

I don't own Ranma or Star Wars.

This was the winner of the small story poll this month. Given the fact my Harry fans had two large meals last month compared to scraps for my Ranma, I wanted to see this imbalance corrected this month.

This has been edited by me using Grammarly in segments and Hiryo. I don't doubt there will be small mistakes throughout, but I hope they won't be large enough to disturb your enjoyment of the chapter.

Chapter 28: Like Wind to Sand, so Chaos to Control

For several moments the mountain's control room was silent, all of the people within looking at one another, trying to get over their shock and horror at the level of blindness on the part of the Order this revelation hinted at, as well as the level of betrayal it spoke to.

Kit looked as if he had just sucked a lemon, his habitual smile nowhere in sight as he gently tapped the tip of one of his lekku with the fingers of his left hand. Although in his case, Ranma felt it had more to do with Anakin rushing off as he had than Palpatine's ability to bamboozle the whole Jedi Order for so long. Obi-Wan looked somewhat stunned, but he had already been that out of sorts since the battle had ended and Quinlan's actions had reached him. Of the three Jedi present, only Shaak still seemed as poised as usual despite Anakin's flight or the revelation as to who the hidden Sith truly was.

In contrast, the Nova Guard were harder to read for once than the Jedi. A good deal of this had to do with their armor covering their faces, sure, but their body language, which Ranma had noticed normally had several things in common with normal humans, showed a strange dichotomy. On the one hand, Cro looked furious, his hands clenching and unclenching, his body rigid. Yurrick, on the other hand, looked both angry and... respectful? Weird, but Ranma knew that the Nova Guard's belief in strength was quite fluid on what being strong actually meant. *He's probably impressed by the Sith's plan and how long Palpatine's been hiding his true colors, whereas Cro's furious at the stab in the back implies.*

Ranma let the rest of them try to come to grips with things for a few minutes before slamming his hands together, causing a loud clapping noise that caused Shaak to grimace, her hands going up to her montrals, sending a momentary glare at Ranma, who smiled back sheepishly for a second before becoming serious. "Alright, folks, I understand that this is a huge deal, and I'm kind of shocked too. But remember, Anakin's already gone. Unless all of you think he will be able to somehow remove the Chancellor on his own, I suggest we get moving. Because I would wager that any resources the Jedi could bring to bear on him will probably be matched by resources he already has in place to protect himself."

"The Senate Guard answer directly to the Chancellor. I recall he rotates them through his own personal guard detail as well," Obi-wan murmured, shaking his head slowly from side

to side before looking over at Kit. The Nautolan did not look back. He was still dismayed at Anakin's actions, very obviously wondering how he could have somehow curtailed Anakin's headstrong nature in the few weeks he had been the younger human's Master. "They could well have been subordinated in some fashion. To say nothing of his own personnel, his aides and personal agents who could be around the place."

"And there are the resources he can call upon as Chancellor. Including having people willing to pass on information about the comings and goings of Jedi within Coruscant's Space Overwatch Command and Trade Integration Service," Shaak murmured thoughtfully. "Still, that can be solved by using some of our fallen brethren's IDs. How Anakin will deal with it is a question."

"Right, and... Space Overwatch Command and Trade Integration Service? Really?" Ranma asked, momentarily derailed.

"That is what happens when the naming nomenclature of bureaucracies gets out of control. Normally it's just called Space Watch," Shaak answered with a snort, reaching over to grasp Ranma's hand and squeezing it once in thanks for his help in pushing through the surprise revelation. That had smacked all of the Jedi back on their heels despite their self-control.

The Chancellor had long been known as a friend to the Jedi, although he tended to put the rule of law over that friendship, which was completely understandable to the Order. Furthermore, he had been on Coruscant for decades, been Chancellor for nearly a decade now, and a senator before that. All that time around the Jedi Order and none of them had seen what he was hiding underneath the surface? *The man's Force Cloak skill must be incredibly well-trained, as well as his acting ability. On top of all that, his strength with the Force should not be underestimated.*

When she voiced these thoughts, Kit came back to himself, shaking his head slightly. "Were it simple strength in the Force, I would wager Anakin might be able to match him. That young man's power in the Force is superlative. But he lacks control and subtlety. And he is now so clouded with his emotions even more than normal, which..." Kit's lips quirked, his lekku all twitching. "Is saying something. No, we cannot assume that he will be able to face Palpatine, not physically, not in a war of words, or in any other manner. He is but a padawan; Palpatine is most decidedly the equivalent of Master Yoda, a Grand Master of the Sith. Which means Ranma is right. We need to go after him, and quickly. There is no way I can see that confrontation coming out in a way that the galaxy is better for it. Or that Anakin remains alive and... himself afterward."

"You think Palpatine could turn Anakin to the Dark Side?" Obi-Wan questioned, surprised.

"No," Kit answered firmly, his large black eyes almost flashing at the very idea. "Ever since the revelation that he might have been created by the Sith somehow, Anakin has been

extremely firm in his desire to never fall to the Dark Side. But there is a personal connection there, and he would not need to give into the Dark Side in order to be manipulated by Palpatine to act foolishly.”

“We also need to do it clandestinely. Going back to the point I already made about the Chancellor having agents in Space Command, we’re missing a major point here. Palpatine is the Chancellor. If we try to remove him, we had best have ironclad evidence, and while these recordings are extremely suspicious and probably could convince many, it will **not** convince the entirety of the Senate,” Shaak warned. “Not in the middle of a war.”

“Maybe not, but it would startle him, push Palpy onto the back foot. And people who are startled often make mistakes. The guy has to have been sweating buckets before this, knowing we had Wayland under our control and that the Confederacy couldn’t reclaim the planet...” Ranma trailed off, an almost unholy look of delight suddenly appearing on his face as an idea occurred to him. Yet before Shaak could question him, Ranma shook that thought off and went on. “But that’s for later. Right now, how are we going to get there without being recognized?”

“We can give you a voice distortion machine. They’re pretty normal military hardware,” the Nova Guard Marshall stated, then looked over at the tactical map for a moment. “Beyond that, you will need to leave the Wild Blade behind for now and instead take one of the Kuat freighters. One of their fast special cargo freighters. Their speed in hyperspace and in real space should allow you the best opportunity to catch up to young Skywalker.”

From there, Shaak and Obi-Wan, who was the most experienced of them when it came to investigation and espionage, while Ranma moved over to Kit, commiserating with him about Anakin’s idiocy, comparing it to how Ranma had gone off half-cocked a lot of times when he was younger, mostly in search of a cure for his curse. It was very obvious to Ranma that Anakin had reacted on a purely emotional level to the revelation of Palpatine’s true loyalties, and the time it would take them to get to Coruscant would allow him some time to calm down. “And hopefully, he is self-aware to apologize. That’s also something I had a lot of issues with, well, apologizing and really meaning it, anyway.”

Kit snorted and pushed Ranma playfully on the shoulder. “If Anakin apologizes to me, be certain I will know if he does not mean it. I will go get K’Kruhk and the rest of the crew.” He then smirked and walked nonchalantly towards the door. “Oh, and one of you will need to tell Master Yoda and the rest what we’re up to. They’re still on Corellia, right?”

“I’ll do that. We’re still using Japanese as a code language, right?” Ranma inquired, moving over to the communications equipment.

Shaak joined him while letting Cro take over to plan what ship and what IDs they would be taking to Coruscant. The message, however, was very short, as Yoda didn’t know enough

Japanese to carry on a conversation. “*We have evidence of the Hidden Sith being Chancellor Palpatine. We will be moving against him soon.”

Yoda took time to translate this, while Windu, the only one there who knew Japanese, looked as if he had been carved from stone. Finally, the Grand Master’s ears drooped, but when he spoke, it was clear that even under the high level of encryption this communication was using, he expected his side of things at least to be uncovered. “Understood. Sad it is but trust the defenders of Wayland we do to continue on this project. Follow up on this, the Council cannot.”

Showing no sign of the confusion filling Ranma, Shaak bowed in answer and then cut the communication. “The shorter the communication, the harder it will be to break the cipher. And even if he does, this will tell him nothing while also telling us to act on our own.”

“Huh, the frog is really good at that kind of doublespeak game. Not certain what I think about that,” Ranma grunted.

Soon it was decided that a special cargo freighter could, once fitted with a civilian transport package, carry the crew of the Wild Blade to Coruscant. They wouldn’t have their fighters, but if it got to the point where starfighters had to be called on, it would be obvious that they had lost in some fashion. But the Nova Guard and Mandalorians brought proven military skills to this operation, which would undoubtedly be needed. The Nova Guard was also reinforced by a demolitions expert and one of their slicers. Dralshy’a would handle the tech side.

When it came to the continued defense of Wayland, everyone agreed that strategically, this would be extremely difficult for the CIS but that it was not outside the realm of possibility. To that end, the recent reinforcements, Master Koon and the rest of the Jedi, would be staying. On this mission, only Obi-wan would be joining the crew of the Wild Blade, something that Plo Koon was somewhat annoyed by.

Yet when the learned Kel Dor Master tried to look into the future to see if his presence on Coruscant would make a difference, he came away somewhat stunned. The future was in such turmoil, the Dark Side and Light roiling like a violent storm, that he could not see anything, let alone something that distinct. So he and Tiin would remain in place while the Kuat Remnants continued to rebuild the space-based infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the slicers continued to work, figuring out which local com line the damning messages had been sent from on Coruscant, tagging them in a way so they could be trailed back from the capital’s uplink center. With that, the specialist would still be able to trace it once they had physical access to the uplink center.

Within an hour of Kit rousing the others, the Kuat small goods and special transport Deep Pockets was on its way. Even with a civilian transport package in place rather than a cargo

container, there wasn't all that much room, and the Mandalorians were frustrated at having been pulled from the wake for Janice and instantly fell to grumbling.

Luckily, there were separate rooms for VIP guests, so the padawan girls were able to get one, while Ranma holed himself up in the cockpit with HK and Kit for now. This was a good thing on many levels because Shaak could sense that both Ahsoka and Talli were having issues with why a Jedi like Quinlan Vos would turn against his fellows. They had been too tired before this, but now with a few hours of sleep under their belts, the true depth of that act had hit them both, and they were very withdrawn and uncertain as they boarded the new ship, not even asking questions about what was going on. That was somewhat worrisome, and Shaak, with a series of nods to the other Jedi, indicated she would handle it.

As they moved into the room, with the girls putting down a pair of clothing to change into for the both of them and began to argue somewhat weakly about who should get the top bunk, Shaak waited, closing the door behind her with a faint woosh of displaced air. *I don't want to broach the subject, I want them to broach it with me instead. That will get them into the right mindset right off the back.*

Finally, the girls were done with tucking their clothing away, and after a few moments of looking between the two of them, Ahsoka began, looking at her Master where she stood by the door. "Master, do we, that is, do we know why Master Vos tried to betray the Jedi order? I mean, why was he working with the Sith? Why... why would anyone turn on their friends like that!" While she fought the Sith several times before this, Ahsoka had considered them a physical and mental threat but an open one. She had never seen someone stabbing their friends and allies in the back, and she was having trouble reconciling that act in her worldview.

"I am afraid that Quinlan's betrayal goes back to Tyrannus in a way, back when he was Master Bulq." Gesturing, Shaak had the two of them sitting down on the lower bunk as she knelt, shifting into the meditative position as she looked at the two of them. Talli instantly took the hint, shifting herself into a meditation pose of her own near the head of the bed. After a few seconds, Ahsoka followed suit even as her eyes never left the older Togrutan's.

"You know something about the various problems and issues that Aayla ran into and that Quinlan was her Master at the time. What you might not know is that Quinlan lost control of himself when he was told he would not be in charge of retrieving her. That all communication with Aayla had been lost, but he would not be allowed to search for her. This pushed him into acting out, attacking other Jedi in his fury. Once subdued, Quinlan was forced to go into a retraining program just as much as Aayla was forced to go to therapy with Master Unduli. And Bulq, who had already turned to the Dark Side, was in charge of much of that retraining."

"And instead of following through on that, Tyrannus instead steered Quinlan to the Dark Side as well. And especially these Sith, who, judging from what I've read from history books, definitely emphasize control of their emotions and cold calculation more than other Sith have

in the past,” Ahsoka understood that at least. But then a horrible thought came to her. “What about Master Tholme? His name is on the placard of the fallen back in the temple, but wasn’t he Master Vos’s teacher?”

“He was. This makes Quinlan’s betrayal of us all the more damning as it is obvious that he had something to do with his Master’s death. Turning for the Dark Side for an overabundance of lust directed at his former padawan and then killing his own Master to keep his secrets.” Shaak shook her head sadly. “Quinlan and I were not friends, but I am a close friend with Aayla, and I know how much this will hurt her.”

“But why?!” Talli said, shaking her head. She was not as experienced as Ahsoka and had actually come to respect Quinlan in the few interactions she’d had with him. She looked a little guilty for a moment, looking away, then back at Master Shaak, searching her face for any recrimination as she hesitantly admitted, “I, I can see the sense of simply, of simply walking away from the Order. It isn’t for everyone, and the Order can be a little too much about the majority than the individual. I will freely admit that I felt both frustration and resentment when I was passed over as a possible padawan simply because of my lack of Force Strength a few times. But why did Vos turn on us? On people and Masters that he knew and respected.”

“As I said, his betrayal was probably long in the making. You cannot take his actions on Wayland as anything more than a front, I’m afraid.” Talli looked down at that, and Shaak went on compassionately. “The true man Quinlan was had simply become a mask for who we had since turned into, Darth Invictus.”

“All, all this because he, he had feelings for Master Secura?” Ahsoka murmured, shaking her head. She’d been around the Twi’lek during and after the wedding until Aayla and Kit had switched places, with Aayla going with Master Fay and Kit joining the crew of the Wild Blade. Ahsoka knew how attractive the older Twi’lek was, but even so. “Is, is being in love so dangerous that it can so easily twist into hating anything that keeps you from it? Sorry Master, but that doesn’t feel right... or safe.”

“I would not say it was love, Ahsoka. Aayla and Quinlan had not been on missions together for years. Do you think Ranma and I would love one another as we do if we had only been able to meet in person occasionally since our first interactions? Never developed the connection between us?” Shaak asked archly. “Rather, he felt another emotion towards her, one far more physical in nature. I trust I don’t have to explain further?”

Ahsoka blinked at that, then after a moment, he blushed, and Shaak continued to drive the point home. “Such emotions, when not given an outlet or not being acknowledged, can fester within a person. It is not emotions that are wrong. It is in not understanding the emotion where troubles begin. Quinlan did not really understand love as an emotion. Instead, he equated lust to love. I imagine the two of you have some holostars, whose physical appearance shall we say you find pleasing to the eye? Would you say that is love?”

Both younger girls blushed, looking away, thinking not of holostars but the young Mandalorian Fabian with his helmet off. He was easily the handsomest young man either of them had ever met. It was somewhat disturbing to think of, but both of them could understand that what they had felt towards him was not love at first sight but a softer form of lust, a crush. "I, I think we can both say yes to that, Master. And no, we would not call that love." Ahsoka answered.

"Exactly. From what K'Kruhk said, it was clear Invictus felt lust toward Aayla, not love. He had built this image of Aayla in his mind, which in no way matches the reality beyond the physical and had convinced himself that it was the Order that was keeping them apart. Again, how much of that thinking was his own, and how much was Tyrannus and the Dark Side influencing them, I cannot say. But lust can all too easily become an obsession if left unchecked. With his anger at the Order and how close he has come to the Dark Side before, the three emotions merged, and Quinlan was undoubtedly easy prey for Tyrannus."

Shaak let the two girls chew on that for a second, and it was Talli who spoke up first. "Is that why you never even thought about keeping your relationship with Ranma secret, Master Ti? That you were worried that in doing so, you would face similar problems in your emotions turning to jealousy and obsession?"

"Not really. I imagine that even when I first realized my emotions were leading me to Ranma, he and I were closer, romantically speaking, than Aayla and Quinlan were. And honestly, keeping our relationship a secret never even occurred to me. Such things are just not sustainable in the long run and goes against our societal mores as a Togrutan."

Her lekku twitching slightly in amusement, Shaak decided to also give the girls some advice. "But you must remember, my relationship with Ranma from the start was that of equals. Quinlan's attachment to Aayla began when they were not equal **at all**. And I believe that his growing attachment to her also warred with the knowledge that he understood that attachment was wrong in some fashion. Which in turn would fuel his feelings of guilt, feelings of anger at himself and at the Order, and all told would have created an infinite loop feeding into the Dark Side."

She sighed then, shaking her head. "The Dark Side itself is the enemy, not the emotions that can cause your fall. Love twisted into jealousy, righteous anger into simple fury. Hatred begets nothing but more hatred, a callous disregard for the feelings and rights of others. It is in that disregard for the welfare of others, the willingness to treat people as things, that all evil springs from, not just the Dark Side."

The two young girls looked at one another, then back to Shaak, as Talli said hesitantly, "So... the trick to not fall to the Dark Side is to acknowledge negative emotions and to let them out occasionally rather than let them fester inside you? And to not reach out to the Force while feeling them, right? Not," the brown-haired girl laughed self-deprecatingly, "that I have much to worry about. My powers in the Force are so small that..."

“Shaak reached out with the Force and tugged at Talli’s padawan braid, causing her to squeak a bit, and Shaak said firmly, “None of that. Ranma should have already shown you that your strength in the Force is only the beginning, a leg up if you have sufficient strength but no more than that. It is what you do, your drive to improve, to do good and your general intelligence and willingness to learn that will shape what kind of Jedi you become.”

She pulled back slightly, letting her eyes go from one young padawan to the other, her tone returning to being earnest instead of teasing. “I will not say that the Dark Side will never tempt either of you. That would be foolish, and I hope you would not believe it even if I did tell you something so silly. But I believe that you will know enough of its tricks, enough of its false promises so that you do not succumb. Remember this above all other lessons I teach you on this subject: The Dark Side takes away its user’s ability to feel anything but the emotions that feed the Dark Side. Quinlan, he was led into the Dark Side until it was all he could feel. Such will never be the case with either of you.”

Talli nodded, looking a little sheepish, knowing that Ranma would have been a little harsher on her self-flagellation there than Shaak was. *He would probably go through with his threat of making an ‘anti-idiot bat’ to smack me upside the head like he did a few days ago.* “Yes, Master.”

“Master... If Quinlan could fall like that, could there be others within the Order who have fallen?”

Shaak frowned at Ahsoka’s question for a few moments, stroking one hand down a lek thoughtfully, touching the bangle there that Ranma had given her at their wedding, which she was wearing openly at the moment. “Perhaps there are others who feel guilty over something they have done as a Jedi or someone who has formed an attachment they should not, resenting the Order, or perhaps even resenting the Republic as a whole. I do know there was a movement at one point that felt our access to the Force made us better able to rule, that looked down at non-Force users.”

She shook her head, scoffing at that. “Why ever anyone would want to lead if you didn’t have to, I do not know. Regardless, that is a far cry from succumbing to the Dark Side. Still, if you are talking about other sleeper agents perhaps the Tyrannus had left within the Order, I have no doubt that Master Yoda and the rest of the High Council will follow up on that concept in the days to calm. For ourselves, we have other steak to fry.”

Ahsoka automatically made a disgusted expression at the idea of frying a good steak, while Talli giggled at the older Jedi’s mangling of a common phrase on Corellia. Seeing that, Shaak reached across the intervening distance once more, placing her hand lightly on Ahsoka’s foot where it was near the side of the bed. “Do not let Quinlan’s betrayal make you jump at shadows, less you miss the reality around you. A Jedi must be aware of the shadows but must see everything else as well. You cannot allow your pre-disposition to color your actions or your connection to the Force. Our order has been betrayed before, and it has survived. It will survive

this, as will your trust in other people outside of our little group so long as you yourself are true to all of us in turn.”

At that, for a moment, Ahsoka bit her bottom lip with her sharp teeth, then nodded understanding. She breathed in deeply for a few moments, and Shaak watched as her padawan slowly centered herself in the Force once more. After a moment, Ahsoka reopened her eyes and nodded. She was still a little depressed, thanks to Quinlan, but she would no longer be in danger of seeing betrayal everywhere around her and her own worries about falling to the Dark Side. “Thank you, Master.”

“We will talk more about dealing with loss in the future, daughter of clan Jedi,” Shaak said in their native language, patting the youngster on the knee again. “Even those feelings of depression you are feeling about Janice are not unnatural or something you should feel guilt over, as I have said before. It is just resenting the universe for your losses you need to concern yourself with.”

Besides the younger Togrutan, Talli also looked far more centered in the Force and was not dealing with nearly as many long-term issues from Janice’s death. While she had become friends with the Mandalorian fire team leader, she hadn’t known Janice for very long. Seeing that both of them had moved beyond the mental shock of the battle, Shaak gave them both a pleased little smile as she stood up smoothly. “Get some sleep, you two. You still haven’t recovered from the battle after all.”

Both Talli and Ahsoka yawned as one, then fell into giggling, leaning against one another, and Shaak snorted, leaving them to restart the debate of would get which bunk in much more determined frames of mind. Heading forward, she found Ranma HK and Kit in the ship’s somewhat large bridge, the ship having jumped to hyperspace as she had been talking to the youngsters. As she entered, Ranma was asking, “So Anakin sees this Chancellor guy as what, an uncle, a grandfather? How old is he anyway?”

“You know what, I have no idea. I know he served as the senator for the Chommell Sector before becoming Chancellor after the trade federation’s invasion of Naboo, but how old he actually is, I do not know. I think he is about Master Mace’s age, perhaps a little younger?” Kit frowned, before shaking his head. “Regardless, the connection was there. I didn’t think much of it, although perhaps Master Giiett might have known more about it. Still, it isn’t why Anakin has acted in such a way we need to figure out. It is what we need to do when we get there.”

“Tune, given the disparate speeds of this ship and an Aethersprite, how far behind Anakin are we going to be when we get to Coruscant?”

From his temporary position near the navigation computer, Tune bobbed on his feet, for once his tin can-like body taking up space within the cockpit, forcing HK to basically crouched

down in a small ball as he could in one corner while Shaak and Sergeant Crow stayed in the doorway and Kit and Ranma took the two pilot seats.

“As we will both be traveling the same route, Master, that calculation is somewhat easy to make. I believe we will only be 3 to 4 hours behind him. The Deep Pocket's hyperspace engine is a Class 2.0. The drive rating of an Aethersprite with a Booster Ring is 1.0. He will be faster than us in hyperspace.”

Kit looked pained at the droid's answer to Ranma's question, “Let's not use the word stole, all right? The ship was his to begin with.”

“Put upon tone: nonetheless, Master and his accompanying meatbags, the actions of the meatbag Anakin will need to be considered. What are we going to do when we get to Coruscant?”

“I think we will need to play some of it by ear, but there are a few things we should think about now. The message we sent out to the high Council in code will have gotten them moving, but the position of Chancellor, that very public position means will need to be very careful about how we go about this.”

“Or very blunt,” Ranma murmured, his previous ideas on this score percolating through his head before he shook it, looking back at his wife. “Those we will face... he's right. We'll need to attack the Chancellor from several different directions, as well as stop Anakin from doing whatever he's going to do. Is there someone on Coruscant who knows Japanese?”

“I do not believe so. Which means one of us will need to go to the members of the High Council that are still on Coruscant and inform them of the proof we have discovered,” Shaak answered, moving forward and sitting on Ranma's lap for now, not just because she wanted to, but also because there was no other place to sit. The other Jedi had already taken the other various seats on the bridge.

“And perhaps sit on them, if need be,” Obi-wan said, shaking his head. “There is a reason we left behind Master Koon after all. This is a problem that will demand a certain level of circumspection. I am afraid I don't know who the High Council left behind, but if they react poorly or force us to act in haste, we will be piling folly upon folly.”

Ranma disagreed, something that Shaak felt through the Force, and she looked at her husband, her lekku twitching as she raised a questioning eyebrow. But he just waved her off as the discussion continued. It was decided that Obi-Wan would be the one to speak to the Jedi in the temple, while Shaak would lead Ahsoka, the Nova Guard and the Mandalorians to hunt down the relay center. If there was some kind of hidden Sith temple, who knew what resources it could have on hand to back up the Chancellor once the truth came out?

The last thing they needed was to fight, say, a horde of Terentatek at the same time the Senate Security Force tried to defend Palpatine. "We need to split the Sith's attention between the temple, the group searching for the Sith temple, and the group bearding Palpatine in his office."

Ranma, Kit and Talli would be in charge of finding Anakin and stopping him before he did something stupid. "Something stupider anyway," Ranma corrected.

Soon the group began to break up. Planning this far removed would be foolish. Sergeant Cro retreated to the main room of the transport area, where he and his fellows would go over their equipment one last time before catching what rest they could.

Kit and Obi-wan also retreated, both of them planning to meditate for some time. Tune powered down, his job done for the moment. HK did not, looking at his master speculatively.

This left Ranma and Shaak in the cockpit, and Shaak moved into the chair Kit had vacated, looking at her husband with one eyebrow rising. "What are you planning, Ranma?"

"I think that we've already proven several times before this that Palpatine seems to have an issue with me and that he is the most dangerous when he has time to plan. So maybe Anakin had a point: getting in there quick, striking while Palpatine might not be ready to defend himself is a good idea. We just need to figure out the proper way to get Palpatine to break his disguise, instead of simply outright accusing him, make his own actions oust him," Ranma snickered.

"And you think you can get under his skin... What am I saying? Of course, you can get under his skin," Shaak chuckled, taking Ranma's hand in hers and squeezing. "Still, that might be an overly optimistic outlook, that you can make him act in a way we want. This man has orchestrated a galactic war, has been a threat fit to make the Order fear for its existence. I just don't see him losing control so disastrously."

Ranma smirked a little, shaking his head. "Ya still don't really know the true power of the Make 'em Mad, Make 'em Stupid technique." When Shaak's eyes narrowed, Ranma shrugged and turned the conversation back on her. "Tell me, what do you think of the Sith Lord's personality? And I mean, not Palpatine, the public persona. What can suppose from the plans we've foiled, his responses, and everything he's sent our way."

Cocking her head thoughtfully to one side, Shaak thought for a moment. "He has been in a position of power for a long while now and has been moving forward with a plan even longer in the making. Palpatine is meticulous, a forward planner, and someone who likes to think he has everything figured out. And yet... He **has** made mistakes. Continually sending his fellow Sith against us, when in reality, before we discovered Wayland, the two of us were not really making that much of a difference in the plan to start this war, whatever the end goal is there. Why do you think that is?"

“Jocular tone: Maybe he doesn’t like Master? You are not an individual anyone in a position of authority would like to see around, Master,” HK quipped.

“Got it in one, HK. Yoda calls me the Chaotic Locus because my presence has made shit happen. Dooku’s not leaving the Order for one thing, and then his meeting with the Mandos. The Mandos becoming allies of the Order, us basically running over a lot of his connections in the crime side of things, not to mention our randomly finding the Katana Fleet. And every time he’s acted against us, a lot of stuff completely out of his control happens. Now, how does someone who is in a position of power, a spider at the center of a web, act when flies start screwing up his web? He gets even more anal-retentive as he tries to repair the damage and remove the fly.”

He grinned evilly. “I mean, look at the hidden program within the Confederacy droids that makes them attack me over any other order. That isn’t the mark of someone who’s able to look at a problem like me and keep his cool.”

“Logical response: which he has done every time he sent his Sith or pawns against us, try again to remove the problem. And each time such actions fail, it will have made him lose a bit more of his reserve. To say nothing of Wayland.”

Shaak snorted in laughter. “You think that our takeover of Wayland pushed him close to the edge of losing his grip on his self-control? And you intend to push Palpatine over that ledge?”

“Yep. If I can get away with it, I’m going to get right into his face. I’m going to attack the Sith with words. And my normal charm,” Ranma snickered. And it was quite the most frightening sound that Shaak had ever heard from her husband. “So much so he’s going to lose it and attack me.”

“Ecstatic joy: master, have I mentioned I really love it when you try to plan things out like this? I’ll note, it never really works as well as you might think, but still, the outcome is always amusing,” the large attack droid said, actually rubbing his hands together gleefully.

“I would prefer to go with you, but I have full faith in your combat abilities. Your ability to think things through and think politically, on the other hand, leaves much to be desired. I am afraid that if we try to make it would not do to make it seem as if this is merely a power play on the Jedi’s part.”

Ranma snorted at that. “Bah, trust me, when Palpy loses his cool, no one who sees it will deny that he’s a Sith.” Watching Shaak’s lips twist into a moue of worry, he leaned over, laying his head against Shaak’s shoulder, one hand rising to gently stroke up and down her lekku. “And then this will be over, right? Or at least halfway there?”

“Halfway there for certain,” Shaak said, leaning her own head against the top of Ranma’s, feeling his silky-smooth hair against the side of her cheek.

She knew why Ranma was asking. Once more, they had faced a monstrous possible, the kind of numbers versus skill type of battle that Ranma enjoyed the least, and they had lost a dear friend in Jennifer. That hurt, that hurt a lot, especially since she had fallen in battle, a battle where her own skills and abilities were almost entirely negated. Moreover, both of them had been in the thick of this war almost from the beginning, and even before it had been actually declared. It had begun to wear on Ranma before this last battle, and the loss of Jennifer had simply tightened it.

Even I am beginning to feel it. The need to take a step back from this war, from the unrelenting pressure of being directly responsible for how this war will go since we took Wayland. It might not be very Jedi-like for me to admit it, but there it is, Shaak reflected. “There will still be Tyrannus and the Confederacy. But if we can further uncover more of Palpatine’s manipulations, if we can prove that he started this war for his own ends, we can perhaps bring the two sides to the peace table once the Confederacy leaders know they have no hope of further aid from within the Republic. And at the least, others will be in charge of defending Wayland, of making plans and setting set-piece battles. Unless we can go for a, what do the snipers call it? A headshot? If we can remove him just as we will do with Palpatine, then the war may come to an end. Something to think about, although doubtful.”

Ranma snorted at that but nodded understanding, the two of them fell silent, leaning against one another as they could given the chairs, and the ship continued on its way to Coruscant.

OOOOOOO

Yoda waited until the hollow projector had turned off before looking at the local Green Jedi. “Secured electronically, this room is?”

“We can activate the electronic defenses now that we’re no longer receiving, yes,” one of the local Masters said, his hand already moving to do so. “We are as electronically secure here as Corellian ingenuity can make us.”

Yoda let the moment of pride in his home system pass, knowing that was an issue with the Green Jedi most of the time. There were more important things to do right now than get into another debate about priorities, let alone the other issues separating the Green Jedi from the rest of the Order. “The hackers on Wayland, succeed they have. Discovered the hidden Sith they have.”

Those words made every other Jedi there sit up and stare at the diminutive Grand Master with even more attention than previously been given. Even Thrawn looked away from where he had been going over logistical reports, his red eyes boring into Yoda. “The hidden Sith

is no doubt in a very dangerous position of power someplace within the Republic. Knowing who it is, is only half the battle. Ousting him is something else entirely.”

“True, your words are. But know the full extent of the danger, you do not. The hidden Sith, wearing the guise of the Chancellor, he is. Palpatine he is, longtime senator, long time power within the Senate. Longtime friend with the Order, he has acted as. In his presence all the High Council have been. Been in his presence dozens of times, I have been. Yet felt the truth none of us did. Blinded I have been to this threat and the danger at our necks.”

For a moment, there was silence, and then even the Jedi’s habitual self-control cracked. Several of the Jedi leaped to their feet. Master Iladen shouted that it could not be so, while others demanded to know what manner of proof there was of this accusation. Only Mace stayed silent, his eyes narrowed as he tried to use the Force to see the future as Plo Koon had, only to fail. The future was far too muddled right now for even Mace to see through.

All of their voices were drowned out when Yoda smacked the tip of his gimer stick into the floor, using a Force trick to magnify the sound a thousandfold. “Intelligent beings you all are. Beneath you, this mindless reaction is. Think clearly, use the Force, clearly, we all must,” he ordered into the silence.

“While I have no experience with it, I imagine that attempting to arrest the Chancellor, the head of the government, during wartime is not going to be very easy,” Thrawn drawled. “At best, it will seem as if it was a personal agenda by the Jedi. At worst, if the information is not believed, or if it is not enough import, his status as a Force User or Sith might be ignored in favor of the pre-existing threat. If the evidence proving the Chancellor’s guilt also proves his culpability war however, that will open up other avenues to explore.”

“We are Jedi! The Senate will take our word and...”

“No, they won’t,” Master Gallia said, shaking her head, sending her headdress shaking. “I have worked extensively with the Senate, and I know how much faith in our abilities and, moreover, our neutrality has faded. That began decades ago and has continued since, multiplied by the chaos of this war and how well or how poorly we Jedi have been doing as commanders.”

Adi Gallia had been serving as the liaison to the Senate for years. She had arrived on Corellia a few days ago from Coruscant, having been requested by Master Yoda to join a team of Jedi who would be in charge of putting together a new government on a planet that Republic forces had retaken during this latest round of battles thanks to Thrawn’s ingenuity.

In another universe, where no Ranma had arrived to work his magic on the Force, the Jedi would not have discovered Palpatine’s identity for years. Years spent in a war the Order was not ready for, years spent becoming more defensive, more insular and mentally strained. They would see Palpatine’s power but would not understand that the political power he

wielded was just as dangerous as the Dark Side. Here, thankfully none of that was true, and they still retained enough of an understanding of the Senate and how popularity worked to not rush things.

"Furthermore, apprehending the Chancellor will be very difficult. He will no doubt be prepared," Mace murmured, having turned his own eyes towards the window to one side. When he turned back, he looked older than he had a moment ago, almost drooping in a way the iron-hard Master of the Order had ever seen. "We should have been worried about this before. Watched and observed who gained from this war. I've been going over the actions of the senate since then. The military laws put in place, the voices of the disparate planets being ignored, the greater militancy in general within the Senate, the lack of political parties and objections..."

"And this war isn't even a year old yet. Who knows how strong the Chancellor's position would be by the end of it if more and more emergency powers are taken away from the Senate and local leaders in order to fight the war more efficiently, or whatever," Gallia muttered, shaking her head.

To one side, Thrawn made no move to speak, something Aayla noted and smirked at him for, knowing his own thoughts on how a centralized government was a better idea. But Fay had convinced him that the Sith ideal was not his own. Their idea of order would only be self-serving rather than for the good of the galaxy as a whole.

"Leave Palpatine in the hands of Ranma and the others. We must," Yoda shook his head, his ears twitching in a while. "Told them this I did. Trust his brand of crazy, we must."

The other Jedi all blinked in surprise at this, while Aayla snickered, fully understanding that, yes, crazy fit Ranma very well. But there was one point she felt they needed to discuss that hadn't been brought up yet. Now seeing none of the others bringing it up yet, she raised a hand. "There is something else we need to think about. How likely is it that Tyrannus will continue to work with Palpatine if Palpatine loses his position as Chancellor? I'm assuming that he will one way or another since I don't think Shaak and Ranma wouldn't have communicated with us at all if the evidence wasn't damning enough to make the chance of that at least somewhat high."

Thrawn nodded thoughtfully, looking at the Rutian Twi'lek with respect and that something else that Aayla had gotten used to seeing in his eyes. "I have had time to study what art you showed me that Master Bulq created in the Order. He is somewhat typical of his race in that he will be excessively aggressive, as we have seen, but he also has a certain... desire for function and form in his work. Which can equate to a connection to order and authority. He will, I feel, attempt to help his master if he is called upon. And if the Chancellor is ousted, then there is only one way he will be able to help: military force."

"Would he go himself, or would he use his cyborg creature?" Mace asked, frowning. "I can see it go both ways."

"Hmm... no. I think he would use Grievous and perhaps one of his other more aggressive commanders to strike at other targets, to pull off any resources Coruscant before he himself arrives with a fleet able to punch through the capital's defenses. Speed, aggression and pinpoint firepower will be his way."

"Arrive on his heels and force him to dissipate some of his fleet to face us. He will lose his forward momentum," Aayla murmured, getting another look of interest from Thrawn.

"Assemble a fleet you will near the Metellos system," Yoda ordered. "Ignored it has been so far in this war, the dark of space around it, work it will hide your presence, but close to Coruscant the system is. Moving from there to Coruscant, fast it will be."

"Further, we need to prepare to take advantage of Palpatine's ouster on the propaganda scale," Mace murmured. "We will need to make certain that news is spread throughout the Republic as fast as possible."

"I will leave that aspect to you. But do you mean for me to head this fleet?" Thrawn questioned carefully.

"Your plan for Wayland worked it did. Command this battle you will, Admiral," Yoda answered. "Go with you I will, but in command, you will be."

"I will help you gather the ships. I have various contacts on the military side of things that we can use to bypass the High Command. We certainly can't trust Yularen and the others to keep Palpatine out of the loop if we start assembling a fleet that close to Coruscant," Mace interjected. "Although I will warn you, it will be quite a hodgepodge."

"I'll come along too," Aayla said, trying hard to not look like this was because she didn't want Thrawn to leave her sight. "I can handle communications within the fleet if we don't want Yoda's presence known until we jump Tyrannus and whatever force he has."

Thrawn nodded, although Aayla had the impression that her attempt had failed both with him and with Yoda, although at least the other masters didn't know her well enough to see through her. "That is a good idea. I would also like to see..."

From there, Mace and Thrawn began to dominate the discussion while Aayla took notes and the plan came together. *I hope we're right that Ranma and the others can oust Palpatine. It would be really annoying if we were jumping too soon here.*

As the others continued to speak about military matters, Yoda slowly shuffled out of the door, unnoticed by any but Mace, who frowned, but let the aged Grand Master go, wondering

what he was doing but not wishing to draw attention to him. Leaning heavily on his gimer stick, Yoda made his way through the Green Temple. Moments later, the ancient Jedi met the ageless as he found Fay out in the gardens, where she had been ever since arriving with Thrawn and Aayla.

“Said you did, that the Force had told you to wait for a time. Feel, I do, the time for waiting will be passing soon,” Yoda announced.

Fay looked up from where she had been meditating, a small, extremely bright red flower in front of her blooming well out of season for this particular flower. The elven Jedi Master smiled at her own friend somewhat sadly. “Yes, my reading of the Force tells me that, although even I am having trouble reading much of it these days thanks to Ranma and the Dark Side. I fear, however, there is still much sadness and death before my task can begin.”

“True. But begin to think now, we must, of the future.” Once more, Fay agreed with Yoda’s words, and the two of them started to speak about what might be needed once Palpatine was removed.

OOOOOOO

Unfortunately, going off half-cocked even with the Force as your aid sometimes did not go the way you wanted it to. Especially when you forgot things, which Anakin had. To wit, that he said no identification, authorization, or indeed anything to show he was a person that was not directly connected to the Jedi Order, which would obviously give the game away if he used it to enter Coruscant.

This was pointed out to him several times by Artoo, As Anakin’s Force given ability to understand the droid’s warble and whistle came back to bite him in the rear. “Remind me when I get to chance to do something about your sarcasm algorithms Artoo,” Anakin grumbled. “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.”

The droid had the decency at least to wait for a few minutes before its beeping resumed on a slightly less strident note. “No, I don’t have a plan yet, and you know that since the war began, just asking them to not notice me or using the Force over a long distance to turn their attention away doesn’t always work since their supervisors are always somewhere nearby. I can’t use that technique without a visual aid from so far away.”

Most planets, indeed, even most Core Worlds, didn’t keep their planetary shields on at all times, not even now when there was a war on. It was an insane drain on the local energy grid to do so. Coruscant was one of the very few planets that kept their shields on at all times. And while previously Space Control had been very lax and even corrupt, willing to look the other way at the drop of a hat, since the war began cleaning it up had been a very important local issue, one Anakin knew Palpatine had been involved in.

“The moment we use a Jedi ID, someone is going to be watching us, and that someone will contact both the Temple and I don’t doubt the Chancellor too, damn it,” Anakin grumbled, thinking aloud. “The trick is to first get through the shields and then down near the ‘ground’.” Coruscant had so many buildings and construction that low-level radar was notoriously dodgy, so once he got down to that level, Anakin could disappear. *And hopefully, my Force Stealth is good enough to hide me when I get there. If I want to sneak up on Palpatine before he knows I’m there, I need to get to the surface first.*

“We’re going to have to be sneaky here. Artoo, I want you ready to cut the engines and all the power beyond the coms gear the instant we come out of hyperspace. We’ll be coming out at one of the set hyperspace points, so there should be some other ships around. Hopefully, a freighter large enough for us to dock with. That’s the best we’re going to get.”

Thanks to the war, security in the whole Coruscant System was heightened, meaning that there were only a few places ships were allowed to exit hyperspace. If a ship came out of hyperspace elsewhere, it would either run into mines or need to broadcast a set number of codes within a minute of its arrival before it came under fire from other automated defenses.

With that, Anakin decided to get some rest. It wouldn’t take them very long to get to Coruscant normally, but once more, there was a war on, and that changed things in terms of the Hyperspace jumps they could do.

Three hours later, the ship came out of hyperspace one last time, and both pilot and Astromech went to work, with Artoo shutting down the hyperspace engines before the footprint of his arrival could go very far. As Artoo did this, Anakin used the Aethersprite’s attitude thrusters to twist the ship to the side and down a bit, aiming the nose of the starfighter toward a cargo ship that had come out of hyperspace a moment before.

When the nose was pointing in the right direction, Anakin switched his coms to directional and a narrow beam before opening up a coms signal. “Attention, Baq of Plenty, this is Jedi Skywalker. I am pursuing a spy ring which has led me to believe that there are several within Space Command as well as elsewhere on the planet. I require your help to get to the ground without them knowing I am here. My ID code is Zebra Alpha Prioris Nu.”

He waited, hanging there in space in a cockpit rapidly cooling down without the ship’s small generator circulating the air. After a few seconds, his patience was rewarded with a series of lights flickering on around the ship before the hanger bay of the ship opened.

“Thank the Force. Hang on, Artoo.” With that, Anakin reached out with the Force and began to push his ship towards the semi-distant square of light that was the larger ship’s hanger bay. Grimacing, Anakin dug in metaphorical heals and kept on pushing the ship forward despite the headache this action began to give him.

Moments later, using only the altitude thrusters, Anakin's starfighter touched down lightly inside the Bag of Plenty's hanger. He waited until the hangar bay closed behind him before opening his cockpit and hopping out. "Artoo, wait here a bit."

The droid tootled back at him, but Anakin was already turning around, looking towards the being who was striding towards him from the interior doors of the hanger bay. He looked like some kind of felinoid, although Anakin didn't recognize the race. "Jedi?" the man asked, his eyes sweeping down Anakin's body until he saw Anakin's lightsaber. Seeing that, he nodded, satisfied, although he did hold out his hand and took Anakin's ID as he held it out. Thankfully for the young Skywalker, he showed no sign of understanding what his padawan braid meant.

"Good enough. But if you are in hot pursuit, Jedi, this isn't the best way to get to Coruscant," the felinoid questioned.

"I'm not so much in hot pursuit as worried my quarry will see me coming and start dumping data, I need to continue rolling up the spy ring," the young Jedi responded quickly. "As I said over the communications, the spy ring I'm pursuing has people within the space control and perhaps even the Senate districts."

"Even while the war is on?" the captain asked dubiously. "I would've thought that kind of thing would be what the Senate security forces would be on the lookout for."

"Nevertheless, that is what my evidence points towards," Anakin responded smoothly. And don't worry, I'll get out of the ship once we land unseen on my own. If you intend to stay on Coruscant for a few days, I'll leave my droid and my fighter here. Once I am finished with my work, you can send it to the temple, or I will come and get it personally. If you simply plan to turn right around, take Artoo out and send him to the temple. You can keep the starfighter as collateral for my slowing you down as I did."

The cat-like captain took this in stride and barked orders to a few crewmen nearby before turning and gesturing to Anakin to follow him. "We will help the Jedi."

Several hours later, as dawn broke over the Senate District, Anakin used a combination of Force Cloak and Stealth to get away from the ship, hiding his presence in the Force and his body from those around him. Soon, he was away from where this ship had settled down at one of the many large-scale ports designed to unload foodstuffs quickly, disappearing into the throng of workers and droids.

From there, he slowly made his towards the Senate District, trying to figure out a way past its outer security without being spotted.

OOOOOOO

Despite Anakin's best efforts, Sidious was aware something was going on or was in danger of happening as he sat in his hidden throne room, his work as Chancellor done for the night. *I felt Invictus's death, but that is not enough to tell me if he failed like so many weaklings before him have when faced with the Chaotic Locus and those he has interacted with or succeeded and died. If he died in the doing, well and good. But the last information I have is that Tyrannus' assault not only failed but that the Jedi arrived with reinforcements at the end of the battle.*

And that Tyrannus had brought in so many resources from around Wayland that the sector has been retaken entirely by the Jedi and Republic, although that was of less importance. Sidious had been forced to applaud this in his public persona as Chancellor, the first strategic-level offensive victory the Republic had scored since the war began. Launching any other attacks on Wayland would take weeks to build up without local resources.

But as a Sith, he had been seething all day. And that had added to his continued issues with controlling his emotions. *Damn it, I nearly gave my real feelings away several times today. It is becoming harder and harder to keep up the Palpatine persona in public the longer the Jedi control Wayland. Blast them all to the Outer Dark!*

Should I run? he mused, not for the first time in the past few days. *Should I cut my losses and run?*

With a snarl on his face, Sidious reached out to the Force, hiding his presence in the Dark Side under his Stealth with the ease of decades of practice, a tendril of thought hidden under a blanket of nothingness. With Yoda gone, he might have gotten away with being less circumspect, but that would serve no purpose now.

But when he reached into the Veil of the Dark Side to discern the future, or even the present, to know if the Jedi had discovered his secret, he could discern nothing. The Chaotic Locus had done so much damage that not only was the future in doubt, but the Veil had begun to fray once more after the second battle of Wayland, and that blasted, never sufficiently damned video had begun to go around the Hypercom.

Sidious had tried to get it erased in a fit of pique, but it had propagated so fast that trying had only annoyed him further.

Regardless of the video, the Veil was failing, torn apart by the eddies in the Force. The Dark Side was still powerful, but without the Veil, Sidious's ability to grab it, to control and act through it across the stars was gone.

The only thing good about this was that it was not imploding as it had the first time, which had resulted in Sidious being bedridden from the raw agony of it. Well, that and the fact the future and present were so tumultuous, Sidious doubted that even Yoda would be able to read much from it. *And yet, the Jedi are able to survive within this uncertainty, whereas The*

Great Plan cannot. I cannot, Sidious thought, actual fear going through him for a second before he fought it away. But while the fear dissipated from his thoughts, the uncertainty that had been growing ever since Wayland had been discovered did not.

After a few moments of contemplation, Palpatine decided that he could not afford to run until he was forced to. *I cannot let this, this blindness to the future through the Force, make me act precipitously. If I leave, the Great Plan will come apart as the Veil has. It would signal a return to the bad old days when it was simply the Sith versus the Republic, which is a losing proposition.*

The Republic was simply too large for even the Confederacy to beat, not in any conventional war anyway. That had been the entire idea behind the Rule of Two, the Great Plan begun by Darth Bane and continued by every Sith Lord since. If Sidious ran too soon, he would be giving up on a plot a thousand years in the making.

There are still hidden webs, hidden strings that I can use, even when I am not Chancellor, to muddy the waters, but there is really no comparison. No, while I must be prepared to run if necessary, I have to put that off as long as possible and make as big a splash as I can when I do retreat.

As he finished bolstering his thoughts on that score, Sidious was interrupted by his computers beeping at him. Noting the decryption keys and code phrases at the top, which told him it came from a spy on Dac, he opened it at once. Reading through the message, Sidious became positively gleeful. *Yes! A sign that the Dark Side is still with us!*

The message contained a series of coordinates and the explanation that this was where the new Jedi living-ship starfighters came from. The Sun Destroyer, which had fought over Wayland and which had only begun to be known to the rest of the Republic, had also come from that same source. The spy had been able to triangulate where they had come from and then met some of the off-duty personnel from the Sun Destroyer as it came through a few weeks ago. It had taken the spy this long to get the message out in a secure fashion.

But now Sidious knew where the living planet had gotten to, the living planet that was supplying the Jedi with their extremely impressive starfighters and which now seemed able to build capital ships of equal impressiveness. That had to be stopped, and the temple the Jedi had no doubt built on the planet also had to be destroyed. Indeed, all the separate temples the Jedi had set up prior to the war beginning had to be destroyed. This would be a good start to that operation, even though Sidious did not yet know where some of the others were.

With a series of quick commands, Sidious sent out a message to Tyrannus, ordering him to set up a large-scale attack on that planet. *Remove that support base, and not only will the Jedi lose who knows how many members, but they will lose a major source of their independent military power. Which will force them to use the clones, which is precisely what I want... if the Great Plan can still go forward at any rate.*

Now in a far more upbeat frame of mind, the Dark Lord of the Sith opened his communications gear, using the hard line down to the hidden temple, far, far below his feet. He waited several moments until his apprentice's face appeared in the pickup, bowing deeply in apology for making him wait, although Sidious could sense a certain level of tiredness there.

"My apologies, master. The thought bomb is nearly ready to go. I have finished programming and building it, and am currently empowering it. By the estimates the computers are giving me, that will take another twenty hours or so. After that, the thought bomb will be powerful enough to take out the Senate district and the temple. If it were not for the accumulated Dark Side energies within the temple here, it would take much longer, and I wouldn't have had enough power to even jumpstart it on my own. As it is, the process is draining me badly."

"Understandable," the Chancellor answered as if he really cared. His apprentice was a tool, a very useful one, and one he had gone to some lengths to make certain she was as sharp and as dangerous as he could make her. But that was all any of the other Sith were. Simply tools.

Still, a good craftsman does not discard his tools for no reason. "Be prepared to flee at a moment's notice. You have access to the news, watch it closely as well as our own communications equipment. If Invictus succeeded, all of this preparation would be unnecessary. In that case, we might move the thought bomb, perhaps to Corellia. But if he failed, it would become very clear within the next forty-eight hours. I rather doubt," he finished dryly, "that the Jedi will be able to stop themselves from moving on me the instant they think they have enough evidence to do so."

"I would recommend escape plan nine, master, or seven," Nihilus answered swiftly. She'd had a lot of time to think about these things while generating Dark Side energies for the thought bomb.

Those plans meant that they would both escape the planet separately on different ships but would meet up quickly on a single ship leaving the system. If she had named a plan in the twenties, those would mean that they would leave the system separately. Nine and seven assumed they could get away without a full-scale manhunt for Sidious and had two extremely different identities ready for them to go at various drop boxes scattered across the ecumenopolis. Such was the long-term impact of the Sith being on Coruscant for so long, with no one even suspecting it, that they had time to prepare for many different eventualities and had many different hidden caches of money, different identities, disguises, and so forth.

The disguise would be necessary for Palpatine, although his apprentice would probably be able to get away without one, the Sith Lord reflected. "We will decide on which plan to follow when it finally becomes time for us to run. Send me the codes to activate the Thought Bomb when you can. For now, I wish to meditate further."

With that, the communication cut off, leaving Sidious in the dark of his hidden throne room. This time of night, when darkness spread across the 'surface' of Coruscant, was normally Sidious's favorite time, the darkness without matching the darkness within. But now, with the Veil of the Dark Side fraying and the future so in doubt, after hours of meditation, all Sidious felt was unease and tension he could not get rid of.

OOOOOOO

Ranma had been on precisely two ecumenopolises in his time in this dimension. Once here on Coruscant and once on a planet whose name he couldn't even remember. He remembered the asteroid stations there had a pro-human issue, which he and HK had kind of ruined by making fun of them so hard they became laughing stocks. But the fighting had been so pathetic the name of the place hadn't stuck in his mind.

Neither experience had been all that unpleasant, in Ranma's opinion, though he had never really liked the idea of cities sprawling out and taking over whole planets. Yet, while he was prepared to disdain the view and everything else, he wasn't prepared for how **wrong** the place felt to him even before they landed. *Is that because I have opened myself more to the Living Force since the last time I was on one of these weird city planets? Or is it just because I think it is really freaking wrong, and that's affecting my senses?*

Ranma looked over to Kit and Obi-wan, who was working the freighter's controls, having already used a code from one of the other Jedi who had been involved in the fights around Wayland. Space Control now thought the ship was carrying other wounded Jedi back to the temple for treatment and had given the Deep Pockets special clearance to pass through the planetary shield, opening a portion above the Jedi Temple.

Luckily, the temple did have enough space within its own hangar bay, and the group waited until the small freighter was allowed to scoot its way forward enough that a watcher would have to be purged in the entrance into the hangar bay to see them before all of them exited one after another.

"So, I know that I am not really a local boy at all, but I gotta tell ya, I question the sanity of anyone who looks at a world subsumed by a single, never-ending city and says, 'Mmm, yes, that's beauty right there. Ugh, I mean seriously, why did the ancient people who lived here or in other places like it allow it to go so far? Honestly, the fact consecutive generations just kept building on the old foundations was much easier to understand than that. And I don't know, but it might be just me, but this place feels sick to me.'"

"It is just not you, my love," Shaak answered, taking his hand with hers while they watched the others pilot the freighter through the atmosphere. "I think it might be because we are so much closer to the Living Force, you and I, that we are thrown off by a planet where there is so little natural plant life and so much sentient life in comparison to what little plant life there is. I don't doubt there are places underneath the surface where there are growing things,

but the sheer number of sentients coupled with the amount of Ferrocrite and construction means that the balance is horribly thrown off here.”

K’Kruhk let loose a rumble of disagreement, looking at the outer bulkhead near him as he frowned. “That is only part of it, as I feel somewhat... uneasy myself. There is a tension here, a feeling of being in a cauldron of Light and Dark. I can feel it roiling here, even more than it was back on Wayland.”

Shaak paused, closing her eyes and concentrating on the Force for a moment. Then after a few seconds, she frowned, as did Obi-Wan, who had just turned over the final landing sequence to Kit. “I can feel that too. I doubt we could tell you anything specific, but I have never felt the Force be in so much flux, not even when the Veil Shattered for a short time upon our attack on Wayland. Can you sense anything specific, K’Kruhk? Try to sense one of the Jedi within the temple.”

The Whiphid nodded and concentrated for a few moments before shaking his head. “I can sense their minds, but if you are asking me to sense a specific individual, make out any individual characteristics, I cannot. This is somewhat disturbing, almost as bad as being blinded by the Veil at the height of its power.”

“I as well. I think I can sense my friend Siri Tachi, but that is the only one I can make out through this turmoil.” Obi-Wan winced. “I cannot imagine that it is any easier for any of the Jedi still within the Temple.”

“Yeah, but look at it this way, guys,” Ranma grinned evilly. “I would wager that the Sith would have as much trouble seeing anything with the Force, either the future or trying to sense things away from themselves, right?”

Smiling slightly at Ranma’s observation, which also buoyed the spirits of her fellow Jedi, Shaak led the way out of the bridge and then the ship, where they were greeted instantly by Master Cin Drallig, the head of the temple’s security. “Master Drallig. I trust I find you well?”

“Physically well, Master Ti, but somewhat bemused at the present moment,” Drallig replied, looking at them all with some interest and thinly veiled concern, taking in each of them in turn thoughtfully. “We expected wounded Jedi and padawans. Instead, we get Mandalorians, Nova Guard, unwounded Jedi and the Chaotic Locus.”

“Perhaps you have a place we can talk in slightly more comfort than here in the hanger? And perhaps that discussion might need to include whichever member of the High Council has been left in charge of the Temple?” Shaak questioned before Ranma could say anything.

“I believe that can be arranged, yes. I was also raised to the High Council. And between myself and Master Rancisis, we lead the temple at present.”

"The snake man, right?" Ranma mused, nodding, ignoring the narrowed eyes of Cin Drallig. "Huh. I remember him as a thoughtful sort. That might make this story simpler to swallow."

Moments later, the group was within the High Council's council room. There, Ranma remained silent as Obi-Wan and Shaak explained why they were there and, more importantly, why they had come to Coruscant so clandestinely. Rancisis and Drallig both remained silent, waiting until they had finished.

"And this information that you believe the Chancellor is the hidden Sith? I am not certain if I can believe it," Drallig stated. He was a human, maybe sixty or so, but he didn't look as sly, in Ranma's opinion, or as intelligent as Master Dooku.

"Yeah, when someone's fooled, they often don't want to believe it. Trust me, I know that feeling all too well," Ranma said, shaking his head. "However, it's the truth. So, unless we want to take more time to talk and thus give Palpatine enough time to discover our presence here and plan accordingly."

"Ranma, be nice," Shaak interjected mildly before turning to the somewhat annoyed-looking older Jedi, her own face and tone serene like a still, calm pool. "I am sorry to inform you, Master Drallig, but we have decided that waiting for the Sith Lord to become aware of our presence is not the best idea going forward. Obi-wan will stay here to coordinate with you and the other Jedi who remain within the temple, and I would suggest that as part of that, you bring the defenses up to battle readiness. We have a plan going forward to force Palpatine to oust himself, but unless we act fast enough, we are very much afraid that Anakin will give the game away. If he does, we might lose him, and the Chancellor will know we are on to him and may or may be able to prepare some measure of defense against our allegations which would be disastrous given his popularity."

"Or just run," Obi-wan reminded everyone. "The Slicers are still compiling more recorded messages with him in them, so even if he can somehow turn Anakin's actions, whatever they might be, against the Order, we still have that information and can release it to the general public. Given enough recordings and evidence, he won't be able to cover it up."

"Wait, what has Skywalker to do with all of this?" Rancisis questioned, looking somewhat condemning. He was one of the Jedi who had spoken out against letting Anakin into the Order.

"Let us just say that he reacted quite poorly to the information we discovered," Kit grimaced. "I should have emphasized self-control and setting aside your anger more, but I missed how deep a connection he had to the Chancellor. And when he was there when the first recording was discovered, Anakin figured out his identity quickly and acted precipitously. Indeed, if not for the fact he probably didn't want to let anyone in the temple know what he was up to, Anakin would already be confronting Palpatine."

"Yeah, but he isn't, or if he is, it's too late for us to stop him. But it ain't too late to put our own plans in action, and if they do, Palpy is going to have all he can handle," Ranma growled, hopping to his feet. "Come on, folks, there's a time to talk and a time to act! We've got a plan, and we all need to do our parts, but if we wait, we lose our chance."

"You are too impulsive yourself, Ranma," Rancisis' snake body shifted in a full-body shrug. "We need to talk about this further. We need to handle the aftershocks of this..."

"No, we need to start moving, blast it. You might be willing to wait like a snake in the sun until everything is perfect before acting, but removing Palpy still gotta happen first!"

"Do not let Ranma's obstreperous attitude confuse the issue. We all have our roles to play in this. And Master Yoda did tell us we had his permission to go ahead with it. However, we wish to try and deal with this issue," Obi-wan said soothingly.

The older master instantly calmed and, after a moment, sighed. "Very well. My instincts tell me it is better to wait for a sure kill, but with the Force so much in flux, my instincts are all I have right now. Before this, even with the Veil in place, I would see something in the present, if not the future. But now, there is only a mad roiling in the future, with no clear path through it. And on something this large, instinct alone cannot guide my way forward, not against the word of those who have brought this information to us in the first place."

"Well, our plans need some Jedi to come in and secure the district, after we've set a few things in motion and stopped Anakin from doing anything stupid," Kit began, going on to explain the extremely offbeat plan Ranma and the others had come up with from the discussion he'd had with Shaak. They had all beaten out a basic idea, one that was designed to ruin Palpatine's public image just a bit, get him jumping somewhat.

Oddly, the idea of using rumors to push Palpatine further off balance made Rancisis nod, while Drallig looked dubious. "Palpatine's a politician. People have undoubtedly made up stories about him before this."

"Not often, actually. Not more than a few times since he became Chancellor, and nothing so... strange or unusual as this. Although when you plant your rumors, you'll have to explain why you are both appearing now," Rancisis nodded his head to Scout and Ranma. "And you will both need disguises."

"I've got some stuff for myself, but if you have some clothes for Scout, which would be great. I can do our makeup and stuff, help Scout get her looks right. As for why we're appearing now..." Ranma smirked. "Yeah, I've got plans for that. Plans that will just add more color to the rumors."

Scout looked a little dubious and embarrassed by the idea of Ranma helping her put makeup and stuff on, but she didn't object. There was no way she was missing out on this, not

when her Master was so set on this operation. *Besides, fooling all those people kind of sounds fun, as against the Jedi code as something like that is.*

“And I suppose there is a way across to the main Senate District, or rather the second layer of it. So long as you can get across the crevice anyway,” Drallig admitted, somewhat reluctantly. He honestly could not understand why this plan would work, although he did agree with the idea of pushing Palpatine over the edge into revealing himself, and another aspect of the plan tickled his almost nonexistent funny bone. “And we do have the same kind of cleaning droids that the Senate District uses. Indeed, given the observation virus, we found within them, doing something like this is actually quite amusing. Loading them up with the prerequisite programming will take a while.”

“I will follow up on that aspect, along with creating small action teams to head into the Senate District once it is time,” Rancisis said, his earlier indecisiveness gone. “Master Ti, you and your team will be given a shuttle and two Jedi Knights, along with today’s codes to access the Hypercom Uplink Center. Go. Master Drallig, escort our allies and young Talli and Knight Fisto to one of the changing rooms. When they are ready, take our infiltrators down to the Hidden Leap.”

Leaving the council room, Ranma looked at Shaak, and the two exchanged smiles and a hand squeeze. “Try not to do anything to precipitous, Ranma. Please?”

“You’re the one that’s going to be storming whatever hidden base the Sith might have out here. I’m just taking on the asshole in the Senate Hall,” Ranma touched Shaak’s cheek, tapping the ring she had given him against her skin. “Please be careful down there, okay? Who knows what kind of defenses the hidden Sith base has.”

“I will be careful as well, never fear. I will see you after this is over, my husband,” Shaak answered, using the term deliberately as she had removed her own rings before exiting the freighter.

Ranma grinned back at her, and Shaak, ignoring Drallig’s censorious look, turned away, leading Ahsoka and K’Kruhk down to rejoin the rest of their crew. Ranma watched his wife go for a few seconds, then turned to Kit, HK, Scout, and Master Drallig. “Well, come on, Sin, let’s get a move on.”

“It’s Cin, not Sin. I can hear the difference,” Master Drallig growled, then frowned, confused as to how he had done so and why he had gotten so annoyed.

“Eh, sometimes the most childish things can make ya angry, no matter how controlled you are. And you’re a Jedi, not a Sith. Palpy might have added a level of insane control to his whole Sith ethos, but the anger’s still there,” Ranma’s teeth flashed again in a grin. “And if I can make him react, then the game is over.”

Drallig still looked confused but shook his head and led them through the temple to a room where he left Ranma and Talli for a time, leaving and coming back with two other Jedi and some clothing for the pair. Not forty minutes later, he was staring in shock along with his fellow Jedi bar Kit at the transformation Ranma had created on herself and young Talli. Even feeling the laughter of the Light Side of the Force, clear as a bell to their minds despite the wild currents the Force was dealing with currently had not prepared them for this.

Talli was somewhat of the same mind. "...Master, may I say that when you and I first met, doing something like this never entered the realms of my imagination," she drawled, looking down at her clothing in some amusement. Her padawan braid had been undone, and she now wore her hair loose down a little past her shoulders. Her clothing had also been changed to a somewhat nice, if dirty, sun dress in white and yellow. She looked like a Coruscanti native from the middle class. She also looked about four years younger than normal due to the application of a bit of makeup and, annoyingly, having her cheeks pinched to give them a slight rosy hue. "And I feel naked without my lightsaber."

"Stick it onto the inside of your thigh. Use a thin strap to do it, though, nothing that'll create a bulge in the dress when you move your legs," Ranma instructed, looking at herself in the mirror one last time before turning to Talli. "Well, how do I look?"

Looking at her now-female master, Scout paused, trying to think of a polite way to say how Ranma looked and failed. "Um...you look exactly on target for what you are going for, master."

Ranma was dressed... well. She looked like a country girl turned hooker. She had on short shorts that barely went down to midthigh, riding up whenever she walked, boots that came up to midcalf, hugging her feet and leg like a second skin, a crop top that showed off her midriff and also a large, almost indecent, amount of cleavage. Above that, Ranma didn't wear any makeup, but her hair had several secret extensions added to it so that it fell down to her rear in a wild mane of red, while around her neck, a fake slave collar rested.

Nearby, the Knight and padawan pair that had been assigned the mission of interrupting power into the Senate District by master Drallig and master Rancisis just stared at Ranma. They were the best pair of Jedi currently within the temple for sneaking around and causing computer-related issues. They had spent most of the time Ranma had spent sewing Talli's suit and programming the dozen cleaning droids the temple would be releasing into the senate when the power outage hit

"I realize we weren't told anything about whatever mission our actions were a part of, but I have to voice some confusion. Why in the world would you dress like a must slave girl owned by a crime boss with a specific fetish in clothing if you are trying to infiltrate the Senate District?" Knight Toraman asked in some shock.

"It'd take too long to explain. Suffice to say that we're just going to cause a bit of chaos, so much chaos that eventually it gets up to the top, and just as a bit more to a certain person's control issues," Ranma snickered.

Kit just shook his head, his normal wide grin, which had been in abeyance since Anakin had raced off on his own, coming back now as he examined Scout and Ranma closely. "I know this will earn me a punch, but you make that look good, Ranma. So much so it's quite disturbing."

True to form, Ranma's now-feminine-sized fist smacked into Kit's shoulder with enough force to send him staggering to one side, although that didn't stop him from laughing. Ranma joined in a bit, then shook his head, looking over at master Drallig. "These two were able to get out into the Senate without using the bridge. Show Scout and me how."

He turned to HK, shaking his head at the large droid. "Sorry, HK, but you're going to have to stay here for this one. You're just a little too obvious. Really, we should send you along with Shaak."

"Actually, we can probably get your droid into the Senate District unseen the same way as you all will, so long as it is able to get across the intervening distance anyway."

"Proud statement: whatever you meatbags can do, adroit of my unparalleled excellence can do as well," the droid answered, and the group made their way through the temple down into its depths, far below the surface level and heading deep into the maintenance areas of the temple.

Drallig continued to lead the group through the service corridors for a time, discussing code words to let Ranma and the others take over and order around the cleaning droids the Jedi would be sending out soon. This stopped when he reached a specific corridor, much the same as all the others to Ranma's eyes, where he quickly began to use the Force to pull out large panels from the wall. Through a series of pipes. The outside could be seen, the chasm leading down into the deeper zones of the Ecumenopolis between the Senate district in the temple.

"From here, if you can get across the crevice separating the temple from the rest of the district, you can get then get back into the Senate district from below," Drallig announced. "You won't be seen from this angle. The shadows are too deep."

Kit and Ranma exchanged glances at that, realizing at once that that comment could have been the basis for how the Sith had been able to hide for so long. Still, now is not the time for philosophy, Kit reflected. He watched as Ranma, then Scout and HK forced their way through the pipes separating the interior of the temple from the outside, shivering a little at how easy it was to get in and out of the temple like this. "How exactly has this remained well, so easy, master?"

“Easy, young Fisto? This little patch of piping sticks out from the lower walls of the temple, all on its own. Everything around it is smooth metal. There’s nowhere to go but across. Furthermore, you can’t remove the panels from the outside, and there are several security cameras along the route we just passed through. It is not easy at all. It is a secret way in and out, which the Jedi can use, but few others would be able to, and could not use to enter regardless.” Drallig shrugged then and gestured them across. “You will find yourselves in a somewhat defunct area, where you can make your way to the area still being used with relative ease. After that, good luck. We will be on the lookout for the signal to send you aid.”

“Thank you, Master Drallig,” Kit answered and then exited just in time to see Ranma toss a protesting HK across the intervening distance with one arm. “Sorry, HK, but your rockets would be too noisy and create light down here.” The redhead now looked at Kit, smirking, while Scout clung to her back. “You think you can make your own way over, or do you need a ride on the Ranma express?”

“Kriff, but that sounded dirty, Kit joked, and before Ranma could respond, he used the Force to power a leap over to the other side, landing next to HK, who was in the process of tearing the small, empty water pipe that served as the entrance to the Senate District into a large hole. Kit landed with some difficulty, scraping two of his lekku against the side of the dingy, pocked ferrocrete.

“You alright back there, Scout?” Ranma asked, watching, feeling the wind from below them in the crevice as HK finished his work and entered the monstrously huge spire.

“Yep, let’s do this!” Scout nearly squealed in her ear, then whooped as Ranma leaped across the intervening distance. Moments later, they too were inside the spire closest to the temple.

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While Ranma and the others were preparing for their roles in his plan, Shaak and the others quickly arrived at Coruscant’s truly massive Hypercom Uplink Center.

There, a series of codes that master Rancisis had given them allowed the now-reinforced group access to the center. From there, they moved to the security control room, and with another series of High Council codes backing her, Master Ti ordered the security officials to put themselves under the Jedi’s command. They acquiesced, but not without writing out a formal protest that would be sent to the Senate after this was done. But with the security on their side, Shaak instituted a short-term lockdown on personal communications going out from the center here to the rest of Coruscant. The last thing they wanted at this point was for someone to understand that the Jedi were here and were tracing the signal to whatever secret base the Sith had hidden in the very heart of the Republic.

With that done, Dralshy'a and the slicer from the Nova Guard got to work, taking command of several of the internal data consoles. The Slicer took over a console directly, while the other looked up a small device to another series of consoles, opened up a screen, and began to read out some of the information that popped up on it. A map of the center soon appeared, and a small glowing red dot appeared on that map moments later.

All of this activity created a bit of a furor in the workers there, but none objected. Instead, all of them looked to Shaak, whispering to one another, looking a little scared. This confused Shaak somewhat, and she moved over to the security manager. "Excuse me, but I had expected some more pushback from our unilateral takeover of your duties here. Yet beyond requesting that I put my orders in writing and that you will be filing a formal complaint, none of you have even protested."

The man she addressed looked a little nervous, wiping his face with a handkerchief for a moment. "Er, Master Ti, you wouldn't happen to know the redhead in the music video, would you? Only some of the clips of it show you in them near the end."

"What? What movie clip?" Shaak asked, somewhat confused.

The man gulped, but one of the others in the room, a young Toong, moved over to Shaak and held out his datapad, holding it up to her with his long, thin hands, a shy, nearly frightened smile on his wide face which, like most of his race, seemed to take up as much space as his actual body. "Here, Master Ti! Look-look!"

Bemused, Shaak took it, pressed play, and watched as Ranma landed among the droid army during the Second Battle of Wayland to some kind of song she was singing. It certainly looked impressive, and Shaak had seen it being broadcast at the time, although she hadn't known it had been recorded. Then, Shaak and the others began to arrive, as Ranma began to switch to a new song, which she hadn't known was still being broadcast. The video went on from there, showing a large amount of her own portion of the fight as Shaak fought beside Ranma. "Where did this come from?"

"Someone uploaded it into the Hypercom network, and it's been bouncing around ever since, yes-yes!" the youngster answered excitedly. "I didn't even know Jedi could sing like that, let alone fight like that, great-great!"

"Most can't do either of those things. I know many Jedi take up painting, some forms of poetry or wordplay, but singing has always been seen as too emotional for a Jedi to take on as a hobby. So, if you're asking me if I can sing, the answer is no," Shaak drawled, getting some of her self-control back.

"We're not concerned about that, Master Ti. We're more leery about your combat abilities. It's not every Jedi who have helped to chop entire armies of droids into manageable

chunks of metal,” the manager answered, still looking nervous but not as much, seeing this Jedi had a sense of humor.

“That makes much more sense. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an enemy to hunt,” With that, Shaak left, leaving the two Jedi who had been seconded to them behind to watch over the security Center and make certain that her orders on a local communication blackout stayed in place with her gone.

Soon, the group was making their way through the uplink center to one of its wings, where the two slicers pointed to an outer wall. That outer wall was a large segment of the Hypercom’s local array, sending out signals that the uplink center took in from off planet or vice-versa. The point was that most of those arrays were transmitters, not hardline LAN.

However, when the two slicers went to work, the equivalent of a LAN line was exactly what they discovered. “It keeps on going down, Master Jedi,” one of the slicers reported, not being nearly as willing to be informal with the Jedi master as the crew of the Wild Blade was.

“How far away do we have to be for you to be able to follow that line?”

“Twelve meters, master Jedi, depending on the material between us and the line itself. If it’s ferrocete, that falls to a maximum of six.”

Shaak grimaced at that but nodded and once more found herself within some maintenance shafts heading down a long ladder following along the route of the communications line. After several hours of frustration, dead ends, turns, lost signals and more trouble, they were still heading down, only this time at an angle, away from the uplink center.

This gave Shaak an idea of how long this thing had been here: at least eight hundred years since when a new layer had been created on the ecumenopolis. That made her somewhat grim, knowing the Sith had been hiding here so near the Jedi for so long, with no Jedi discovering their continued existence.

Several more times, they had to double back, and more than once, Shaak and Ahsoka had to use the Force to try and direct them forward as they descended further into the depths of the ecumenopolis. But they were still making progress as they left the topmost three layers, the layers where people regularly lived, into the fourth level.

And further down from there.

And still further, until the last of the light from above was, but a memory, and moving forward demanded explosives and lightsabers to get through rubble and metal walls.

Eventually, finding the LAN line became the least of their worries. It was visible now, mostly trailing along the floor of a shaft that opened up in segments into caverns that were so

deep they contained almost primordial darkness. They were now so far below the surface that K'Kruhk wondered if the Jedi had ever been this deep before. Certainly, he had not been, and the large shaggy Whiphid felt a faint stirring of claustrophobia occasionally as they moved through the thinner segments of the tunnel.

Thankfully, these segments were short, despite the fact that they were so far deep underground. There was also life here, dark growths of trees that grew here without sunlight, finding what little nutrients they had in tiny pools of water and broken down ferrocrete.

In the distance, Shaak and Ahsoka could make out noises, the noises of small skittering creatures thanks to their montrals. Ahsoka stayed close to her master, somewhat disturbed by those noises, while Shaak took it with her normal calm, not nearly as disturbed by the sounds hitting her montrals as she was by the tightness of some of the spaces they had to move through.

And of course, some of those animals thought that the group looked just delicious.

As they passed through one large cavern, the skittering grew louder, accompanied by a keening wail, at first, just a slight distant noise barely heard by the Togrutans thanks to their montrals. But the noise grew, and Shaak held up a hand, staring around them. "We are going to be attacked. K'Kruhk, to the left, I sense more of the noise coming from there and directly ahead of us although..."

The animals they had been hearing crossed the intervening darkness insanely quickly, and as they moved into the lights of the Nova Guard and Mandalorians, nearly all of them recoiled.

The animals looked like people almost, but warped, twisted from living down here for so long. Their eyes were wide, gleaming like pearls as they charged into the area illuminated by the intruders. They still had bits and rags of clothing, but their feet and hands were warped, larger than they should be given the size of the rest of their bodies, and with equally large claws. They almost reminded her of the former denizens of Vjun, who had been driven mad by the release of a Dark Side virus.

And there were a lot of them. Boiling out of the various bits of flotsam and crushed apartment complexes that the group had passed through and from the front.

"We're surrounded!" shouted Ahsoka, backing away rapidly, her normal courage in stark abeyance down here until her master gently touched her shoulder and gestured forward with her hand.

The Force push that Shaak released slammed into the creatures ahead of them, picking up several dozen and hurling them backward into several more. "Calm yourself, my padawan,"

Shaak soothed. "Given all the trials we have faced so far, we will not be undone by these creatures."

Several of the monsters reached her, and Shaak's lightsaber was in her hand faster than Ahsoka could follow, cutting two of the monsters in half.

Nearby, K'Kruhk reached out with the Force as well, into one of the creatures' brains. He hoped to find some means of calming them down, of maybe making the animals see the attacking team as if they were another band of similar beasts so that this horde of monsters would leave them alone. But he found nothing of the sort. All he found was a deep, bottomless, insane level of hunger and hatred for the light. Yet even if they turned off the various lights, the creatures would still attack. The heat of the team's bodies attracted them too much, overriding everything else.

Behind her, the Nova Guard began to fire. Crew served weapons, grenade launchers, and heavy repeating blasters opening up at near point-blank range, so much so many of the group were hit by debris from the explosions. A few rockets from the Mandalorians also lashed out into the horde around them, slaying the monsters as they came. The actinic flares and blasts of their weapons, coupled with the lights of the two lightsabers, cast a macabre across the scene as more and more of the monsters flung themselves forward.

"I cannot get into their heads," K'Kruhk announced sadly, stabbing the monster he had been trying to influence, the thing, having ducked under her lightsaber at the instant only for the Whiphid to smash it to the ground.

Shaak nodded as she lashed out in either direction, her lightsaber taking one of the monsters in the chest while a punch took another creature in the side of the head, which exploded thanks to the Force of the blow. As the blood and brains splattered her hand and sleeve, Shaak grimaced slightly. *Ah, I should have remembered to control my strength.* After all, none of these creatures had anywhere near the level of durability that Shaak's regular sparring partner did.

"We will need to push forward. Sergeant Cro, no more grenades. Have one of your troops prepare some satchel charges. We will need to seal off any chokepoints that we come across," Shaak ordered. "Flashbangs for now, please."

"Roger." Gesturing, Cro sent two of his men moving back from the outside of the defensive circle while some of his men pushed forward to take up position on the top of a small rise in the ground, where two other men pulled out their large riot shields. The Mandalorians and Jedi moved with them, and from the center of this position, one of the men who had been using a grenade launcher switched out to flashbangs, creating an even more unholy amount of flashes all around the group.

But it seemed to work. The bright flares of the flashbangs caused many of the attackers to scream, holding their eyes as they did, backing away from the group.

This allowed the group to move through several of the small tunnels, limiting the avenues of attack. At the front of the group, K'Kruhk and Shaak literally cut through any of the monsters ahead of them, the rest of their people stepping over the dead corpses as they moved forward. And when they were pressed hard from behind or attacked from small side passages or hidey-holes, Ahsoka fought them off, her earlier fear gone now, until a satchel charge blew the tunnel down on the attackers.

Twice they came out into larger areas and almost found themselves surrounded. But the flashbangs, which they rapidly began running out of, the Mandalorians taking to the air, and the two older Jedi's Force powers got them through until they were finally back into what looked like a long tunnel, with none of the monsters ahead of them. This tunnel almost looked like it was coming out of a giant crushed apartment dwelling set on its side, but the LAN line from the Hypercom was still ahead of them, and no monsters were any longer.

"Bring down the tunnel behind us. We will have to find another way back to the surface," Shaak ordered, twisting around and moving to the back of the group, pushing aside two Nova Guard shield bearers.

Shaak stood there defending against the horde all by herself for a time, letting the others retreat behind her. Ahsoka moved to join her, and almost instantly felt her master's approval, her Force presence reaching out to her. The padawan and Jedi pair stood there, facing what amounted to a small regiment of creepy monsters as they continued to come out of the darkness behind them, their thoughts buffeting the younger Jedi with hunger and hatred of the lightsabers that cut into them as they came.

For about ten minutes they stood there, the art of demolition. Not exactly being something you wanted to rush when you're deep underground, and who knew how many hundreds of millions of tons of rubble was above you, kept there by some delicate balance that you would need Master Windu's Shatterpoint skill to understand. Eventually, however, the work was done, and Cro shouted, "Shaak, we're ready!"

"Rockets," Shaak ordered as she and Ahsoka ducked. Both of the young Mandalorians, Fabian and Keala, fired their wrist rockets over the heads of the two Jedi, and Shaak and Ahsoka, still in the gestalt that they had entered into the battle, thrust forward their free hands. The Force push crashed into the nearest of the monsters attacking them, pushing them back just as the rockets hit, creating a space between the horde and the two Jedi. With that, they turned, lightsabers turning off as one as they raced to join their friends. They leaped up and over the two shield-bearers as they backed away down the corridor.

The demolition expert waited until his two fellows were a set distance away from his bomb, then clicked the detonator button.

The deep rumble that this event invoked in the smoke and fog that came around the corner of the tunnel towards them caused everyone to wince. Even Shaak stared up at the ceiling in trepidation, grimacing at the pain to her montrals from the noise, while Ahsoka stumbled, shaking her head.

However, after a few seconds, the sound of tumbling stone and ferrocrete fell silent, and K'Kruhk closed his eyes, reaching upwards with the Force for a moment, before breathing a sigh of relief. Around him, the others also congratulated the demolition expert, who just nodded back, then looked over at Dralshy'a, who was acting as the team's signals expert. "Well?"

She simply shrugged and pointed ahead of them. "Follow the black string of faith, I suppose."

"I don't like that line. I don't know where it came from or the societal background, but I still don't like it. Let's just get this over with and find out how the Sith are able to get up to the surface. I want to punch a Sith in the face, see the sun again, and have a bath and a steak, in that order," Ahsoka grumbled, causing Shaak to chuckle as the group once more began to move on their way.

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It took the group of Jedi, martial artist and droids some time to get close to the ears of the Senate District, where people still routinely moved around. Drallig had understated how much effort it would take to move up rather than down, as was normal for Jedi wishing to leave the temple unseen. Still, they had arrived, and it was now only a little after local morning. They had also seen the lights go out, with HK reporting the lack of sound from the large central generator station that was the primary source of power within the district. It was off for several minutes before coming back online, which meant that the Jedi Order had done its job. Now it was time for Ranma and Talli to do theirs.

"Are you sure you're going to be good on your own, Scout?" Ranma asked, kneeling down in front of the younger girl, giving her a somewhat off-putting view down Ranma's current shirt.

"I should be fine. I'm supposed to talk to four, fifteen people before retreating? And I'm so small that I can use the air vents to move around or hide pretty easily." Scout held up a multi-headed screwdriver for emphasis. "And some dirt and dust on my dress might actually make my story all the better."

"And you're good with acting as I asked you to?"

Scout hesitated at that, and Kit reached over to touch her shoulder gently. The smiles on both Kit and Ranma's faces, although somewhat sardonic and it had to be said manic on

Ranma's part, gave her some courage, and she nodded resolutely. "Yes, master, I remember my lines and everything. It's just picking out my targets that will be a little tougher."

"Choose older to middle-aged people, men and women both. One young woman, and maybe an older woman who looks a little... How to put it, censorious? The kind of woman who would look at a young waif like yourself and go 'put on some proper clothing' or tut at the fact that you're out and about without a minder."

"Someone like master Jocasta," Kit added to Ranma's description, causing Scout to burst into giggles.

"Yep, and remember to giggle if someone asks you a hard question, as if you are so simple, you couldn't hurt a fly."

Scout gave her master a thumbs up at that and then turned to enter the nearby air vent that HK had pulled out.

With that, HK settled back into place, waiting for her to return.

This left Kit and Ranma to their own devices, and the two friends clasped forearms before moving out, one of them going one direction down the hallway, cloaked in his Force Stealth and Force Cloak to the greatest degree he could manage, while Ranma moved in the other direction, disappearing under her Umi-Sen-Ken, which was even more effective so long as he didn't run into a Force user. If a Force user was in his physical presence, they could see through the technique but not before.

The redhead reappeared a moment later, entering a wide hallway with lots of trees around it and several people as well. There, she looked around in interest, running one hand through her hair as she walked forward, looking all around her, then ostentatiously bending over a directory set into a plinth in the middle of the large hallway. *Kami, who knew that contest I had with Tsubasa and all the times I had to act like a waitress would come in handy for something like this?*

The redhead garnered several looks from the people around them, both workers for the Senate, two security guards, and even three senators. That trio was clustered around one another, discussing something in low tones, and from what little Ranma could overhear, it seemed as if they were reacting to the momentary loss of power that had happened a bare hour ago.

But their discussion trailed off quickly. Now all three, all men and two of them human, watched Ranma, both with interest and surprise.

While personal slavery was known in the Republic, only two dozen or so senators out of several thousand slaves, and most of those slaves were well known and of an alien persuasion,

mainly Twi'lek. Ranma wasn't one of them, and while her body wasn't as good as a Twi'lek pleasure slave, the clothing and attitude did add to the interest.

Before any of the watchers could figure out what to do, Ranma had found the name of the senator that Shaak had told her to look out for back when they had first talked about this plan, and she skipped away, humming something under her breath. A nearby security guard raised his hands to stop her as she blithely passed him by, only to freeze as the words she was humming reached him. "Going to get trained, going to have my Master-Daddy spank me in the good way!"

And now I am using those porn books Tofu left me. UGH. Going to need to scrub myself with an engine cleanser! Keep it together, Ranma. Just remember, this kind of scandal is one Palpy's never had to deal with, and he's already gonna have control issues.

The security guard, a young human man, blushed to his hairline, stuttered, stammered, and watched the incredibly sexy redhead bounce off, completely out of it, until his partner shook his shoulder. "Damn, where did that girl come from, and what did she say to make you react like that?"

"I don't know, but whoever her 'Daddy' is, he's one hell of a lucky man!"

"She was still wearing a slave collar no matter how happy she might seem. And she isn't one of the slaves we have data on. Come on, let's see if we can catch up to her. We need to get some kind of ID on her."

But the redhead was gone, having used one of the lifts to head ever higher up into the central spire of the district.

Several more times, Ranma would deliberately show herself to groups of people, always leaving behind either the names Master, Daddy, or a few times, Sheevy, leaving her little singsong mantras behind her in various forms. If anyone tried to follow or approach her, Ranma would disappear like a ghost around a corner or into a side room, adding still more to the mystery. And coupling mystery with scandal was like tossing raw meat to a pack of starving dogs.

As a finishing touch, Ranma only talked to one group of people directly.

Coming out of her Umi-Sen-Ken behind a tree, Ranma skipped through a small park on the six-hundred and twentieth floor of the main Senate spire. This was a place where lots and lots of Senators and their aides occasionally came to relax before important committee meetings, as this whole level was devoted to small council rooms.

At the moment, it was somewhat sparsely populated, but there were still more than four dozen senators and aides who saw the redhead in the slave collar suddenly appear as if out of nowhere and move toward Orn Free Taa.

The Twi'lek senator of Ryloth, leader of the Rim Faction, one of the power blocs within the Senate and one of the few to have survived the start of the war, looked up from where he had been surreptitiously feeling up one of his slave girls only to stare. His eyes went wide in his fat, extremely jowly face as he beheld the redhead in front of him, his fat, almost moribund lekku twitching very slightly in response.

"Oh, damn it, if only my trainer had told me where to find you, I've wasted so much time, I can't get in any training," the redhead said, her voice low and despondent as she clicked her fingers in a typical Coruscanti manner to indicate a missed opportunity as the redhead looked between Mas and the large clock set into the ceiling above them.

For a moment, the words didn't register to the overweight Twi'lek, then he shook himself, looking at her quizzically and quite avariciously. While his Twi'lek slaves were experts in all things he desired of them, having a taste of something new was also interesting. "And what do you mean by that, my dear? Is your master loaning you to out to me for some reason? As a form of payment for past actions, or to pay for some future aid?"

"Now, none of that. My master doesn't even know I'm here. It's just my trainer says that my skills in a couple of areas are lacking, and if I want to really serve my master, I need to get better at them," Ranma answered, keeping her hands from twitching towards the fat fool's jugular with some difficulty. Still, she had kept up the charade up to this point, and after a few more short glimpses, Ranma figured his job to get under Palpy's skin would be finished. "And I know I'm not supposed to be out, but when the lights all flickered, I thought, well, why not?"

There was a bit to unpack, and if Orn was in his right mind at the moment, he might well have questioned that last sentence. But the senator for Ryloth had a penchant for the female flesh normally and a fetish for human women, which he was very rarely able to indulge in. "And what kind of skills would you be looking to learn?"

"Dancing, dress, some play with these," Ranma said, pointing to her chest with one finger from each hand, drawing even more attention to that body part as she continued. "Daddy Sheevy didn't think the last time I used them was all that good. Still, like I said, it took too long to find you. I guess I will really have to request my master allow me to train with you later. I wanted it to be a surprise, darn it!"

Orn Free Taa's eyes widened, and his salacious grin turned into a real one as his lekku twitched in delight. There were only a few senators who could be called 'Sheevy', and all but one were women, which made no sense whatsoever under the circumstances. *So Palpatine is mortal after all! Delicious, as is this girl. Where has he been hiding a slave so well-trained to feel pleasure in service enough to act on her own contrivance?* "Well, don't worry your pretty head.

Go on back to wherever you are currently living, and I will get in touch with your master personally. I'll send one of my own girls to you tomorrow for training."

"Thanks!" Ranma gave Mas the most brain-dead, simpering smile she could possibly contrive, adding a little bounce on her heels as she did. Then, she twirled away, looked up at the chrono again and muttered loudly, "oh geez, I don't know if I'll be able to get back in time. My trainer is going to punish me! Seriously, so much for this being a surprise. I really should have known better."

With that, she was off and, moments later, disappeared through the trees, pulling the Umi-Sen-Ken over herself with a certain amount of relief, ending the slimy feeling of Mas's eyes on her. *All of this better freaking work, or else I'm going to have to pulp that bastard's eyes with my thumbs.*

Stealing herself, Ranma showed herself several more times and was delighted when, with the last one, the aide who had overheard her had already turned to his companions and said, "That is the Chancellor's pleasure slave! He must have been keeping her around here somewhere. I wonder how he got away with that? And I didn't even know he had it in him at all to keep slaves at all, let alone one like that."

"It's disgusting is what it is! The Chancellor has always held himself up as an upright individual, and he's keeping a pleasure slave whose mind is so broken? What else is he hiding if that's the case?" the other aide said, shaking her head sharply and then very deliberately kicking her companion in the shin. "And don't think I didn't see where your eyes were going."

Yep, I think I've done my bit, Ranma reflected. Now to see if I can find Kit and Anakin.

This was easier said than done, but after sneaking into a nearby security station and looking over the map and the video recorders, Ranma spotted Kit, moving around freely now, dressed somewhat like an orderly rather than a Jedi. With that, Ranma knew the general area where he could find his friend and raced away.

OOOOOOO

Anakin had not had an easy time of it since he had arrived on Coruscant. For one thing, his ability to hide his Force presence from other Force users was not the best, and he had to concentrate on that to such a degree he could barely use the Force for other things, such as the technique to hide his physical presence. Let alone use the Force to command the minds of others for a short amount of time.

But Anakin was determined. Determined to surprise the Chancellor, determined to confront him when the man would not have time to raise his defenses or prevaricate. And if Palpatine really was the hidden Sith Lord, really was connected to the Sith Lord who had created Anakin in his mother's womb via the Dark Side, then Anakin would do what he had to.

Anakin had wanted to enter the Senate District from below, get down to Coruscant's third level and cut his way upwards from there. This proved nearly impossible, but eventually, Anakin had found a small area in the ceiling between the third level and the second below the Senate. There, where Anakin could sense open space only a few hundred meters away through ferrocrete, Anakin cut a basic hole, using the Force to pull large segments of reinforced ferrocrete out from the hole he had cut with his lightsaber as if he was drilling through the stone with it.

By that point, the strain of hiding his Force Presence was getting to Anakin. It was a technique that he had only rarely had to experiment with in the past, Master Giiett never having been concerned about hiding from other Jedi like that and even preferring other methods of infiltration when dealing with ongoing investigations or anti-criminal operations to Force Cloak. He had to rest for a time before moving on resolutely, heading upward all the time.

Anakin was helped at one point by a strange power outage, causing him to frown and wonder what was going on elsewhere, but he was unwilling to reach out to the Force and see if he could figure anything out, knowing that would give his presence away for anyone else who was using the Force nearby, either the Force or the Dark Side.

Several close calls caused him to stop and retrace his steps, slowing him down further, but eventually, his willingness to find empty core doors and simply cut his way upwards paid off, and Anakin arrived below the first of the five floors that were dedicated to the Chancellor and his aides. From here on, he wouldn't be able to just cut his way up words without setting off alarms, the floors dedicated to the Chancellor having a higher security level than the rest of the district, and sensor equipment layered into the floors and walls.

Now so close to his goal, Anakin threw caution to the winds and simply made his way to the nearest elevator, intent on carrying it up words. But as he raced forward's, he wasn't so aware of his surroundings, and as Anakin turned the corner to where he hoped to find the lift, he and another body entering the same intersection smacked into one another. Anakin found himself stumbling back while the other person fell on her rear, grumbling under her breath before politely, if in a somewhat strained tone, saying, "I'm sorry, I was not looking where I was going."

Anakin stiffened as he stopped himself from reaching for his lightsaber, a flash of pure anger going through him at being stopped once more so close to his goal. But as he heard that voice and stared at the young woman on the ground, his anger started to dissipate for the first time since he had realized Palpatine's betrayal. A soothing, almost calming presence came to him as, through the confusion and craziness of the Force, he senses a bright, pearlescent presence, not that of a Force User, but something close, someone special.

It was a presence he had felt years ago on the day his life had changed so much. On the day he had met Shaak and Ranma for the first time along with Master Jinn, the man who would

recognize his talents in the Force and free him and his mother from slavery. On that day, Anakin had personally met his angel. "P, Padme?"

Blinking, Padme frowned up at the man, wondering why he was being so informal, before recognizing him as a Jedi padawan. *Still, most Jedi are also formal. That's certainly been what I have observed before this. Although he is something of a handsome young fellow, and those eyes are our familiar...* "Anakin? Little Ani! Good grief, you've grown up."

Suddenly feeling tired, almost drained of all his forward momentum, Anakin sighed, leaning down and helping Padme to her feet. When he did, it became clear that he was at least a foot taller than her, something that sent a small atavistic thrill through him as the two of them stood. Anakin was just a little too close for polite company, although Padme didn't seem to notice. "Nice of you to say, Padme. Or am I supposed to call you Senator Amidala?"

"You can call me Padme if you like! Nearly a decade later, those adventures we had on Tatooine are still clear in my memory," Padme said, blushing faintly at looking up at Anakin. *My word, he really is quite handsome. Is this really the little boy who ran at my heels and talked about building his own droids all those years ago?*

But as she took in his face, Padme became aware of how much strain was in Anakin's face, the exhaustion in his posture and eyes. There was also a fury there buried under the surface, like a banked fire hidden in a hearth. It was visible in the way his jaw clenched between words, the way his smile didn't seem natural and the set of his shoulders. Padme had become used to seeing signs of anger in her fellow sentients, but even though Anakin's anger had been pushed below the surface, the power of it still startled her.

Hesitantly, she reached down and took his hand, squeezing it, watching some further bits of that anger dissipate behind his eyes. "Ani, are you all right? Do you want to sit and catch up for a bit? I don't have many duties myself these days, unfortunately, so I don't need to be anywhere until three this afternoon. No one wants to listen to the Peace Party any longer, and I have found that I'm no longer invited to any meetings or parties either."

Padme tried to keep the bitterness out of her tone as she spoke, but Padme knew she wasn't doing as good a job as she normally would. The months since the war had begun had worn on her spirit horribly, on top of having lost so many friends in the bombing that had nearly killed her and begun the war. She still kept the Peace Party going, still tried to push to open dialogue with the Confederacy, to create some kind of agreed-upon rules of war, but she wasn't getting anywhere, and that lack of success rankled just as much as the continued brushoffs she received from Palpatine or his aides.

"I, I'm sorry, but I need to see the Chancellor," Anakin said, and just like that, his anger was back, pushed to the surface so quickly at the mention of the Chancellor that Padme stepped backward in surprise, watching as the young Jedi's face seemed to transform, his teeth

bared in a snarl. He stood there for a moment, trying desperately to keep his Force Presence from showing.

"... Whatever has you so furious with him, going to speak to the Chancellor in such a state is never a good idea, Anakin. You have to be controlled in such circumstances, line up your arguments in a logical fashion and maybe even practice your words first," Padme joked, trying to defuse whatever bomb was about to go off in Anakin. "No politician reacts quite so well to an angry opponent than the Chancellor. It's part of why he disdains vitriol and emotional responses in the Senate, despite that making up around seventy percent of what is said there at any one time."

The words of his angel calmed Anakin down, and Anakin looked back at Padme. He found his eyes arrested by her lips. They were painted a neon blue at the moment, her only concession to local fashion, which had garish lipstick colors as the height of fashion this season.

At the sight of those lips, Anakin, his self-controlled frayed badly and pulling in different directions, gave out, and once again, the young Skywalker acted precipitously. Leaning forward quickly, Anakin crossed the intervening distance between them and kissed Padme on the lips, and it wasn't just a peck either.

Padme's eyes widened as she saw Anakin leaning forward, and before she could pull back, she could feel his lips on hers. It was quite a good kiss, she thought, stunned into immobility for a moment. But when Anakin made to put his arms around her, Padme came to her senses. She pushed him away with one arm, her other hand coming up in a slap that caught Anakin in the side of the mouth. "Anakin Skywalker!"

"I, wha, you hit me!" Anakin stumbled back, more surprised than hurt, staring at her incredulously as one hand rose to his cheek.

"You kissed me out of the blue! Even if we are old friends, Anakin, some things are a little beyond the line! Especially considering your Jedi training!" Padme snorted, deciding to put that moment down to how utterly exhausted Anakin seemed. "Impulse control is still a thing for you, isn't it?" she teased gently, her tone changing to a friendlier one. "The least you could do before kissing a girl is to get to know her better, or in our case, catch up, yes?"

So frazzled was Anakin at the present moment by his anger pulling him in one way, his guilt at leaving his master and friends behind, and the lack of ability to read the Force very well along with meeting Padme once more that he didn't even feel anyone coming up behind him at that point. He only became aware someone was behind him when he saw Padme's eyes dart over his shoulder, narrowing for a second before widening in surprise.

Before he could turn, Anakin found himself locked into a headlock as a familiar voice intoned, "Do forgive my padawan. He does seem to have a bit of a problem with impulse control, don't you, Anakin?"

Kit had gone through Ranma's training, if far more haphazardly than Shaak or the other members of the Wild Blade crew. Regardless, he was far stronger than was normal for his race, and he held Anakin in a headlock with one arm around his neck, the other grabbing Anakin's lightsaber from his belt and holding it out to Padme. "Hello, Senator Amidala, I don't suppose you could hold that for me for a moment, could you?" Kit inquired, his tone almost light but his face serious as Anakin tried to elbow Kit in the stomach, doing nothing more than hurting his own elbow, as the taller Kit lifted him lightly off the ground, his now free hand coming up to lock Anakin's arm into place.

Somewhat nonplussed both by the fact that Master Fisto, who she had met only a few times before, remembered her and his sudden arrival and violent incarceration of Anakin, Padme took the lightsaber in one limp hand, cocking her head to one side as she watched them for a moment. "Why do I get the impression that your comment on Anakin's lack of tact has far more behind it than just your annoyance with him for kissing me like that?"

"You are an observant young woman senator. I have no doubt that you can tell there is indeed more to the story," Kit chuckled before turning his attention back to his padawan. "Anakin, calm down! This is far too important for me to let you run haring off on your own! I understand your anger. I understand your feelings of betrayal, a far more personal sort than the Order is dealing with. But I don't want to lose you, and I very much fear that one way or the other, I would, if I let you continue on this course."

Anakin's eyes widened at that, as did Padme's, who was really feeling out of her depth all of a sudden. This was a feeling she did not particularly enjoy. And her voice was tartness personified as she ground out, "Would one of you explain what is going on?"

However, Anakin wasn't without tricks. From the inside of his robe, Anakin dropped a small disk, catching it on his foot and flicking it upwards. The small flashbang, a gift from a Mandalorian he had danced with back on Corellia, went off at head height, blinding both Padme and Kit, who reflexively reached for his eyes. Some things even Jedi training could not change, and that was the instant reaction to being blinded.

But before Anakin could do more than break out of Kit's chokehold and take a step in the direction of the elevator, it opened. For some reason, Anakin couldn't figure out if there was someone inside, and he took a step into it, quickly turning to close the door.

As he did, a feminine voice behind him intoned, "Unconscious man say what?"

"What..." Anakin stammered as he turned before a small feminine fist slammed into the side of his head, sending him into unconsciousness.

Padme stared at the redhead, who had seemingly just appeared out of nowhere, knocking Anakin unconscious with a single blow. She looked vaguely familiar, but that wasn't

enough to offset the growing confusion, concern and annoyance within Padme. "What, where did the... Who are... What is going on!"

"What is going on is that your delay of him has allowed us to stop Anakin from making a deadly mistake, one we will explain in private," Kit supplied smoothly, shaking his head. *That is proof that even a Jedi's sense cannot push through the chaos which has gripped the Force, although we have been able to use it for combat skills so far, so it is not a total loss...* "If we could retire to your chambers? Possibly without being seen?"

"We can do that so long as you all can hide your presence for a few intersections and that you don't mind the graffiti that has begun to appear around the area today."

"Fine, we'll give you your answers. Just give us a place to talk with you without anyone or anything overhearing and a place for me to get changed," the redhead muttered, gesturing with her head towards the elevator. "Move, girl."

Her voice reminded Padme of the same series of memories that meeting Anakin had woken, and Padme started, staring incredulously. But when she made to make open her mouth, the redhead held up a finger to her lips in the universal gesture for silence. "No more questions, let's get going."

Carrying Anakin allowed Ranma to cover him with the Umi-Sen-Ken as well, hiding Anakin's presence better than he had been able to previously. In this manner, the three of them moved through the hallways and elevators down nearly 80 levels before coming to Padme's. As they entered it, it was clear that this was an area that didn't see much traffic any longer, or at least hadn't that day, since Ranma spotted several instances of droid-created graffiti on the walls and smiled cheerily as Padme continued to lead them away. *Heh, I will wager that kind of thing is causing SSF a fit, and maybe the head fucktard himself.*

That smile didn't disappear as Ranma entered Padme's suite and made a beeline towards the refresher station she could see through one open doorway. "I'll be right back, Kit. You can start the explanation."

"Kriff," Kit grumbled before sighing and admitting it was his place to do so. After all, Ranma had been doing quite a bit of work today, while Kit had simply been searching for his wayward padawan. "Fine, dammit! Senator might need to sit down for this. And if you could activate any security you have on your suite to stop outgoing calls or recordings?"

By the time Ranma was finished getting off the makeup, changing into his male body, and changing clothing, Kit had explained about Wayland and the evidence they had discovered against the hidden Sith. Anakin had yet to wake up from his Ranma-induced unconsciousness but seemed to be stirring as Ranma exited the bathroom, slumping down on the same sofa that the younger man had been tossed on.

"I understand what you're saying, but what does this have to do with Anakin possibly making a mistake by speaking to the Chancellor? Is this hidden Sith Lord one of his aides, perhaps? I know that one of them, Pestage, is quite an easy fellow to overlook, and that kind of talent would fit with someone who is wishing to hide within the government of the Republic while playing both sides of this war against one another," Padme mused. "I will warn you, even Jedi will need proof of that kind of supposition. Perhaps especially Jedi, these days."

Shaking his head slightly at Padme's words, Ranma decided to get this over with. "It's not just someone in his office. It is the Chancellor himself. We've got voice recordings of him, and Anakin recognized it, as did several of the others with us at the time. Only Anakin was there when they first broke the codes for those recordings, and..."

"And he raced off on his own without consulting with the rest of us. That somewhat forced our hand, although we were able to come up with a somewhat loose plan on the way here," Kit took over the tale as Padme shot to her feet, staring at the two of them in horror and disbelief. "We can share some of the recordings with you if you like. We have copies here with us."

"I cannot, that is I... could that evidence have been planted? How could the Chancellor, how could Sheev Palpatine, who has long been an aid and mentor to me as well as a friend to the Jedi, be a Sith Lord!?" Padme nearly shouted.

"That's the same question Anakin was worried about. Although obviously, he's already figured out some of the answers, or else he wouldn't have been so angry as to rush off as he did. Would you, Anakin?" Kit addressed his padawan, who finally was rousing himself enough to hear their words.

He sat up abruptly, then touched his jaw gingerly before looking furiously at Ranma and would have addressed the pigtailed martial artist angrily if not for Kit's pointed remarks hitting him like so many daggers. He slumped on the sofa, one hand coming up to rub at his eyes, but when he spoke, he acknowledged his master's words. "Yes, master, I, the Chancellor has been something of a role model, almost like a distant uncle to me, ever since the incident on Naboo. I could not, I could not take the knowledge that he had possibly been manipulating me from the start without acting. I'm I will not apologize for that, although I am sorry for it."

Kit stared at his young padawan for several moments before sighing explosively, all of his lekku twitching in every direction for a moment, a sure sign of exasperation among his people. "Anakin, we **will** talk about this once this is all over. Your actions prior to that moment, your skill with the Force, with your lightsaber, and how you reacted to my lessons about letting your grief fade along with your anger had me thinking that you were on the way to becoming a Knight, possibly becoming one of the youngest to ever be so named."

He shook his head slowly. "Now? As Padme put it, your impulse control is atrocious. Your anger issues, which I can tell still reside within you, is also too strong for me to want to let

you take the trials anytime soon. I am not saying your anger is misplaced, Anakin, and not even saying it is wrong to feel so. Anyone who would have equated the Jedi order to an Order of mindless automatons. But we are not. We are thinking and feeling individual sentients. But we are bound by a code, and the way you are willing to go your own path, heedless of the consequences for both you and the galaxy at large, is disturbing. Thank the Force that you retained enough intelligence to not simply rush in using your Jedi codes to get close to Palpatine.

"But we can't really deal with that now," Ranma interjected, as Anakin slumped, knowing he would be in for a lot of training in the future. *Heck, the kid will be lucky if he and Kit don't retire to one of the Agriworlds to help them rebuild for a few years so the Order can deal with all this anger he's gotten inside him. Like Kit, I don't deny that he has a reason to be angry, and I don't want to be a hypocrite and say I never went off halfcocked but still...*

"You still haven't convinced me that you are correct in your **assumption**," Padme emphasized the last word, "that the Chancellor is the Sith Lord you've all been searching for."

That took about thirty minutes of watching not only the footage that had set Anakin off but a number of other recordings of Palpatine giving out orders to the Sith cult on Wayland. If there had ever been any doubt from the first recording, it was gone by the second time Padme watched a message play, along with a voice comparison charts to one side showing some of the Chancellor's speeches.

"Enough!" Padme growled, hopping to her feet and piecing angrily. "You've convinced me. But this is something that needs to be seen by the maximum number of people as immediately as possible. You cannot keep this under wraps! You also **cannot** try to arrest him or move against Palpatine in any way without the full understanding of the Senate behind you. I say this, Master Fisto, knowing precisely how difficult that will be. But I also know how much support the Chancellor has."

The young senator shook her head. "Before the war began, even the separatists respected the man, although they didn't respect his policies and belief in the Republic. Now, the only real parties within the Senate are the Centrists, the Rim Faction, which is heavily allied with them, and my Peace Party. And the Chancellor has support from all three for how he has run the war. Indeed, many of my fellow senators have begun to blame the Jedi for any significant loss we take in this war, while he keeps on coming out of each such discussion looking better."

Ranma and Kit exchanged glances before nodding in unison. "That dovetails with what we were told by master Rancisis. We've already been acting in a way to undermine his self-control, get Palpatine to act first, get him to break character. But you're saying that needs to happen in public?"

"It needs to happen with as many senatorial observers as possible. Anything else, any recording, and the statement by the Jedi would be seen as a divisive figure. The Republic could then collapse into warring parties, one party holding up the Chancellor as a martyr if you kill him or as a victim of a Jedi plot if he somehow survives. While the other side would back you. And I hate to tell you, the first group would be much larger."

Anakin grimaced at how casually Padme mentioned killing the Chancellor, which did not match his image of his angel from Tatooine. But while Padme believed very firmly in peace and pacifism, she also understood the realities of the galaxy at large. There was no way a confrontation like this could end without one side or the dead. And given the evidence Ranma and Kit had just showed her, as well as examining her own memories of how Palpatine had convinced her to ask for a vote of no-confidence on his predecessor, Padme knew which side she wanted to come out ahead.

"Is there a full Senate meeting today? We were told there was, and we were planning on a confrontation with Palpatine right before it," Ranma explained. "We hoped the noise we'd cause doing so would draw out the Senators."

"It wouldn't. The acoustics of the Senate Hall is such that very little can be heard coming in or out unless more than one of the entrances is open. You could do it that way, I suppose, if you have a program that will get you through the locks, but... That is doubtful. And even then, you would have a lot of the Senate declaring that you had entrapped Palpatine or that he was wrongfully accused. No, the only way to wreck Palpatine's outward personality entirely is to do it in front of the entire Senate and for him to be the one to strike the first blow, preferably with a red lightsaber in hand."

"Then we change the plan a little. It isn't like it's set in stone or anything," Ranma answered with a shrug. "Station Anakin and Kit outside just in case you can get away, and you sneak me into the Senate Padme."

"Impossible. The hover bubbles might be big enough for more than one person, but they're open, and anyone can see inside you as you're entering. Although you could probably hide afterward in the shadows of the Senate Hall once all the bubbles have settled into place. But the entrance and flying around means it's impossible to hide on a hover-bubble."

Ranma smirked slightly and, sitting there, pulled the Umi-Sen-Ken around him once again.

Knowing he had previously been sitting there, both Jedi could still sense his presence, but Padme looked around wildly, her eyes unable to focus on Ranma at all. "What, where..."

A second later, Ranma reappeared, still sitting where he had been. "So, when was the Senate meeting again?"

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For her part, the rumors Scout created were of an entirely different nature, but which, molded with the ones Ranma was putting around, would paint a **very** confusing picture for the rumormongers among the Senate and the rest of the organization that worked around them.

Talli also wasn't nearly as creative as Ranma was about spreading the rumor of your own presence. Instead, she would simply come out of hiding, normally from a vent or from behind a tree in one of the many thoroughfares within the district, and move around as if she was examining everything for the first time until she was close enough to her target, middle-aged people in general, and people who looked very strict and austere in the main.

Once they addressed her, Scout would ask them where to find her father and then would simply repeat that he was her daddy, rather than knowing her name, and when they tried to escort her somewhere, she would leave, racing off. Only occasionally did she drop a name, calling herself Malane Palpatine. That name, chosen as it was a very normal name for highborn young ladies on Naboo, caused many of the people around her to stare at the girl in confusion and suspicion, but Scout never stayed in one place for very long, always retreating into the air ducts as quickly as possible. In this manner, she left behind more people who had overheard her words than Ranma out of the people who had seen her, although the number who had done so was fewer than that of who had seen Ranma.

Escaping every time like she had to was not easy by any stretch of the imagination. Scout had to push her limited Force Senses to the max to know precisely when to cut and run and always had to keep control of her body language so that doing so looked natural rather than a retreat. Acting like this had not been something she had studied as a Jedi youngling. Still, Ranma and a grinning Keala had walked her through how to act, and Scout retreated after her twelfth rumor drop, believing that she had done a good enough job.

She made her way back to where they had left HK, hiding within a series of pipes deep within the air conditioning unit of one of the outer segments of the spire. She smacked the droid on the back of its head, causing it to wake up, and then settled into place next to them, pulling off her dress and holding out her hand, demanding the bag on the droid's back. "Give me my robes. Kriff, how can regular girls go around with skirts swishing around their feet all day!"

"Amused tone: you are asking the wrong droid that question, small one. But I take it that your presence here means you did your part in this madcap plan of my master correctly?"

"Yep. Now we wait."

Elsewhere, the cleaning droids the Jedi had sent into the Senate District during the temporary power outage had also gone to work. Their task was simple: leave behind five slogans or images carved into the floor or wall, depending on the unit type, whenever there

was no one observing them. This also began to work as more senators saw these odd, bizarre messages. Indeed, it was this aspect of Ranma's plan to scrape away Palpatine's last measure of control that bore fruit first.

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Staring between the man in front of his desk and the images on his computer Sidious was somewhat befuddled, a feeling that he did not like at all. He had been feeling off the entire day. His inability to control the veil of the Dark Side, to use the Dark Side to see into the future or even the present at all, was throwing his self-control off more as every hour passed, a self-control moreover, which had been fraying badly. Ever since... Well, if Sidious was honest with himself, he'd had moments of rage and fury going as far back as the appearance of the Chaotic Locus. But it had certainly gotten worse ever since he'd woken up from the moment when the veil had shattered, causing him so much pain and agony he had fallen unconscious.

Sidious had not realized before this how dependent he had become on being able to see the future through the Dark Side, sensing the overall feeling of the universe, understanding how the Great Plan was carried out, if not in detail, and then at least the shape of it. And it was not just the future he had gotten used to being able to discern, but the present. He simply was not as aware of everything around him as he normally would like to be, something that impacted his self-control. The chaos within the Force was so much. He was practically blind, and no longer could the idea that the Jedi were equally blind sustain him.

Furthermore, there was this present issue that the Senate Security Captain of the Guard had brought to his attention.

"I... have no idea what to make of it either. Here we have what looks like seditious comments, down with the Senate and so forth, on top of these other stranger messages and what look like random doodles. I think we can discount the ones shouting about this or that Senator for Chancellor as being randomly chosen. That is all I can say with any certainty," Sidious said in his Palpatine persona, scowling as he looked at his computer screen.

Throughout the day, people had begun to be aware of messages scrawled on floors or walls in disparate areas throughout the Senate District. Some of them were just symbols, strange eight-sided stars, hands performing rude gestures, pictures of male genitalia and so forth, the kind you would find anywhere down-spire. There were also several weird cartoons, reminding many of the Senators who saw them about some of the most lowbrow satirical cartoons out there.

That was strange and bizarre in many ways, but some of the actual statements were worse. Besides the ones calling for this or that Senator to replace Sidious's public disguise, there were others calling for the destruction of the Senate and for everyone to come together in harmony in what one called a Socialist Republic. What socialism was, wasn't explained, but Sidious felt it was probably connected to the other even stranger statement, which went, 'we

demand is peace, land and bread! If we all come together, then peace is achievable through sharing of these three principles.'

He could understand all three, but why would they be called principles? And why 'coming together' could achieve them was beyond Sidious.

"We think it has something to do with the emergency shutdown of the power grid we dealt with early this morning, Chancellor. We found out where the order for the routine shutdown of the primary generator came from and why it wasn't followed up on immediately by the secondary generators to take up the slack. The overseer of the primary generator had the next round of reviews set for today, the first of the month. The others had it for the tenth, a mistake of not having a zero in your calendar where there should be one." The captain grumbled, shaking his head, his horse-tail topped blue helmet under one arm. "At least the man was promptly able to restart the generator once it became clear that the secondaries were not picking up the slack as they should have."

"I will leave that matter in your hands, although for my part, I believe that the man has proven himself somewhat incompetent despite his attempt to recover from his stupidity," Sidious answered, more bluntly than he normally would, but Zachary was a blunt man, just like his predecessor, Jezra, and not one to peer too deeply into things. He was also, quite secretly, as rabidly anti-Jedi as anyone Sidious could find for the position. His loyalty to Sidious personally wasn't as strong yet as he could wish, but there was a base there to build on.

"I'll look into the overseer's past performance reviews, and if this kind of absentmindedness has happened previously, I will hand him his walking papers, Chancellor. We'll have to promote one of the managers for the secondary generators to take his place, but that will be simple enough. However, I think perhaps these droids might point to a slightly more sinister motive. Perhaps someone was able to bribe the man? We're going to keep him overnight in the cells and question him, but all he will say at present is that he thought it was time for the drill."

"Find out more," Sidious said, waving him off. "It must be some cleaning droids perhaps, the kind that can blend in..." Sidious paused as he spoke, one eyebrow rising in the air as he pondered that statement. *The same kind of droids that the Sith of the Rule of Two has long used to spy on the Jedi. That avenue was closed to us months before the war began, thanks to the Chaotic Locus. Could they have somehow turned back on us? But... no, this is far too childish, far too pointless to come from the Jedi.*

"Regardless, I could almost say it was a group of children who had done this if it wasn't so pervasive," he finished shaking his head.

"Exactly, Chancellor. This could be a dry run of some kind for something more serious that got out of hand, perhaps? A glitch in the droids? Who can say? But we need to discover

where it is coming from and put a halt to it. We surely can't have the Senate District being so defiled like this."

"Then I will leave it in your capable hands, Captain." With a wave of his hand, Sidious dismissed the man and took a brief moment to rub his forehead before the door to his office opened, and two of his aides came in.

Sly Moore and Sate Pestage walked towards him, both of their faces showing a myriad of emotions. Pestage looked equally amused, confused, and worried, and he moved away from Sly the moment they were within the room, the two of them taking to a different path through the large office towards Sidious's desk at the far end. In contrast, Sly looked about as angry as Sidious had ever seen an Umbaran be. Her teeth were gritted, her jaw noticeably tight, and her eyes almost looked to be flashing yellow below her bald pate.

That concerned Sidious, who held up a hand pointing at her coldly. "Remember my addition to the creed, control over everything," he growled, aware of the sophistry of the statement even as he spoke and uncaring of it. "I will not have you give the Great Plan away by having a random Jedi moving through the district spot you with yellow eyes as if you were just some random berserker like Maul or Tyrannus's Acolytes."

The fact Sidious was prepared to cut and run and leave her behind was not brought up. One did not tell tools they were going to be left to die, after all.

But astonishingly, Sly glared back at Sidious as she demanded, "When were you going to tell us about your daughter?"

That threw Sidious onto the proverbial backfoot, and he looked between the two of them in confusion. "Daughter? What are you talking about?"

"I believe that Sly is somewhat disturbed by the fact that there are several rumors going around today about, well, you having a daughter or a sex slave who you force to call you either master or daddy, My Lord," Pestage intoned, his face twitching trying to form a smile despite his best efforts not to.

"I was there! I wasn't able to get close to the girl before that stupid sow Senator Astriocus scared her off, but she was a young girl, perhaps ten, eleven, who wore a typical Nabooian garb while speaking with a Coruscant accent. She called herself Malane Palpatine. And while I was not close enough to examine her features closely, the Senators who were said she does resemble you in some manner," Sly growled.

On the surface, all of this was ridiculous, and Sidious knew it. People should know his nature by now. Having a sex slave was a waste of time, in Sidious's opinion. The same went with actually having children. Indeed, why would he have children when Sidious was fully expected to be able to live forever via the Transference technique?

But coupled with the uncertainty about what the Jedi had found on Wayland and what was going on there, the Dark Side not being strong enough to let him see the world around him, and the need to keep his mask in place, Sidious could feel his control fraying as Pestage spoke.

And here was Sly Moor staring at him disapprovingly as if she really believed this. Sly Moore, who he had found and trained in the Dark Side to be able to hide her presence and be a template for his future Hands.

With a growl, Sidious reached out to the Dark Side and began to Force Choke Sly, sending the Umbaran woman to her knees. "I have no children! This is some kind of strange prank being played on me or an attempt to undermine my public persona! The next time you accuse me of something like this or assume that you have any say in what I do in my personal time Sly, I will cast you aside, am I clear?"

While Sly was his lover, Sidious had taken her as such as a means of control over her as for some sexual release. The idea that she could be so arrogant as to believe that it gave her control over him, in turn, was an affront to Sidious.

"I, I beg forgiveness!" Sly intoned, her eyes wide as her hands scrabbled at her throat, trying to stop the pain. "Master, it was just the site of that child was so astonishing, on top of the other rumors of the slave way it also heard. And I during my meditation, I did not ..."

"I am dealing with the same issues with the Dark Side being somewhat uncooperative at present. Take solace in the fact that the Jedi are no doubt dealing with the same issue with the Force in general," Sidious ground out, repeating the same thoughts he'd had on that subject that morning, despite the fact that it had brought him no new comfort since.

Sly nodded convulsively again, and Sidious let her loose to crumple to the carpet underneath. Ignoring the Umbaran woman's gasps, Sidious stared over at Pestage, who answered quickly. "As for the rumor about the sex slave, that one is much more certain, unfortunately. She was seen far more times than the young girl Sly saw and was heard almost every time to call you either Master, Daddy or..." Pestage paused, shuddering. "Daddy Sheevy. She even talked to the Senator from Ryloth about some of his slaves training her in order to be of better use to you."

For just a moment, Sidious's self-control slipped, the name Sheevy bringing up horrible memories of his youth. Before he became Sidious before he understood the real power of the Dark Side when he was back with his hateful family. They had never seen his greatness for what it was and instead were openly contemptuous of his ambitions, his father dismissing them as childish angst, while his siblings slavishly followed the man's attitude.

He stood up abruptly, his hands coming down on the desk with such strength that the heavy piece of furniture bounced in place as he turned, whirling away to pace in front of the window, trying to work off some of his fury while the Dark Side roiled around him in a nearly

visible corona. So much so that a feeling of unease and fear washed over Pestage as he took several steps back, while Sly still knelt, exalting in the feeling of her master's power after having been subject to his anger.

For about ten minutes, Sidious ward with his rage and fury, his desire to hunt down whoever had decided to launch this strange campaign against him, dealing with memories of his childhood, his brothers and sisters calling him that name, denigrating him for his dreams of power and greatness. But finally, finally, Sidious's self-control began to reassert itself, and after a moment, he slumped back into his chair, staring hard at Pestage.

"How much damage control can we do for this? Is it better to simply let this... this affront run its course or try to clamp down on it? My political instincts are telling me the first choice is best, while my personal antipathy for all of this is telling me the second." *And should I discover who is behind this, I will make their deaths so painful their screams will abound in the Force for decades!*

Pestage nodded, carefully hiding both his fear at his Lord's actions and his surprise at Sidious asking his opinion like that. *We must be really off-balance to show such weakness. And when one such as Sidious is off-balance, one should not be in range for him to take out his frustrations on you.*

"Master, I believe a humorous response to this would be best. Simply take it in stride as someone playing a joke on you, not looking to harm your public persona in any way, just some random individual playing a joke, trying to lighten your mood or the mood of the Senate as a whole during this trying time. You'll have to take it in stride at the very least, but humor would be better."

"Humor..." Sidious mused like it was a foreign concept. To the psychopath he was, it actually was somewhat. Oh, Sidious did find some things pleasing. Sidious liked to see things play out as he wished, he got a thrill seeing his plans come to fruition, and he smiled quite a lot when torturing someone down in the temple, their pain and fear feeding the Dark Side. But he understood that was not really the same thing as having a sense of humor. Still, it would not be the first time Sidious acted as if he did have one.

Nodding his head, Sidious smiled at his aides. "With that last bit of an annoyance out of the way, is the Senate primed the way we wish it to be prior to this next meeting?" With the war going on, Sidious had delegated more of the day-to-day running of the Senate via his various strings to his two aides so he could concentrate on the war effort and making sure it was as bloody for the Jedi as possible and taking credit for any victories as they came along. *And just because I might have to retreat to Tyrannus and the Confederacy is no reason to stop pushing the Great Plan forward.*

Sly was still rubbing her throat but responded willingly enough, while Pestage attempted to hide a shudder. *That smile...*

Normally Sidious's smiles were a work of art, finely crafted instruments that he could use to create good feelings, comradery or what have you. But that smile just now was a pale, twisted reflection of those previous smiles. It looked like someone had seen a manual for the word smile, complete with pictures and then attempted to re-create a smile without understanding that it had to be accompanied by some feeling of good humor.

The discussion went on for several moments, and Pestage's unease remained, carefully hidden behind his own mask. Whatever was going on with the Force at his Dark Side was bothering his master to a tremendous degree. But there was nothing Pestage could do about it but hope that this would pass quickly.

Moments later, they were ready to go, and the two aides left, allowing Sidious a few more moments to gather himself. As they did, Sidious reached out to the veil of the Dark Side once more, trying with all his might to see the future, to discern whether or not this all was because the Jedi had discovered his identity or not. Yet the veil of the Dark Side could not give him the answer. There were too many images, too many possibilities going through it at present, to tell him anything concrete. Still, the Chaotic Locus' particular powers had spread throughout the entirety of the Force, keeping Sidious blind now as he had been the night before.

But this time, coming out of his meditation, Sidious decided to err on the side of extreme caution. If the Jedi were indeed planning to move against him, and Sidious was becoming certain they would, although they had yet to do so, he would perhaps need a better escape plan than number nine and seven, as he and Nihilus had spoken of earlier that day. He punched several different codes, connecting him through another series of cutouts, and sent off a message to Tyrannus via the same method he had used the night before. But this message was far shorter, only three words in fact. 'Activate Plan Three.'

Having an enemy in orbit will take away the Senate's concentration on anything going on within the halls of the Senate District, and if the Jedi move against me, I will be able to get away and join the Confederacy fleet in orbit.

With that done, Sidious rose to his feet and made his calm, stately and measured way to the Senate Hall.

Halfway there, he passed through an atrium where several other senators were also gathering, prepared to head towards the different wings of the hall and enter via the different doorways there. Seeing the Chancellor, many of them nodded to him, while he became aware of several of them whispering as they watched him and some of their looks were concerned, cold, and even censorious, a look that had rarely been sent his way and not for very long time.

It's just the rumors. Control yourself. It's just the rumors. Control yourself. Do not strike them down with Sith Lightning! Save that for whoever somehow picked out that blasted name! Sidious snarled to himself. *The opinions of the sheep do not matter to the shepherd.*

However, despite this internal mantra, Sidious's self-control was tested a second later as one of them shouted out, "Palpatine, you sly dog!"

Turning, Sidious watched the fat, somewhat disgusting Twi'lek Senator come up to him, clapping him on the shoulder in a friendly fashion. "I didn't know you had it in you to keep a fem like that around! A slave willing to act on her own, to look for better opportunities to train herself to surprise her master? That kind of thing is rare indeed, even among my folk. Don't you worry, I'll send one of my girls to wherever she is the moment you tell me where you've been keeping her, and we'll get her trained up in whatever bedroom duties you want her to be."

It took all of Sidious's considerable self-control not to slay the man instantly with his lightsaber and then kill every witness there. Indeed, Sidious could feel his hands twitching, one of them towards his hidden lightsaber, the other in the cupping motion used for Sith Lightning.

But he restrained himself with difficulty. "I am afraid, my friend, that you have been the butt of a joke, as I have. I do not own a pleasure slave. My first love is to the Republic and the law," Sidious intoned, trying desperately to keep his persona in place even as he smiled and laughed with the other man. "I've seen images of the girl, and I can see the appeal if I were thirty years younger, perhaps. But as it is, my tastes do not run in that direction."

The Twi'lek took this information in stride, nodding sagely as if he had suspected such was the case, stepping away and shaking his head. "I imagine all of us would wish we were thirty years younger. It is a pity, though. If that was part of some kind of prank, it is rather disappointing. Perhaps she really is a slave and was ordered to do that? If so, I would still dearly like to make her master's acquaintance."

"I will leave you to discover that. But for now, my own first love calls me to serve. I will see you in the Senate Hall, my friend," the Chancellor replied, smiling at the man and shaking his head with each another chuckle.

He was unaware as he walked off that Orn's expression had shifted to one of deep suspicion and worry. The Chancellor had said all the right things, and looking back, Orn Free Taa knew that he had probably been duped. Yet, even so, the expressions the man was wearing, the twitching rictus of his smile, that disturbed the leader of the Rim Faction deeply.

That was a man very close to cracking. And if it is not an issue caused by the redhead or these other odd rumors of a very young, very underage daughter running around doing it, then what else is Palpatine dealing with currently? Whatever it was, the senator for Ryloth decided he wanted to be as far away from the man as possible in this meeting. I have a feeling in my lekku that this meeting will be one for the ages.

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"How exactly are you doing this?" Padme asked, her lips barely moving as she spoke, a skill that was invaluable to any politician as she fought back a stern blush from feeling the heat from Ranma's body behind her. Yet if she turned, she knew she would see anything of Ranma's immensely handsome, athletic form. *Remember he's married, girl! Look, but don't touch unless you want to get a lightsaber through your head.*

"Trade secret, Padme," Ranma snickered behind her, his own voice a little bit louder than her own but not traveling very far. "Unless you have an idea of how the Force works, I don't think you'd understand it. Suffice to say, I can hide myself from Force Users and other individuals, so long as the Force Users aren't aware that they should be looking out for me."

Despite that assurance, Padme looked around to see if anyone was looking in their direction, but no one was as had become normal.

Padme was used to being ignored, and in moments like these. Whereas most other senators would be wheeling and dealing, discussing with allies and acquaintances the upcoming senatorial meeting, going over the last one, or talking about whatever committee they were on, Padme had been sidelined since the terrorist attack on her months ago. She tried to fight the trend and had succeeded in rebuilding the Peace Party, but the entranceway she was assigned to was dominated by centrist and militant senators, leaving her very much the odd girl out. They did not attack her or Padme's position, but they certainly weren't friendly.

Occasionally Bail or one of the other Peace Party senators would go out of their way to end her in the same entryway she was assigned to, or vice versa, and things would be a little different. Today though, she was glad to be ignored.

"Just remember, you can't reveal yourself right away. None of us will be able to talk until the Chancellor has called for any new business unless we're already on the docket. Until then, only the Chancellor and those he personally chooses will be able to speak. After he calls for any new business, control of the Senate's internal broadcast systems will revert to the controlling droid program within the hall," Padme reminded Ranma.

She had said much the same thing earlier, but it bore repeating as she knew that Ranma was somewhat impulsive. *Kriff, this entire plan revolves around the fact that he is impulsive but able to roll with changing circumstances, and Palpatine isn't as good at it.*

"Got it. Don't worry, I can keep quiet if I have to. I just hope Anakin, Kit and Scout do their part." *And Palpatine doesn't sense anything going wrong through the Force,* Ranma added mentally.

That was the hole in their plan, as well as the foundation of everything they had been doing since entering the Senate District. The fact that the Force was so chaotic at the moment that no one, no matter how skilled, was able to see much of anything through it one way or the

other. Rather than being the eye of the storm, Coruscant was the center of the whirling dervish that was the Force currently. If they were wrong on that score...

Moments later, Ranma's concerns on this matter faded as he spotted Palpatine in his special Chancellor box for the first time in person. Padme and Ranma had been able to very easily get into her assigned hover-bubble, and Ranma was now crouched behind Padme in the darkness there, his ability to hide easily magnified by the shadows and the normal lighting of the Senate Hall.

As for the target of this infiltration, Ranma had seen Palpatine a few times previously through Hypercom transmissions but had never met Palpatine before this. Still, he rather doubted the faint sheen of sweat on his face, the slight twitching in his eyes, and the subtle tremor Ranma could see in his hands were normal.

None of these clues were very big, and Ranma doubted that anyone else there saw them all. But for a martial artist like Ranma, they were pretty obvious. *Good, he's on edge already.* "It looks like we've succeeded in getting under his skin. How much time did we tell Kit we would need?"

"Three hours, which is how long before the Chancellor declares the meeting open for new business. I hope the rest of the Jedi are in position before then," Padme quietly fretted as the Chancellor called the Senate to order, and one of his secretaries began to go over the minutes of the last meeting. After that, the Chancellor and the military officers in their own hover bubble would speak about the daily actions of the war, the purpose of the meeting other than that, and then the floor would be open for any new business.

"They will be. I'm going to meditate for a bit, reach behind your head and scratch at the back of your neck if anyone says anything you think I need to listen to." With that, Ranma closed his eyes and folded himself forward slightly so that instead of crouching behind Padme in the darkness at the back of her hover-bubble, he was leaning against the back of her seat facing the other direction, his hair pressed into the back of her neck.

This caused Padme to blush faintly again, but she was able to ignore it, concentrating on what the greatest traitor in the history of the Republic was saying, a certain amount of vindictive pleasure running through her as she anticipated what would hopefully happen later that day. *Odd. I was seriously concerned about my role in all this, but now that we have gotten Ranma in here so easily, and despite the fact that this plan calls for a Sith Lord to lose his cool and almost undoubtedly commit violence here in the Senate, I find myself actually looking forward to this...*

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As soon as the signal to Ranma's communicator cut out under the Senate Hall's anti-communication field, HK and Kit were on the move. Kit checked in with the temple on his own

communicator and then joined Anakin in moving to secure the communications room devoted to the Senate District's public announcement system. Thanks to his Jedi credentials, Kit was able to take control easily, although he had quite a time explaining that no, they weren't allowed to interrupt the Senate session to ask the Chancellor whether or not this was what he wanted and that yes, he wanted things set up so at a specific time the signal went out live across both the planetary broadcast system and the Hypercom to every connected system out there.

As the overseer finally agreed, Kit watched all of the workers in the room very closely and saw one of them slowly moving her hand into her pocket.

Before Kit could intervene, Anakin was already across the room, a slightly overpowered Force Grab catching the woman's arm and lifting him up and out of the seat and into the air where she dangled for a second from nothing. One hand directed that Force Grab, while the other made a gesture as if pulling something towards Anakin. The woman's pants ripped, and the small communicator within flew towards Anakin.

He held it in midair in front of him, twisting it this way and examining it closely while all of the people in the room stared in astonishment. All of them were veterans of working for the Senate and knew the Jedi had special powers, but only a few of them had ever seen those powers being used before, and Anakin's violent actions had startled them all.

"Carefully, padawan. Control yourself, or else our enemy will be able to make use of your emotions against us. Act as if we are in a spar against master Windu and you wouldn't be too far off even now," Kit gently admonished.

He watched as Anakin regained control of himself, sending the spy towards the door, where Kit gently pushed the woman to her knees in front of the Jedi and handcuffed her arms behind her back. As he was doing this, Anakin used the Force to crush the communicator, letting the pieces drop to the ground at his feet. "It was a one-shot communicator master, a simple piece of tech without any kind of kill switch."

"What is going on?" the section supervisor found his voice once more. He was somewhat angry at this overbearing intrusion into his domain, although he was also looking at the remnants of the small communication device the worker had been hiding with some distaste. "I thought that we got rid of partisanship in our ranks already."

"That one's master might have more sinister motives than you think," Kit intoned dryly, gesturing everyone up and out of their seats and away from the equipment. "Never fear, good sir, you and the rest of your fellows are not under investigation whatsoever. The individual we are investigating is part of the Senate itself. All of this is to make certain that he has every opportunity to hang himself."

The supervisor was not a stupid man, and although he didn't understand who the Jedi were actually after - and would have been horrified and quite dismissive of the very idea that the Chancellor could be in the wrong - he understood what was going on now. "This Senator, he's extremely popular, and you want to do away with that popularity at the same time he incriminates himself in the eyes of the law," he guessed.

"You have it correctly," Kit answered, allowing a slight note of admiration for the man's quick thinking to enter his tone, causing the man to smile a bit and straighten his shoulders. "I don't suppose you could help us?"

The supervisor looked at his people and picked out four of them, pointing them out as people who might still have divided loyalties. That kind of witch-hunt type of thinking was something that caused both Jedi to wince a bit internally, knowing that there would be a lot of clean-up after today's business. *Thank the Light Side that I am not going to be involved in it,* they both thought somewhat complacently.

For now, though, Kit was willing to let the supervisor help them, although they needed more hands now that he had weeded out the people of his shift who might have split loyalties. *I wonder how much of that is honest corruption still in place after all this time and how much the Sith created such an atmosphere. How many threads of intrigue and corruption will lead back to one source?*

About ten minutes later, two other Jedi arrived, along with a Wookiee who Kit did not know. One of the Jedi explained they had reached out to the Wookiee delegation, knowing that they could trust them, and the ambassador had supplied one of his own people without questioning why the Jedi would need a mechanic and couldn't reach out to the Senate or the military.

Kit explained what they wanted, and the Wookiee and one of the Jedi instantly went to work, while the other Jedi helped Kit keep a wary eye on the people within the room.

"Master Fisto?" Anakin questioned, gesturing with one hand towards the door. "You don't need me here any longer, so..."

"Go." Kit ordered before going on a little more obliquely aware of the watching technicians. "We'll want you in place to back up Ranma. Just remember that you need to wait for our target to reveal his true loyalties. Do **not** jump the gun, Anakin. I cannot stress that enough."

Anakin winced but understood that he was going to be in the doghouse with his master for the foreseeable future and honestly would be more than willing to take his lumps so long as he was able to confront Palpatine personally eventually. *I don't need to be the one to oust him, as satisfying as that might have been,* Anakin reminded himself forcefully, throttling his emotions back under control with both mental hands. *And this way is going to be a lot more*

satisfying anyway. I could not have done anything but confront him on my own. This way, Palpatine will know and understand all of his plans are crushing around his ears.

That cheerful thought helped Skywalker keep his self-control in place as he nodded to his master and left quickly, hastening up to one of the thoroughfares leading into the Senate Hall. All of the entrances to the Senate were on the same floor, although only a few passed through each separate area for security reasons. Still, this was the one that the Chancellor had used earlier that day, which meant it would be the entrance closest to the special Chancellor's hover-bubble within the hall.

Elsewhere, Scout and HK were also on the job, having been told their role in this operation by Ranma a few minutes ago. And once more, Talli's job was both straightforward and required a bit of acting on her part. While there were numerous security posts within the Senate District, there was only one near the Senate Hall that could respond quickly to any issue there. It was one of the largest security posts, and the Jedi Order knew that it was equipped with a lot of different riot equipment along with the normal Senate Guard weaponry and body armor. It had to be shut down.

With Scout beside him, once more dressed as a padawan, HK trundled down the hallway, a buzz of electronic amusement coming from his mouth as he saw the four security guards on duty outside the room stiffened at his approach. *They look like someone took old-style Mandalorian armor, added useless frippery, and then dipped everything in blue. I do hope these Guard meatbags can put up more of a fight than their first impressions suggest.*

Their eyes also took in the young padawan at his side, but she was unknown to them, and these people recognized the padawan braid falling to one side of her face. One of them stood forward, holding up a hand to stop the two of them. "Padawan, your identification, please, and your reason for being here. Even for Jedi, there are procedures to interact with the Senate Guard."

Scout heard the faint tone of disdain in the man's voice towards her and knew that this might be a sign of trouble. Still, that was why HK was with her. "Padawan Talli... You don't need to know my full name. It's a mouthful. My ID."

She held out her ID, which now showed her as a Padawan rather than as a worker for the Agri Corps, something that she was quite proud of. She'd had it changed back on Wayland. "My master has requested that I familiarize myself with the Senate Security Forces and your operating procedures while he is meeting with the Senate." She smiled wanly, shrugging her shoulders. "Personally, I think it's makework for me because he doesn't want me in there with him and maybe embarrass him. But you know how it is."

Some of the stiffness in the guards faded, although the one who had spoken was still looking at her askance. And none of the four had made to relinquish their grips on their gun-glaives. "And the droid?"

“A recent purchase by my master to help familiarize ourselves with fighting droids in close combat. We haven’t had time to overhaul his command sequences, so he’s basically only programmed at this point to follow one of us around. As you kind of can see, he’s intimidating so...”

The security officer scowled, looking between the two of them and not for the first time, Scout wished she had enough control of the Force to reach out and influence someone else’s mind. But the man finally sighed and gestured into the security office. “Register the droid with my supervisor, and power him down once you’re inside. You realize that there will be a formal protest lodged with the order about this.”

“Go right ahead. Frankly, I think my master is the one that needs to review proper procedure the most,” Scout answered, snickering both at the reality of what she was saying and the fact that such a review would probably be ignored utterly. *Unless they make it out in actual paper, then he might use it as toilet paper or maybe in one of his weird training exercises.*

That seemed to calm the four security guards down further, and one of them entered with the droid and Scout, explaining things to his supervisor.

He also looked at the two of them askance, and looking around, Scout could see the people in the security station, along with the special riot squad that was part of the security post, looking at her and HK. She hid a gulp with some difficulty, but the looks went away as HK very obviously powered down under her orders, and she moved over to a nearby wall with a data pad that the supervisor gave her about the standard operating procedures for the Senate security forces.

A final put upon, slightly annoyed look seemed to do the trick. With that, Scout went from unknown padawan among a group of people who obviously did not like the Jedi very much to younger sentient with an unwanted homework assignment.

That was good, and Scout hid a smile with some difficulty as she began to meditate rather than read what was in front of her. All the players were now in position, and all that waited was for events in the Senate to take their course.

End Chapter

Okay, so I had an issue with this chapter. I ran into several bits where I had to then go back and add more background and reactions and so forth on top of writer's block. So I basically have half the next chapter written. We will see if I can get the chapter up next month. And I hope you all liked Palpy finally starting to lose it, heh.