

So far, attempts had failed. Howlader knew in his heart of hearts what he must do. It had started with a night in a cantina. It had started with alcohol. It had started with so much alcohol. Then, a little prompt here, a little nudging with the Force there. Subtle little jabs both within and without the Force, and with much work, the acolyte had opened up.

He had undergone initiations. He had kept mostly to the fringes and the outer edges of the Children's influence. It had been slow and steady work, but the Master at Arms was no slouch.

Finally, he had what he hoped would be the first meeting of many. He sat in the meeting room, waiting with the others. Occasionally, he had received an odd look or even a glance of bewilderment. A subtle wave of his arm and application of the Force, and all was well again. If nothing else, Howlader exuded confidence.

So far, he had been fortunate. The Master at Arms knew the Shadowseers and Lightbringers could potentially sense one of his power, if he slipped up. So far, he had been fortunate. He was playing a dangerous game, with so much to gain, and so much to lose. So far, he had been fortunate.

"Another has joined the circle." A tall woman with a brisk, Imperial accent declared, drawing the attention of all. Raising an eyebrow, Howlader cleared his throat, focusing on the motion of his finger as he tickled the speaker's brain with the Force. He would be just another face in the crowd. "I wish to extend open arms to the latest to join the case. Jacros Centani, will you please stand?"

A murmur broke out amongst some of the others sitting around the long, polished table that Howlader was seated at. He looked around, before giving a slight and ungainly bow. He did not want to stand out, so he tried to make the motion as meek and unassuming as he could. Several of the assembled gave a wave or a word of greetings before the Elder sat down again, his attention upon the speaker.

"Tonight, we will discuss the part that each of you will play in our conquest." A holoprojector rose up from an indentation on the table, buzzing to life. A small blue-white image of the galaxy to scale appeared above the table. Several large, white star looking projections were assigned to different areas of the galaxy. Each was well known to Howlader. He could pick out the likes of Caperion, Kiast, Aliso, Orian, Zsoldos and the rest. They were all Brotherhood system, owned by the various clans. He raised an eyebrow, stroking his chin thoughtfully in order to appear more attentive.

"These are areas we will prepare to strike." The woman poked at the projection that represented Dajorra as she spoke the final word. "Some of them have even been foolish enough to lock away their ill-gotten prizes. Those worlds will be robbed of their hordes. The rest, we will purge from the face of the galaxy." The woman turned to a tall human dressed in a uniform reminiscent of the Imperial Admiralty. "This man has infiltrated one of their sects, masquerading as a member of their 'Warhost'. He is one of many who have been our eyes in the galaxy." The man looked

proudly over the assembled crowd. Howlader raised a hand in preparation, but it was not soon enough.

"What is that!?" He yelled, pointing at Howie. Confusion rippled through the crowd as they looked at the undercover Master at Arms. "Is there a BEAR sitting in our midst? Why is there a BEAR!?"

Howlader waved a hand in the air, covering his face in mock embarrassment. He reached out in the Force, to try to sate the confusion. The first speaker turned with a look of concern at the uniformed man. "What are you talking about?"

"A bear!" The man pointed, drawing a growl from Howie as he projected his desired image into the Force. He had come too far to let the farce go now. The woman motioned to someone out of Howlader's sight. "What has possessed you to allow that THING in here?" The uniformed infiltrator was practically shrieking now.

"Sir, we need you to come with us." A Twi'lek, dressed in a uniform that harkened back to the Rebel Alliance, grabbed the accuser by an arm. "We can't have you making wild, baseless accusations. We need you to calm down, and continue the brief please. Time is of the essence."

"But it is a BEAR!" The man's volume rose, his voice breaking up as he was forcibly hauled out of the room.

"We will have to continue this meeting, without the data on the Orian system." The woman's tone was apologetic. "I am sorry for the disturbance, Jacros."

Howlader gave a grunt of understanding as he nodded his big bear head, and slouched his big bear shoulders. He had been fortunate. He had been cunning. He would be safe. After all, what sentient whom believed themselves to be of sound mind would seriously believe they had allowed a bear, or this particular bear, into their midst!?