emotions in my tone as he weighed my words. He wouldn't use the Force to get a sense of me, at least not intentionally, but I felt the story Anakin and I had crafted was good enough that it would fool an unsuspecting Jedi Knight, though perhaps not a Master. Even without the Force, he was mature enough to be able to read the subtle signs in someone's body language to catch if they believed what they were saying. Thanks to years of being a friend of Chancellor Palpatine, I'd subtly learnt from a true master how to deceive anyone, though I knew I was far from his current level, never mind where he would go in the coming years.

Time drew on as we stood in silence, waiting for Aranaris to comment.

I find little in your words or body to suggest deception," he eventually said. "The boy will be trained with our young. However, I have yet to hear why you feel you should be trained alongside him."

I chuckled, knowing this would come but wanting to appear amused at my lack of explanation. Everything, even my comments on the issues between the Jedi and Mando'ade, was focused on getting Anakin permission to train with the Shapers. That was because his story was based on facts, from a certain point of view. Mine at least, was going to be based on a complete fallacy.

Hiding that I had, at least before **Natural Selection**, been able to control the four base elements of the Shapers' philosophy was going to be my greatest challenge while here. Amusingly, taking **Natural Selection**

helped there as while I had all the lessons in my head, including the more scientific ones from Jedi Masters like Plo Koon, I'd yet to spend any real time working on harnessing them since the change. That was because I had always intended to head to the Shapers for training. Now I was going to have to lean heavily into my Social Skills to convince him of what I was about to say, putting them through another test, though one I considered far easier than continuing to hide what I was and what I knew from the Banite Sith.

To that end, I had a quest designed for me to raise **Deception** and **Persuasion** by, at a base 50 levels by the end of my training with the Shapers. If I failed, either by not being accepted for training or a lack of effort, then it'd cost me a decent chunk of XP, but it was worth the effort.

I was around halfway to Level 32, which would be another Perk Point. I was leaning toward taking **Stat Boost**, so my combined physical stats would have their limit lifted to 75. From what I could determine, that was the absolute peak that a Human could reach. While I was happy with how my life had gone, I did wonder if perhaps I'd made a mistake during character creation in taking Human as my species. However, there was nothing I could do about that, nor was it worth wasting time wondering about what might have been. Instead, I turned my attention to Aranaris and began spinning my spiel.

"After I'd rescued him from the Trandoshans, and ensured they never repeated their customs on others," that drew a short nod of approval from Aranaris, "I asked a medic I trust implicitly to test Anakin. From what he said, Anakin has the potential to be extremely powerful in the Force." Aranaris looked at Anakin heavily, trying to judge the truth in my words. "On a hunch, I had the medic test me as well. Throughout my life there'd been moments where I'd moved a touch faster than I should've, or when I knew instinctively what was about to happen a moment before it did. Until Anakin's ordeal I had put all that down to training, but understanding that Anakin could use the Force, I grew curious. I was shocked to discover that while nowhere near as potentially powerful as my son, I could learn to use the Force."

"Given what you have revealed about the Jedi, how did that make you feel?"

"For the first hour or so, I felt wrong. As if I'd been infected by the failings of the Republic. However, with time to consider it, I saw it as another weapon in my arsenal, one I needed to learn how to wield for it to have worth."

Around us, I could feel the Force shifting, hinting the decision was in the air. Part of me wished to use the Force to help ensure Aranaris made the choice I wanted, and I knew the Force would do that if I so demanded. However, there was a chance that Aranaris would sense what I was doing, and realise I wasn't the simple mercenary I claimed to be.

"You are not the first people to come to our world seeking training, though the first to visit my village in my lifetime." He leaned closer. "Most visitors head to one of the larger settlements elsewhere on the planet, so why did you come to us?"

I shrugged. "A hunch I guess. The less people know that Mandalorians are here training, the less likely it is that the Jedi get wind. As much as I'd enjoy showing them how they've failed as warriors, I won't put my son at unnecessary risk." I smirked. "Just to be clear, your people are not the first we've approached and trained with. We spent around half a year with the Matukai. They're another group of Force users outside the Jedi's influence, with a focus on drawing the Force inward to make the body stronger and faster."

I didn't know if the Shapers knew anything about other Force sects beyond the Jedi, or if they used the Force in similar ways to the Matukai. By revealing this now, I could explain away instances where Anakin and I moved faster than we might otherwise be able to in advance. That should mitigate the risk of anyone questioning our story.

"Such training is offered to those we consider Apprentices. The second true rank of warriors among our people." He leaned back, one hand coming up to stroke a long beard. "It will be interesting to see how someone does knowing such techniques before learning to shape their first element. As it will to see how an adult with some understanding of how to use The Gift does in training. Perhaps it might even offer new insights into the training of our warriors."

I nodded, pleased he wasn't upset about us training to draw the Force inward, and that he could already see the benefits of having us train with his tribe. There was an undertone of something, perhaps uncertainty over our story, but if he wasn't going to touch on that concern, I wasn't going to ask about it. The less he openly questioned our story, the less likely he was to see through the lie in it until, I hoped, we were finished with his training and off-world.

"I will speak with the other Elders," Aranaris added, making me smile. He moved toward the door of the room, though as I moved to follow he gestured for us to wait. "You are to remain here as my guests until a decision has been reached."

I disliked being confined in the room, not least when I could easily sense the dozen Shaper warriors around the building waiting for any sign we were a threat. However, if the roles were reversed, I'd have done the same.

"How long will that take?" Anakin blurted out.

Aranaris stopped and turned back to us. I feared he might dislike the question, but as he offered Anakin a warm smile, I knew that wouldn't happen. "I see the impertinence of youth is a universal constant," he said as his eyes found me.

"Only in those with the desire to make their mark on the galaxy," I replied with a grin.

That drew a short chuckle from the Shaper Elder. “Very true.” He returned his attention to Anakin. “Based on what you and your father have told me, I’m inclined to accept your presence among the tribe. Now I have to convince the other Elders of that, but my voice carries enough weight that I don’t foresee it taking more than an hour or two at most.”

Anakin accepted that, and Aranaris left the room. While the door was open, I saw two Shapers standing there. They had accompanied Aranaris to this meeting, but it appeared that they would be remaining behind. More security to ensure we didn’t do anything rash.

Like those that met us at Raven, they carried simpler weapons; one with a sword, the other an axe. Their eyes, as had been the case for any that had seen us, had been drawn to my beskad. I was unsure if I’d be allowed to train with it, at least for the entirety of our stay here, but it offered me a potential inroad to getting better acquainted with the warriors of the tribe. As would their tattoos.

The meanings seemed clear, and I was sure Adas would be interested in them as well. The holocron was curious about the Shapers and had asked me to speak with him at least once during my training so he might learn about their culture. The ancient Sith King – a true Sith unlike those of Bane’s lineage who bore little in common with the original beliefs of the species the name had come from – was wiser than he let on. Or at least knew how to withhold enough information to keep me interested in continuing to learn from him.

I understood what he sought from me, and I understood the dangers of heading down that road. But with me unable to ever let go of my emotions – good or bad – the Jedi path wasn’t one I could walk. Certainly not the path the current High Council was taking the Order down. That road led only to one place, which I was intent on stopping.

The trick for me was to learn from Adas without losing myself to his ideals, or the depths of the Dark Side before I was able to master it as I wished.

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“... and that’s about it so far,” I said as I sat in my quarters, the holocron in front of me glowing as its gatekeeper listened carefully to my words. “I’m sure there’s more to come in the Apprentice classes, but I’ll not know that until tomorrow.”

It had been about a month since we’d arrived on the planet and begun training and I was finally moving up. Spending that month in a class with young learners had been irritating, but I had endured it. Beyond it feeling like a test from Aranaris and the other elders, I knew that you had to crawl before you walked. Or in this case, understand the element you wished to Shape before attempting to do anything more than summon it to your hand.

Those I'd be joining in the Acolyte group were closer to my age, though most were in their mid-teens while I was eighteen. Amusingly, the names the Shapers had for their ranks, were a mix of ranks the Jedi and Sith had used. Or at least older Sith orders. After Apprentice, there was Warrior, Knight, and then Master for your chosen element.

Interestingly the tribe that the Force had guided us to specialised in Fire Shaping. I'd half expected that given the tattoos of the Shapers in the tribe, but it was nice to have the confirmation as that was the element both Anakin and I were most inclined toward using. We both had some inclination toward Air Shaping, but that wasn't going to be learnt currently.

Regardless of the tribe, Shapers learnt to master a single element first. then, if they had the inclination and desire, they could learn another. Thus, someone like my trainer, Master Walrion, could be a Master of one element, but an Apprentice of another. Those who could master two or more elements were the Grandmasters of their culture, with those rare individuals who could master all four elements were considered a Supreme Master. From what the tribe knew, there was no Supreme Master currently, but that wasn't uncommon. Not only were they a semi-isolated tribe on the remotest continent, but Supreme Masters' only seemed to be born in times of great strife.

Within the tribe, there were a handful who could wield multiple elements, with them often in positions of importance. Interestingly, the Shapers considered one's primary element as a guide to the sort of person they were.

The rarest of elements as a primary was Earth. Those who could shape it were regarded as incredibly dependable and practical. In battle they were considered, if they had mastered the element, the most difficult opponent to overcome; much like a mountain, they could be near-impossible to disrupt or knock over without an insane amount of power used against them.

Water Shapers, like Earth Shapers, were considered dependable as well but were generally calmer and more reserved. Those who mastered the element were said to be able to sense the gentlest of changes in another's emotional state and knew exactly what to say to help those with which they were speaking. Water Shapers were highly sought after as tribunal members – their version of courts – and diplomats to send to other tribes due to them, like water, being able to flow around obstacles to reach their destination.

Air Shapers were regarded as free spirits. They often wandered the land, travelling from tribe to tribe, guided by their curiosity about what lay over the next hill. They were also the best for creating new ways of doing things, that same drive of curiosity helping shine their mind toward seeing things in ways few others could. Given Anakin's ability with technology, it wasn't a surprise that he was considered almost as strong with Air as he was with Fire by the Masters. I lacked the cutting insight he had, but my drive to wander and explore showed I had an affinity toward Wind as well.

However, for both of us, Fire was where our hearts lay, and after learning of what it represented, that wasn't a shock. Fire Shapers were bold, aggressive people; those willing to rush into danger to help others. Their passions burnt bright, leading them to do what needed to be done. However, that same drive could also be a problem if the Shaper didn't learn to overcommit and do the wrong things for the right reasons. If they learnt to temper that heat, then Fire Shapers were considered the greatest of warriors and commanded armies when tribes went to war.

"Interesting," Adas commented as he stood still having listened to my report. "This blade they had you train with, show it to me."

Since we were in my cabin, a good few kilometres from the settlement, I reached out and used the Force to do so. The blade floated up into the air, turning along its axis to show all points to the ancient Sith King.

The blade was about the length of my beskad, which was longer than most such Mando'ade weapons, and a touch heavier. It was also blunted as while Master Walrion and her helpers weren't against trainees striking each other with their blades, they didn't want unnecessary damage done to us. The blades thus left bruises when they struck, or at least they did if wielded by some with the strength to do so.

While I had to hold back on my blade work while training to become an Acolyte – because of the age and skill of my groupmates – I hoped that wouldn't be the case from tomorrow as I began studying to become an Apprentice Shaper. Regardless of that, I would still have to hold back with using the Force, at least externally. There hadn't been any instances with the children where there'd been an instance when drawing on the Force would be the easier choice, but I knew that wouldn't last. While he might have more need of drawing on the Force to defend himself, Anakin was doing well at not doing so. I could only hope that remained the case over the coming months.

"A teaching weapon, one sadly blunted to avoid injury. I would have ensured the blade was at least partially sharp, to remind the younglings that it wasn't a toy, but I can understand why that isn't the case, and why they gave you such a blade when training with their youngest potential warriors." I ignored the comment about having to train with children, as it was one I'd snapped at myself about on occasion over the last month. "It certainly isn't on par with your beskad, to say nothing of the weapons my armies wielded, but I can see potential in its design."

"They use the Force to strengthen their blades," I said as the training weapon continued to rotate around in the air. "Nothing like how the Force was used in the creation of the war blade Plagueis gave me, but from what I've heard, it's the same principle as what I learnt from the Jedi about how to strengthen any object with the Force if there is a need to do so temporarily."

"While that is probably true, you should still listen to their methods on the unlikely chance they offer an insight you had not yet considered." Adas paused. "When will you consider training with the war blade?"

“Probably not for some time, and even then the beskad will remain my choice as my secondary weapon.”

“Understandable, but you shouldn’t discount a Force-forged blade as an option. The blade you have is powerful, though not comparable to the axes I wielded in war. Ones so powerful they could shatter the hulls of those who thought to invade and conquer those I ruled over.”

“The Rakata.”

The gatekeeper nodded. “Yes.” He paused for a moment. “It is interesting that your ancestor has history with them; or at least one of their great war machines. Almost as if it were a sign that through the Rakata, we were destined to meet.”

“Perhaps.” My response was noncommittal as I didn’t want to even hint that my choice of Revan as an ancestor was an active choice on my part.

“I remain disappointed that this Star Forge is gone. The potential for it to help us prepare for the wars we sense coming would’ve been immense.” I nodded, agreeing with the sentiment even if I was glad the Star Forge was gone. Something that powerful, if it fell into the wrong hands, had the potential to fuck up the galaxy if given time to prepare for war. “Returning to the Shapers, they have potential as useful warriors in an army, but they remain limited by flaws in their beliefs. Flaws I’m sure you are well aware of.”

I chuckled, knowing full well he wanted my opinion on the Shapers. The tricks he used were the same as ones I used with Anakin, and that Dooku had used when training me as his Padawan. The difference between Adas and myself was that I was trying to have Anakin focus on the ideals of the Jedi. Those lessons weren’t sinking in well, and it was clear now – if it hadn’t been a year ago – that he wasn’t cut out to be a Jedi: at least as how the Council would expect.

With Adas, while he spun his words well, he wasn’t hiding his intent to teach me how to draw upon, wield, and dominate the Dark Side. The only upside was that his teachings were based on what true Sith would’ve learnt, and not what those in the Banite Order had followed for nearly a thousand years. Yes, that plan was working, but it didn’t feel like the correct choice to take.

I often wondered if Bane had somehow learnt from Revan, as he was one of the few Old-era Sith who had used a Rule of Two. Learning the truth was highly unlikely, but the question was one of many that I had linked in various ways to my ancestor. Of course, to get answers, I’d either have to wait for him to reappear and speak to me about them, or somehow discover information from the Banite Sith.

That was something for far into the future, and I replied to Adas’ comment. “Their ability to harness the world around them, to shape and use it how they do is impressive. Perhaps even beyond what most Jedi and Sith

could do. However, that is because the Jedi and Sith embrace a wider view of the Force and how it should be used.” There was more to it than that, but that was the answer I felt Adas wanted to hear.

“Yes. Against a properly trained Sith, or even a Jedi, most of the Shapers would be little to no threat. Their Masters, however, might well be more effective against Sith Warriors or Jedi Knights, but in a prolonged conflict, their narrow-minded views would result in their deaths. Now, if they chose to work in concert, ambushing a Jedi Master, they might well stand a chance of taking them out; provided of course, that the Jedi Master in question was caught unaware.” A nod came from me, signalling my agreement even as Adas continued.

“As you said, the flaw in their beliefs is their greatest weakness. It does, paradoxically, offer great strength as one who focuses heavily on a certain aspect of the Force can overwhelm others who aren’t as well versed. The challenge, as both agree, is that these Shapers focus too narrowly on how they use the Force. However, if there was a need for a combat-capable Force sect in war, the Shapers have the potential to be extremely effective; particularly if deployed in situations designed to maximise their skills.”

Again, I nodded as I had already added the Shapers as a potential resource to draw upon when it came time to be a coalition to challenge both the Republic and the CIS. Such a coalition would be termed as Separatists by Republic media, but I had no intention of allying with the majority of the CIS, or at least the mega-corporations that ruled it from the shadows. Those who genuinely believed that the Republic had failed them and also disliked the companies that provided the power to the CIS were potential recruits for my forces, as were those Republic worlds who stayed with it simply because of hatred toward the mega-corporations, or who didn’t want to change from one suffocating overload to one far worse.

Taking time to train Anakin and myself was a risk, but with Gunray and his closest subordinates removed from the board, and Dooku shifted away from becoming a Banite Sith pawn, I felt I had time to do so. Those actions would delay the Banite Sith’s plans, though I wasn’t foolish enough to believe that it had ended their plans. With Damask as Co-Chancellor, they held more political power than they might have in the other timeline and now had ways to circumvent Republic laws about time in office without rushing to generate a crisis.

What might work in my favour there was that it was uncertain how Republic courts would rule on the idea of someone serving three terms as Co-Chancellor while being elected twice. The matter was already being discussed on the Holonet, though if it were brought before the courts, I knew the Banite Sith would move to ensure the ruling was in their favour.

That was why I’d dropped the hint about Maul being involved in the attack on Sojourn. Sidious was actively seeking to remove Plagueis, but I felt the Muun wasn’t aware of that threat. At least he wasn’t until the reveal of Maul’s actions. Now, if things went even slightly well for me, Plagueis would begin to distrust everything Sidious told him. Not only would that generate the smallest of wedges between the pair, but it could unravel a few threads in their plan. I just had to be ready to pull on those threads to further weaken them before the Clone Wars erupted.

“This trial you underwent to become an Acolyte, what did it involve?”

“Nothing more than proving my competency with what was taught, but wielding the Force to control fire and with a blade. While easy to manage, I’ve had to be cautious with how quickly I’ve mastered their instructions, not wanting to risk giving away that I have prior training.” So far, that had worked, but I knew there were a few voices from some of the younger Shapers that my rate of improvement was far too good to be anything but due to previous training. I was going to have to be cautious going forward, as there was a chance that someone would place me in a situation where to avoid harm, I had to draw upon the Force in ways not yet taught to me.

“For the Apprentice trials, the blade will be replaced with one sharpened, though not to levels that could cause a fatal accident. However, I’m told the goal of those trials isn’t to defeat your opponent with the blade but to show your understanding and control of your chosen element is enough to allow advancement to more difficult training. I assume to do that, it requires creativity and ingenuity to if not defeat, then out-move my opponent. If it’s clear that one fighter is superior to the other, the Masters will step in to avoid potentially fatal injury, but I’m unsure of anything more.”

I intended to pass the Apprentice trial as, beyond wanting to advance as quickly as possible, that would be the second of five objectives for my time with the Shapers. I’d passed one by advancing to Acolyte, but the higher ones – to become a Warrior, Knight, or Master – were beyond me. at least with me intending to not spend more than half a year on Kro Var.

“Hmm,” Adas began as he considered my words. “I understand the choice to not use fully sharpened blades, but is it disappointing. One cannot determine what a potential warrior is capable of unless they are placed in mortal danger. A lesson you have learnt several times in your life, from when you were attacked by Sith as a youngling, through your trial with the Mandalorians and up to the challenge the Sith Assassin gave you on Naboo.”

I’d told Adas much about my adventures to prove I was worthy of his training, to see how he would react, and slowly earn his trust. So far, it seemed my stories had worked with Adas, and he was willing to teach me what I wanted. I was aware he wanted me to go further and faster down the path he intended, but I was being cautious. The Dark Side would swallow me whole if I entered it without fully understanding it. Indeed, I suspected that it was only because of the Interface that I hadn’t fallen during the events with the Bando Gora and Vong. I’d lost that protection now, and while I was open to learning what I could use of Adas’ teachings, I didn’t want to fall as deeply into the darkness as he did.

“Ritual combat is something to be encouraged,” Adas continued, “and hearing the Shapers, like the Echani and Mandalorians use it, reminds me of my youth. I had to scratch and claw for everything I earned, be it proving my worth to my tribe to uniting my world under my banner. However, from how you describe it, it’s clear that the Shaper duels are but pale imitations of what a warrior should face to prove their worth. Nor do I expect that, when battles between tribes take place, the victor savours their triumph by drinking the blood soup from their defeated enemy’s skull.”

“I haven’t heard anything about how disputes between tribes are handled, nor do I suspect I will,” I replied, pushing aside all my distaste for what he’d mentioned. He knew I wasn’t going to do that or things like it, but continued to mention them as if to judge if I was unworthy of continuing to train under him.

He might claim that there was power in drinking the blood of someone strong in the Force and that it could be used in various rituals and incantations, but I had shab’an interest in doing that. Now or ever.

“Understandable, but I expect if you did, I would be disappointed by their rules. Few species have the resolve and power to truly delve into the Force as a warrior should.” While his tone was neutral, I could catch the slight inflexion that hinted at his disappointment. “On the topic of combat, have you given any further thought to how to rebuild your lightsaber?”

“Not heavily, no,” I replied, knowing he was meaning my main blade. The yellow shoto blade was a backup weapon for me, and until Anakin created his lightsaber, the one he was training with when time allowed. “I want to attempt to rebuild or repair the crystal, and intend to use beskar or phrik as the coating of the hilt, but beyond that, nothing.”

I had spent the year-plus since the lightsaber’s destruction acting more as a Mando’ade than a Jedi, but not having the hilt at my waist continually left me feeling incomplete. The crystals, including the Mantle of the Force, were all aligned completely with me, yet I hadn’t found anything on how to repair the damage done to the micro-crystal that formed part of the focusing array within my old lightsaber.

If I wished, I could’ve taken a random crystal from my Inventory – I had ten such crystals – and used that in a lightsaber, but the microcrystals had been the ones I’d found in the crystal cave on Ilum. I’d worked to find them; facing, and defeating visions of two possible extreme paths I could walk in the process, and not using them in a new lightsaber was wrong. Thus, I preferred to at least attempt to repair the damaged crystal, or failing that, work to find a new one.

“Then perhaps it is time I offered an alternative to blindly searching in the hope of finding a suitable replacement. During my lifetime, lightsabers were unknown, but due to previous holders of this holocron, at least those who proved themselves worthy of my instruction, I have learnt several secrets related to them and other powers. One such secret is how the Sith craft crystals for their weapons.”

“You mean the reason every Sith lightsaber uses a red crystal?” I asked slowly, my thoughts turning to lessons with the Jedi about how unlike them, the Sith didn’t seek out a crystal. Instead, the Sith crafted such things from their hatred and rage, from the darkest depths of their souls. According to those lessons, the Jedi claimed a true Sith lightsaber was weaker than a Jedi one because the crystal was not forged naturally by the Force. I suspected the Sith claimed the opposite, but while I had crystals from Sith, the last time I’d **Observed** them, nothing had been revealed to suggest either side was telling the truth.

“Yes. The process was revealed to me many millennia ago but one of the few worthy of learning at my feet.” I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at the arrogance of the gatekeeper, thinking those who’d come before me had been beneath him. Adas had been a warrior king, ruling for centuries but that was but one world in a galaxy of hundreds of thousands of them. “The process, rather amusingly, has its roots in techniques and rituals dating back to before even my rise as the Sith’ari.”

“Who taught you?” I asked, ignoring Adas referring to himself as the Sith’ari – their Chosen One. The title, given his rule lasted for centuries, only ending when he drove the Rakata and all their advanced Dark Side-powered technology from Korriban, was well earned. I wanted to hear who had once owned this holocron, as that might well grant me the chance to plot the rough course it had taken over the mill...

“Freedon Nadd.” The mention of that name knocked me out of my thoughts. “You have heard of him?” Adas asked, seeing the shock on my face.

“He lived before my ancestor did,” I replied slowly, drawing on studies in the Jedi Archives. “He conquered Onderon and ruled there for upwards of a century before the Jedi arrived and, so they claim, defeated him and his followers easily.” There was more to the story, much more, but this wasn’t time to reveal everything I knew of Nadd.

“Yes, I was made aware of his defeat several centuries later by the next who proved themselves worthy.” A deep, almost guttural chuckle came from the gatekeeper. “It was not long after learning of Nadd’s fate that the matrix of this holocron went dormant. Remaining so until you awoke me from my slumber.”

Well, that would make plotting the holocron’s route considerably easier, though there were still massive holes in it. Not least how my mother managed to gain possession of it, and stored it with her belongings in the Vault on Ordo.

“This process, what exactly is involved?” There was no harm in hearing about it, though I was hesitant to consider it any further than that.

“I sense reluctance in your tone.”

“Obviously.” My response was dry, and lacking in detail. “Trusting the words of a long-dead Sith, even one as powerful as yourself, without question would be beyond foolish.” Plus, I was concerned about heading further down the path Adas wished for me to walk. I wasn’t going to follow his intentions. No, I would forge my own path through the Force in the coming decades.

Another deep, guttural chuckle rippled from the holocron. “If you followed my words blindly, then I would be even more hesitant to instruct you than I currently am. Teaching other Jedi the fallacies taught by their Order is an effort I have grown weary of over the countless years since this holocron was created.

“That said, the fact you are aware of the dangers my lessons contain and how my desires don’t entirely align with yours, is a sign that your mind is more open to the truth than the magnitudes of failed Force users that have or will exist in this galaxy and beyond.”

I smirked, amused that my logical unwillingness to completely trust Adas had, in some small way, earned me some of his respect. I felt I now knew, after a year or so of truly learning from him, what he wanted to hear and how, but that didn’t mean I was always honest with him. That was a dangerous path to walk.

Adas had ruled his people for hundreds of years, and this holocron was over twenty-seven thousand years old, so this gatekeeper had had more than ample time to learn and evolve further. Yet for all that I was learning from him, I had no intention of heading down the deeper, darker, and more dangerous paths he wished to show me.

With war slowly forming on the horizon, I knew that I would have to fight, that I would have to do things many might consider horrible if not downright diabolical. However, if that was what it took to defeat the Banite Sith, and correct the failings of the Jedi and the Republic, then I would do so. There were just some lines I refused to cross.

Learning exactly how the Sith forged their crystals wasn’t one of those lines. “What exactly is required to create such a crystal?” I asked, wondering if it might offer some insight into how to, if not repair then at least reforge my damaged microcrystal.

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The blade in my hand flashed, cleaving through the arrow of fire arcing toward me. The Force coursed through the blade, bending to my will as the flame dissipated, leaving only faint embers where its threat had been.

The memory of my first mistake in Acolyte training burned hotter than the flame itself. I’d learned then that pride could sear deeper than fire. Now, standing at the threshold of my Apprentice trials, there would be no such error—no hint of weakness.

The Acolyte trials had been mere sparring matches within the safety of the settlement. The Apprentice trials were harsher, six tests in a single day, each demanding more than the last. Failure meant half a year’s wait, an eternity to someone who had already lingered here for five long months. Victory was my only path forward.

Four trials had passed, three ending in duels where my opponents, consumed by resentment, had faltered and fallen before my steady hand. But this one—a boy my age, cautious and sharp—held his ground, sensing that I was no easy target. I felt his rage, raw yet focused, stirring his attacks with force, but it was nothing compared to what I held within. Since Anakin's abduction, I'd honed my emotions to a lethal edge. But here, that edge remained sheathed, restrained. The time to reveal myself had not yet come.

The dying embers of his fiery arrow gave way to a flick of my wrist, sending five bolts of flame hurtling toward him. Each bolt was a distraction, an irritation, calculated to make him falter. His blade rose to meet them, and he retaliated with a wave of fire, pushing it forward with all the focus of his intent.

I met his fire with my own, conjuring a wall of flame. In the midst of the blaze, I surged forward, beskar-arm braced against the searing air, cutting through the flames like water. He knew what that arm could do, having seen me send another opponent to the ground with a single strike. His blade rose, deflecting, creating an opening I could have seized—but restraint kept my power in check. Not here, not yet.

Our world narrowed to the rhythm of combat, the Force binding us in a ritual dance of fire and steel. Shadows flickered at the edge of my vision, where the Masters watched, unaware of the true power I kept veiled. My blade shifted, gripping the hilt with both hands as flames spiraled around my beskar limb. The boy's eyes widened, his stance faltering as he watched the fire coiling around the metal.

He raised his free arm, desperate to deflect, but his fear betrayed him. The strike was mine—until a resonant *bang* shattered the silence. The sound jarred me, just enough to miss my mark, my fist glancing past his form. A surge of fury flared within, raging against the interruption, yet I forced it into a cold, tempered edge.

The Keeper approached as I surveyed the boy, his robes singed, marked by flames. I remained untouched. I'd won, though no one would call it victory. The true question was whether the restraint I'd shown, the power I'd kept veiled, would be understood.

The man offered us a smile once closer. "You both fought well and while neither achieved victory, I judge that you are both ready for the final trial." As he spoke, another member of the Hall – easy to determine by the deep brown clothing they wore, similar in many ways to Jedi robes though without much of the undergarments, moved forward. Knowing what he wanted, I twirled my blade around and presented the hilt to him and my opponent did the same. "That will come this evening after you have both rested and recovered from your previous trials."

We bowed to the Custodian, accepting his words though I felt ready to face whatever the final trial was right now. I knew that was adrenaline and my lust for battle talking, but with the Force under my command, I didn't fear any of the others fighting to become Apprentices nor would I lash out and break my cover simply to satiate my urges.

The Custodian offered me a smile. “You show remarkable ease for an off-worlder with sliding into alignment with The Gift.”

I smiled back, having faced this question multiple times during my time with the tribe. “When one is born into warfare, one learns to accept every advantage one has. However, it was only recently that I learnt why I had an advantage of knowing how and when to move before it happened; one I trained with another sect before coming to Kro Var.”

“Yes, I have heard you trained with a group called the Matukai,” I nodded confirming that, “once your trials are over, regardless of how you fare in the final test, I would enjoy speaking with you about the training you did there. There is wisdom in studying how others view The Gift and how it is used.”

“Certainly, though they are the only other Force sect I’ve visited with my son. I have interacted with the *Jetii*, but I’ve never asked them much about their philosophy, and from what I understand, your people have little trust in the *Jetii* because of how they use the... Gift.”

“Indeed.” The Custodian turned after getting in the final word and walked away. After giving my opponent a nod, I turned and moved toward where those from the tribe I had trained with were gathered, savouring the understanding that only the time limit had saved my opponent from defeat. He might still have been granted permission to attempt whatever the final trial was, but I suspected that wouldn’t have been the case.

As I moved, my smile grew wider as I revelled in how easy it was becoming to slip into the Force; to have it flow around me, granting me insight of what to do and when while ensuring it did as I wanted. It’d been over a year and a half since taking **Natural Selection** and it was almost instinctual to do so, though I understood that coming to continually rely on it risked leaving me open to moments when the Force was either blocked or when another had greater domination over it than I had.

I’d spent thousands of hours, most nights since I barely required sleep, deep in meditation working to align the Force with my goals, to ensure it was my ally and not my enemy. Now, there had been moments, lasting no more than a nanosecond, where the Force seemed to hesitate, not wishing to aid me as I desired, but those were becoming less common and so far in my training, yet to expose me to true danger.

“You passed!” The exclamation came from Pamaris, one of my fellow Acolytes from the tribe. Most of the others were reluctant to get close to me, fearing me as an outsider, but Pamaris wasn’t. That may well be because his inclination lay with Water and Wind, as it made him inquisitive and patient with others. Pamaris had passed all four stages of the trials as well, while most of the other students hadn’t, which probably explained the glares I was getting from them.

Their opinion, however, didn’t matter. Nor did Pamaris’ nor even Master Walrion in all honesty. All that mattered was completing as much of the training as possible in the remaining month or so I intended to spend

on Kro Var. Each day remained a challenge, needing to walk the fine line between showing impressive regular improvement and not having that improvement be too great, and thus risk discovery of what I truly was.

Some of the other students in the tribe, and even a few Warriors, had attempted to force me to break my façade, going so far as to carry out actions that had left me slightly wounded. The urge to lash out, to strike them down for their actions remained strong, but I was better than my base desires; certainly, better than those fools who dared challenge my power. The only thing that might, conceivably have me break cover would be a threat against Anakin.

Only one Warrior had even suggested that, and after I'd beaten him down viciously for the threat – without drawing on any Force power I might add – the village had understood that I wouldn't tolerate such comments or behaviour toward my son. That warrior, once the matter had been deliberated on by the Elders, had been sent on with a caravan travelling for months to one of the few cities on the continent. They had yet to return, which was good for the pitiful excuse for a warrior. If he suggested going after Anakin again, I wouldn't be as lenient in my response. Nor hold back on revealing the full extent of my power to him and his tribe.

Now, while I'd kept myself distant from most of those I was studying alongside, by choice and by circumstance, Anakin hadn't, which was entirely expected. He was very much a people person, always seeking the best in others. Two of his group, a pair of twins not born in the village, had become his newest friends.

It was this ability of Anakin's to make friends and seek the best in them, that I felt had been exploited by Sidious to turn Anakin into Vader in the other timeline. Now, I couldn't claim to be immune to this same failing, seen when Serra had been in danger on Naboo and when Anakin had been kidnapped, but I was better able to handle the dangers of having relationships with others due to my maturity. Anakin had a long time to learn that control, though while I was teaching him how to do so I wasn't going to deny him the chance to make friends as we travelled.

"Yeah, but I should've won," I replied to Pamaris, knowing if I stayed quiet any longer he might think I was ignoring him. I wouldn't classify him as a friend, but he was sociable with me.

"Perhaps," a new voice said, drawing my attention, revealing that Master Walrion standing nearby, "but victory in your last duel was not required. All you had to do was prove your capability against someone as skilled as yourself. Those you defeated in the earlier rounds were unready for their trials," around us, several members of his tribe looked away, reminded of their failures in earlier duels, "this last trial was to show you were ready for your final test."

"That doesn't sound ominous at all," I muttered, using a wide smile to make clear I looked forward to the challenge.

"What is life without challenge?" He replied, matching my smile. "Now come. You have time before your final trial, and it would be wise to use that to rest and prepare."

After giving Pamaris a nod, I followed Walrion. Around us, most of those in the tribe who had come to attempt their Apprentice trials glared up at me. I, however, didn't care; they had proven themselves unworthy of the position they sought while I had not. All that remained was one final test, but I could feel the Force sliding around me, offering its help to ensure I emerged victorious.

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As the green flames surged closer, I dove to one side, their scorching heat grazing past as I rolled into a landing. Pain flared in my left leg—a harsh reminder, tempting me to unleash fury on the fool who dared wound me. But surrendering to that urge would be a surrender of my purpose, my control, and the Force itself.

Instead, I channeled the anger inward, sharpening my focus, honing my movements to a razor's edge. Yet, even as I rose to retaliate, my power felt constrained, a fraction of what I could wield if I allowed the Force to surge unchecked. Five months of holding back, lowering myself to match those around me, grated against every instinct. But now, so close to completing my trials, I couldn't risk shattering my disguise.

The flames gathered at my fingertips, yet before I could release them, the emerald blaze arced again toward my new position. "Enough," I growled, springing forward to evade the green inferno as best I could. Unlike the previous duels, this one stripped me of my blade, pitting me against a Fire Master. Survival alone was the objective—time the only measure of success. Yet, the Custodian's cruelty lay in concealing the duration, forcing each Acolyte to fight as though every second might be the last.

Rushing across the arena, I scanned for anything I could use. This duel wasn't held within the Hall of the Four but in an open arena, like a colosseum with rows of seats filled with eager spectators, those who had failed their own trials watching hungrily. Every attack I attempted was swallowed by the Fire Master's flames, his green fire devouring my efforts with effortless contempt. The cheers that rose with each failed attempt only fanned my irritation.

I knew the Fire Master wasn't aiming to kill, though he wouldn't hesitate to wound. In truth, if we clashed with full strength, I would crush him; he wielded the Force narrowly, through a singular mastery, while I could command it in ways he couldn't comprehend. Yet here I was, forced to endure this torment, to bide my time.

Then I saw it—a pillar of stone, no doubt raised by an Earth Shaper in an earlier duel. It was broad enough to shield me from view, at least briefly, and I sprinted toward it. To the spectators, the seconds I spent rolling, rising, and darting to the pillar would seem brief, but to me, with the Force amplifying each sensation, it was an eternity, my mind racing through strategies, discarding each in turn as inadequate.

Just as I reached the pillar, four steps from cover, all thoughts of strategy fled. Around the pillar, another funnel of green flames twisted toward me, the Fire Master's trap. Fury erupted, raw and consuming, pulsing through my veins as I realized I had no escape.

I couldn't stop, couldn't veer from the path, couldn't reveal my power to evade what was coming. In the agonizing slowness of the moment, I braced myself, arms raised in a futile guard against the oncoming blaze. I closed my eyes, the searing heat enveloping me, burning through layers of will and flesh alike. I knew the cost this might exact; it might end my trials here, rob me of my chance to ascend as an Apprentice Fire Shaper.

But I wouldn't flinch, wouldn't turn away. If this was how the duel would end, I would face it head-on, unyielding. Pain blazed through every nerve as the flames devoured me, their heat an all-consuming fury—and then, mercifully, the world faded into darkness.

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As I lay in the bed, my gaze returned once more to my arms. Bar the beskar-covered replacement which showed no hints of damage as far as I could tell, I wore bandages from my shoulders down each arm. Those were the last bandages I had, with those for the rest of my body having healed in the days I'd been lying here.

The Shapers had a substance that accelerated the healing of the skin, and from what I'd seen, I wouldn't have any marks left on my chest, back, and legs. I could've healed the wound quicker, but that would mean drawing upon the Force and desiring it to restore my skin to its natural state. Such an act, while faster and less painful – even with the numbing agent the Shapers added to their medicine and bandages – would've ruined my cover, and after enduring the mind-searing pain from the duel with the Fire Master, I'd be a son of a Hutt before I made such an elementary mistake.

When I'd first awoken, and been told of my scars, of which my arms had taken the brunt of the blow, being the only section of me, outside of my head, the Water Shapers – or at least those who had learnt to harness their gifts for healing – had told me I would retain the scars from my trial. At least those on my arms. Those elsewhere would heal fully, and my hair – burnt away by the flames – was already beginning to return. I'd started to enjoy having slightly longer hair, allowing it to reach down past my shoulders, and not feeling it there – instead, having to endure any breeze on my exposed skull – was perhaps more off-putting than the scars hidden by the bandages.

For a few moments I had considered healing the scars that would be left once I left Kro var, but Master Walrion had entered the room not long after and stated why the scars on my arms were important. The scars that lay under the bandages were badges of honour to the Shapers, with every one of them, all the way up to the Grandmasters, having such marks if they learnt to Shape fire.

Other elements could leave scars, but the only element – at least of the base four – that always left such marking was fire. The issue, as I lay in the bed after nearly a week, was that no one had explained why the scars were important. I had a few ideas, but without confirmation, I couldn't be certain of anything.

That had meant the anger I felt for having to endure the bandage, for being forced to experience the pain of my body being engulfed in flames, only grew stronger. Thankfully, after time training with the Matukai, and the Shapers, and learning some ways to focus such rage from Adas, I had no issues controlling my rage. Shaping and guiding it in the ways I wished was child's play and while that was a simple matter for any who understood the power that lay in achieving dominance over one's emotions, it was such a relief to have that. Particularly when I remembered my time with the Bando Gora and fighting the Vong.

The upside, or at least the biggest one, to being stuck in a bed for a week was that it granted me time to think. On both the next few steps while on Kro Var and the ones I needed to take to regain what I'd lost from taking **Natural Selection** and where Anakin and I would head next.

I couldn't see us staying on Kro Var for much more than another month. I wanted to see what new techniques I would learn as a Fire Apprentice, but after that, there was little need to stay. I'd seen enough from Fire Masters, and painfully experienced more, to see ways I could harness my training to further my abilities. Perhaps in ways that few Jedi and Sith might ever consider. What also assured me that our time with the Shapers was growing to a close was the way Anakin was slowly becoming agitated. As if he longed to move on and explore more of the galaxy.

I shared the same sensation but was better able to hide it from others, but I could sense the Force shifting as if suggesting we needed to move on. That some unknown problem was slowly forming not far into our future. Because of that, my thoughts turned toward powers I had yet to rediscover.

Phase and **Teleport** were the two obvious examples of such powers. While I knew I could use them, I had remained reluctant to attempt either. Screwing up with them could easily prove fatal. I'd known I needed to learn how to harness the Force properly before attempting to reapply those powers, and as my time with the Shapers grew to a close, I felt it was almost time to add them back into my arsenal.

They were extremely powerful abilities, but their usage in combat – bar for quick withdrawals – was limited. Or at least they had been before taking **Natural Selection**. Once I was again comfortable using the powers, I'd have to test if that still held, but my feeling was that they would. Still, they offered me avenues that remained closed to most other Force users, and I'd have to start trusting their use, if not in direct combat, then to move into or out of such situations faster. It had been a regular flaw of mine too, when forced into rash actions, that I'd not used them, and that was a flaw I wished to remove.

I'd given more thought to Adas' suggestion on the creation of a new crystal for my lightsaber, and while I was reluctant to commit to it, as it was an obvious path down a road I wasn't comfortable travelling, there was some wisdom in at least attempting the process. Or using it in another way that he might not approve of, but might be more suitable to my needs.

That would come once we were away from Kro Var, but I'd also have to make sure that I didn't leave Anakin and the others waiting around on me while I attempted what I wanted to try. Fenrir and Simvyl were growing agitated with the boredom of not doing much. They went out hunting and training every other day, but both wished to do something else. Raven wanted to fly, her desire to feel the wind surging over her skin growing with each passing minute. As for the droids, while R2 seemed unaffected by such an extended period with little to do, HK had stated a desire to find some meatbags to test his latest calibrations upon.

The only issue with leaving Kro Var soon was that we'd not get the chance to study with an Air Master. Even if we travelled to another tribe elsewhere on the planet, Master Walrion had made clear none would train me until I had become a Fire Warrior. Even then, most wouldn't begin teaching a secondary element until I had mastered the first. That was, even if Anakin and I had the potential to shape air, there simply wasn't the time to commit to the training, so I'd have to learn the ability on my own through trial and error.

I didn't think I yet had to reinsert myself into events of substance in the galaxy, but I knew that the time I had to prepare myself and Anakin before the first beats of the drums of war sounded was growing to a close. Nearly eighteen months had passed since Palpatine had been elected Chancellor, and another month after that Damask had joined him as Co-Chancellor. By now the pair would have the levers of power aligned to ensure they remained in office for as long as was necessary before a galactic crisis ensured none would want them to step down.

Whoever they had chosen to replace Dooku as Darth Tyrannus – if that name was still used – would soon be ready to begin stirring the pot. Assuming it remained a Jedi Master, then it wouldn't take much to search the Holonet for mentions of a member of the Order speaking out publicly on the failings of the Republic in the Outer Rim, but to search for that I needed to be away from Kro Var and back in civilization.

The question, once that figure was revealed, was determining if they had the acumen of Dooku to influence others in the ways he had in the formation of the CIS, or if they would travel down a slightly different path. That, however, would only become clear once I knew who the Banite Sith's puppet was.

Even if I had to wait a few more years to discover the puppet, I could start making moves to prepare. The development of a third faction, one offering another path forward, was perhaps my best choice. That faction would be far smaller than the Republic or CIS, but with the right people, planets, and companies backing it, I felt it held a good chance to royally fuck up the Banite Sith's plans, perhaps even offering sight of the path through the coming chaos that I and Anakin had to thread.

Something hinted to me that beyond us and Dooku, Maul and Vosa had roles to play in finding and then widening that path, however, I was unsure of what those roles would be, and in the case of Vosa, if I wanted to accept her service.

The obvious non-Force users to focus on were the Mando'ade and Lokella. The latter were small but dedicated toward goals I could support and would induce new forms of chaos into the Banite Sith's plans. The

former, however, had the potential to derail things majorly. There were, potentially, hundreds of millions of Mando'ade spread across the galaxy, and if they could be united under a single banner, under a new Mand'alor, and bring the full strength of their arms and technology to bear, they could be incredibly useful.

However, they alone wouldn't be enough, but I had a few plans, some downright insane that I could enact that might, if not outright help my cause, then disrupt the Banite Sith's plans. One such group was the Anzati, or more accurately their assassins.

From the general stories on the Holonet that one read of the Anzati, they sounded like this galaxy's version of vampires. Feeding on the 'soup' or 'luck' of others to enhance themselves and live longer was the stuff that gave people nightmares. More so when one considered that they considered those strong in the Force delicacies of the highest order.

When one dug into their culture, however, one saw that while all that was true, only those who lost control of themselves and became little more than feral beasts deserving of nothing but a quick and painful death, attacked and fed on others so indiscriminately. The majority of the species lived for centuries, learnt to control, and rise above their urges, and through those centuries if not millennia of life, trained to become some of the deadliest fighters in the galaxy, with many specialising in assassinations. So much so that HK considered them the apex meatbag species for such missions, which from him was as high praise as he could offer to a sentient.

All that meant that I would be safe to train with an Anzati Master Assassin if they were willing to train a Force user. However, Anakin and the others wouldn't save perhaps for Simvyl. For the droids, Fenrir, and Raven, it would be another five or six months of sitting around, but I felt the time was something Anakin could use.

I was uncertain how easily I could slip away from my training to oversee Anakin's; however, he had his project waiting for him. He'd not been able to focus on it while we were on Kro Var, but nearly half a year of training by himself aboard Raven would grant him the time to create his droid; something that might help keep HK and R2 occupied as well, at least to some degree.

The door to my room sliding open drew me from my thoughts, and a moment later Master Walrion stepped in. "Good Morning. How goes your recovery?"

"The pain's gone, and I can finally feel my fingers," I said, flexing them for emphasis, savoring the relief.

He smiled at the sight. "Good. The healers expected you'd be ready for the final bandages to come off today. Then we can begin the last stage of your trial."

I frowned, puzzled. The battle with the Fire Master was supposed to be the final test. "I've finished the duels," I said, watching as he stepped further into the room, a hint of amusement on his face.

"Yes, the duels are done," he said, his smile widening, "but you've yet to be confirmed as an Apprentice of Fire. You still need the markings that signify you as one of us."

"How are the tattoos applied?"

"The process is simple." He raised his arms, revealing the intricate flames etched from his hands to his shoulders. "Look closely, at the places where the flames seem to meet and intertwine."

I leaned in, examining the stylized flames that danced up his skin. They crept under his clothing, but I knew they extended across his chest. The markings were striking, giving the impression that his arms were alight, an effect that became even more mesmerizing when he summoned flames to dance across the tattoos. The ink seemed to come alive, each line of fire blending seamlessly with the real flames, a merging of flesh and fire that was both a mark of power and a promise of what lay ahead.

"Do you remember how in your first lesson; I spoke of what my tattoos represented?"

It took only the slightest bit of effort to have the memory come to the forefront of my thoughts and in crystal clear detail. "That they mark your mastery over the flames, and display to others you have proven your status as a Master of Fire."

Walrion nodded and lowered his arms. "Indeed, and you have now passed your Apprentice trial, it is time for you to gain your first markings." That held some appeal, as I had no issue with tattoos, at least not when they weren't as all-consuming as Walrion's. "Each Shapers' markings are different," he continued, moving closer to the bed, "the marks shaped by events of their trials. The scars your arms bear will form the base of your markings, and the more dangerous the trial, the greater the scars one can experience." I nodded, seeing the logic in that.

"What about the other elements?"

"Those are not as prone to scarring the body as fire, but where they do they are used in the markings. For example, Master Ranalís' markings to show his mastery over earth are based on scars. At least the ones showing his status as Master. Earlier trials rarely leave the same lasting impression as the cleansing flames do."

“In that case, I’m honoured to accept my markings,” I said with a smile. A tattoo should always have meaning, signifying something the person did or earned, and not just a mark because they liked a picture. The idea of healing the scars was gone now, replaced by the understanding they carried respect and honour with the Shapers.

“Good. The Custodian and the other Masters were concerned you might reject markings based on personal belief.”

I chuckled. “You remember the markings on my armour?” He nodded, remembering when I’d brought part of the armour to show the sigils I bore for both my clan and myself. I’d done so as Anakin had detailed the story of my verd’goten to his friends, and it had spread through the tribe to the point I had to prove them with a recording of the hunt. While many disliked the use of technology to show that, almost all were impressed that I downed the greater krayt dragon with nothing more than a knife. “Then I’m uncertain why you would think I would reject marks of honour and courage.”

Walrion grinned. “I knew of this, but the others did not. They needed me to confirm that you were agreeable.” He turned and moved toward the door. “I will have the healers visit you soon to remove the bandages. Then this evening, your markings will be created so that you can display them with honour on your travels.”

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I watched carefully as I ignited the fuel at the centre of the furnace. Having taken days to gather the ferrocrete needed for it, craft that into shape, and then build the forge, the last thing I wanted was for it to fail as I started the fire at its core.

Quickly, the heat rose, stifling the surrounding environment. The Force protected me from the worst of it, yet I could see the air around us simmer from the intense temperature emanating from within the forge. The flames inside roared; twisting around seeking freedom to destroy everything around me, but I knew I couldn’t allow that. I had to take control of the flames, control the heat they generated, and focus toward helping me achieve my goal.

Adas had been clear that to forge a crystal in such an intensive way, the Force user had to be the dominant party; they had to ensure for however long the process took that the fire obeyed them in every way they demanded. For the Sith, that meant building a crystal from scratch, applying each layer of lattice one at a time, painstakingly using their fury to endure the time and effort needed to do that, and ignoring the pain brought forth by the intense heat of the furnace as they knelt before it. I was uncertain if I could do that, and with the cracked crystal available to me, I hoped I wouldn’t have to.

Once the flames were hot enough, I opened one palm, and using the Force lifted my cracked lightsaber crystal into the furnace. Attempting to repair the crystal using the method the Sith used to create their crystals was a longshot, but since there was no other way to recover the crystal for its primary purpose, I figured it was worth a shot.

On the journey to this remote planet – one in a system known simply by galactic coordinates rather than a name – I'd spent hours using the Force to examine the two micro crystals down to their atomic structure. Or at least as best as I could. The Force had resisted helping me, almost as if it knew what I intended and wanted to stop me, but it had bent to my will and assisted my work; just as it was going to do now.

Even as the crystal floated to the centre of the furnace, I could feel it buckling under the heat. The crack within it widened as the heat affected the lattices within as the flames probed for more weaknesses to exploit. If I was simply trying to repair the crystal, then that would be an issue, but I understood that I couldn't do that. No, what I was attempting was to break the crystal down and rebuild it into something usable.

Focusing my emotions into a fine edge, using it to slice through the Force as it tried to prevent me from accessing the elements that went into the creation of the crystal, I got to work.

In the depths of his holocron, I knew Adas expected this to fail, for it to become nothing but a waste of my time. However, I felt I had to try. This crystal was one I worked to acquire, defeating the worst possible versions of myself in the process, and then discussing the future for a brief moment with Revan.

My mind knew what I had to do, and the Force would bend to my desires helping me achieve that. This was going to take hours, if not days, but I felt the effort was worth the risk.

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I slumped back, the exhaustion of what I'd done finally catching up with me as I felt my work was finished. However, before I could savour rebuilding my crystal, I felt a shift in the Force and a flare of **Danger Sense**. Understanding what was about to happen, and as the ferrocrete of the furnace began to glow ominously, I reached out and engulfed the furnace in a Force bubble.

The furnace exploded spectacularly, and I had to shield my eyes. The bubble I'd created held, and I felt it strain against the pressure that slammed into it. However, I wasn't letting the bubble fail. If I did, I was dead. The Force bent to my desires, strengthening the bubble, ensuring it withstood the onslaught inside.

Opening my eyes, I saw the flames moving slowly around the inside of the bubble, desperately seeking a weakness it could exploit; a gap to escape and unleash its fearsome fury. The hand that had shielded my eyes from the initial explosion came up, helping me focus on strengthening the bubble. The flames inside moved around slowly, allowing me to see individual spikes of flame fight with the bubble and other spikes, seeking to assert their dominance over each other.

The heat and intensity from the flames were easy to feel outside the bubble, far surpassing anything I'd seen any Shaper generate and control. That, however, didn't mean I couldn't control them. Closing my eyes, I focused on the flames, attempting to assert my will over them. Before Kro Var, this would never have worked, but with my training with them to draw upon, and the full breadth of the Force at my command, I wouldn't be losing this battle. The fury of the ferocious flames would bend to my desires.

The flames pushed back, somehow understanding that an outside force was threatening them. Their intensity grew stronger, challenging my position, but I wasn't going to lose this battle. Reaching inward, I found the source of my emotions, those filtered and focused into a razor's edge and drew on that. Every cell in my body was fuelled by my emotions, pushing the Force to strengthen me further and bend the fury contained in the bubble to my demands.

I watched, a small, delighted smirk creeping onto my face as the flames, dancing to their nature, slowly started slipping in intensity. The air inside the bubble slowly was dying out as it was fed upon by what had destroyed the furnace. Knowing this was the moment to begin to end this struggle, I reached out, grasping control of the flames while at the same time shrinking the bubble.

The flames, those that bent easily to my demands, turned on their compatriots, feasting on them even as the space available to the fire shrunk. Those flames not under my control slammed into those that were and the bubble, raging against what was happening, but I didn't care. I knew this battle was over. All that remained was to snuff out the remaining strands that refused to obey me.

This kept up until the only flames left within the bubble were subservient to me. Wanting to end this farce and see what state my crystal was in; at the same moment, I had the flames shoot upwards and opened the top of the bubble. The fire easily accepted my wishes and raced skyward. They rose like a rocket, and then on my command, once high enough to not be a threat to anyone, I flicked open my hand.

The flames exploded outward, resembling a firework with such intensity that if this was a habited planet, I suspected those in orbit might well have seen the momentary flash before the flames died.

With that done, I slumped back on my legs. To anyone watching, everything that had happened had taken place in merely a few seconds. With the Force enhancing me, time had passed much slower for me, and it felt as if I'd just run a marathon. Yet even in my exhaustion, I felt a surge of delight. I had dominated the flames and proved my dominance over them. now all that remained was to...

"Fuck!" the word slipped from me as I saw that, where the furnace had been, all that remained was ash. The ferrocrete not consumed by the flames slipped away as a gentle breeze past over us. "FUCK!" I screamed, my voice blasting away the remaining dust as I understood that, at some point, while I'd been fighting the flames, the crystal I'd worked for Force-knew how long to rebuild was gone. Reduced to ash along with the furnace.

The ground around me cracked, the dust scattered with the shockwave that emanated from me as the rage I'd drawn on to control the flames was if only for the slightest moment, unleashed fully. Plants were ripped from the ground, the topsoil and their roots shredded by my rage, while trees metres from me bent and cracked as my fury slammed into them.

As the blast of fury eased, I looked at the spot where the furnace and crystal had been. The ground around it hadn't endured my fury, clearing a ditch around that spot and me. Yet where the furnace had stood, the ground had turned to glass, which had then shattered when I'd lost my control for a fraction of a second. As I regained control of my fury, I sensed Anakin's panic. Behind that, similar feelings of worry came from Raven and Fenrir, the former also expressing a primal desire to fight those who had angered me.

Once the rage was reforged into a cold, hard blade, I pushed it back down inside myself and then reached out to the trio. I let them know, with feelings pushed through the Force, that I was fine and not to worry. Raven and Fenrir accepted that easily, though there was doubt coming from Anakin. Another wave of reassurance, mixed with disappointment and determination settled his doubt and I brought my thoughts back to my location.

Rebuilding the crystal had failed, much as Adas would've expected it to. However, as I reviewed what had happened, and what had caused the furnace to explode, I understood my flaw. The mistake hadn't perhaps been in attempting to reforge the crystal but in the construction of the furnace. Reviewing the memories of its explosion, I could see where the flames had first weakened and then engulfed the ferrocrete. I saw the flaw in the design. One so slight it had slipped my attention in the furnace's construction. The crystal was gone, but the process was proven to work. At least so long as the furnace didn't explode.

I shifted around, wanting to stand for the first time in Force-knew how long. The muscles in my legs protested, straining against what felt like days of inactivity, yet within a short while I was standing. Carefully turning and stretching – I might not experience cramps as most sentients did, but I could feel pain in my body from being stationary for so long – I worked out any potential kinks in my muscles and sinews.

The crystal was gone, but this wasn't a failure. Simply a way in which my plans had displayed a flaw. Knowing now what that was, I would repeat the process, and this time I would have a crystal for my new lightsaber. This time, however, it would be one built from nothing more than my desires.

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