

I am not Disney. I still have my soul. Nor am I Japanese.

This was the small story poll winner this month. ATP was also updated on Patty on, as well as another fic over there.

This has been looked at by Hiryo and I. However, due to RL truly smacking me upside the head this past week, I have not had much time to go over it, let alone to Grammarly it. There will undoubtedly be small mistakes. I can only hope that there aren't enough to hurt your enjoyment of this chapter.

Chapter 31: Preparations Come in All Sorts

Leaving Coruscant, the Wild Blade made straight for Mandalore, with Ranma and Shaak both hoping that their stop over there would be short, but acknowledging that hope would probably be in vain. Not only would they have to tell Bo-Katan about Janice, but the Mandalorians might try to convince Ranma to add more members into the crew, which, if they succeeded would perforce create a need for another series of trials as there had been when Janice, Kad, Dralshy'a, Natasha Thomas and Jethro had joined them. The youngsters, Fabian and Keala who had replaced the deceased trio, had also been forced through a series of trials, although nowhere near as hard as the official ones back on Mandalore had been.

And then there was the fact, Ranma and Shaak had no desire to take on more crewmen any longer. In Ranma's mind, he had made good his debt to Bo-Katan and those who had joined her on the moon of Yavin, he had tried for months to teach his abilities to both the Mandos with them and the Nova Guard. Taking on even Keala and Fabian had been a step further than honor truly demanded. "I'd be fine with taking on maybe Bo, if she could get away from her whole leadership thing," Ranma said as they entered hyperspace, snorting at the very idea that Bo-Katan would step down from her position as leader of the Reborn. "But no more. Dralshy'a and the other three are it. And only until I decide they've learned enough to start building on their own."

"Nonetheless, Bo-Katan deserves us telling her about Janice in person. I suppose we will need to be ready to put our feet down," Shaak sighed faintly, leaning against Ranma's shoulder lightly. She smiled as Ranma's arm went over her shoulders, grateful that the copilot and pilot chairs were close enough to let them do this. "Now, I think you can go back and get Ahsoka and the rest doing some exercises. Tune and I will watch the ship."

Snorting, Ranma leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then stood up, leaving Shaak there. The Togrutan smiled then pulled up a news report. While she had tried to catch up on what had been going on since her collapse after the battle with the Thought Bomb, there was still a lot more she had yet to read about. *And unlike my love, I actually do like to know what is going on with the greater galaxy, if only in general terms*, she thought with a snort.

Yoda occasionally joined her over the next two days as they traveled through hyperspace toward their destination, although he joined the training of Talli and Ahsoka occasionally as well. Ranma watched him at moments like that, amused by how the ancient Grand Master seemed to act so much younger while training the two girls, before he would invariably turn to training the rest of the crew, which led to a very pleasant surprise a day out from Mandalore.

Bo-Katan and the Reborn had somewhat retreated from the greater war after the battle on Corellia, although perhaps that wasn't quite the right term. The Reborn were, after all, a still small population, in relation to the size of the Republic anyway, and they'd taken losses. Judging by what Yoda had passed on from the reports Master Dooku had been sending the Jedi, their population was still growing though, small enclaves of Mandos rejoining the greater community being found here and there on scattered planets throughout the sector of space and even beyond.

Instead, since that battle, the Mandos had been sent out in far smaller units, small trac'traat or fire teams, temporary groups made of single warriors or coming from the larger aliits (clans). They had done so as part of some of the larger battles going on, joining Republic Forces, or in direct contractual agreements with the planets involved. The planets making such agreements were looking past the Mandalorians... well... past in order to make these agreements, which sent the Reborn resources to further the rebuilding process of Mandalore and to continue fight this war.

It was somewhat like mercenary work, but so long as Bo-Katan vetted their so-called employers very well, and those employers knew that they were only fighting the greater war against the Confederacy, and that no, the Reborn were not tools to be used to solve their own petty grievances, it had worked well enough in the weeks since the Corellian campaign. Although these agreements hadn't yet made the losses from that battle good just yet in terms of ships and starfighters, it had begun to make an impact on Mandalore itself.

As the Wild Blade exited hyperspace into the Mandalore system, its scanners went before it, and Tune let loose a low whistle as he provided them all the information the sensors were telling him. "The orbital defenses are still nowhere near where they should be, although their orbital industry has changed yet again, for the better once more. Further, I am picking up readings on the ground of the first steps of a planetary energy grid. A grid that was certainly not in place last time we were here. I wonder, is Mandalore building up to the point where they can house a planetary shield?"

"Yeah, well if they are, more power to 'em. Given their history, one of those things would probably be a very good idea, and regardless of what sector they might be part of, I can't imagine any of the people down there would disapprove of it," Ranma drawled.

Shaak had the grace to wince a little at that, although Yoda, present in the cockpit and the only living Jedi who had been alive back when the Dral'han had been ordered did not.

Although if he had actually heard either of their words Ranma didn't know. He had been meditating as they came out of hyperspace and didn't seem to have stopped now.

Moments later, Shaak was on the pickup with the local space control center, where they were greeted enthusiastically, although Ranma hoped this wouldn't translate to large crowds or whatever waiting for them on the ground. He didn't think Mandos normally went into that kind of thing for the most part but the Mando on-duty tried to talk Ranma's ear off about how portions of his battle with Sidious had been seen, recorded and then placed on the hypernet.

It had spread throughout the galaxy by this point, but here on Mandalore it was extremely popular. "It's even been made into a mini-movie! I don't know anyone here on Mandalore who hasn't seen it. Heck, even the longer one with the bits from the Senate is one of the most downloaded things off the Hypercom."

"I don't give out autographs, and if anyone tries to thrust a camera or microphone in my face, they're going to get it straight back into their mouths," Ranma growled. "One thing I like about you lot, is that you appreciate privacy. Don't go against that to try and get my personal take on that fight and we won't have problems. Now give us the damn coordinates to land or I'll land the Wild Blade right at the freaking palace. I doubt it's moved since we were here last."

Finally, it seemed as if Ranma's tone got through and the young Mando on the other end finally got himself under control. "Er, roger that and received. You are cleared to land in the capital at port fourteen, lot number twelve," the Mandalorian on the other side reported. "The Mandalore has not been informed of your arrival, so you can't go directly to the palace, that's protocol. But she won't be able to make it. There is aliit'alor (clan head) meeting occurring right now and even the Mandalore is not above the dictates of culture and good manners."

Ranma answered in the affirmative, and then cut the connection, grumbling in annoyance. "That stuff is still going on even now then?" he asked, remembering all too well the meetings and politics he and Shaak had run into the first time they had been here. *But hopefully with way less bounty hunting assassins*, while Shaak directed the ship into the planet's atmosphere, following the coordinates down into the planet's atmosphere that the man had sent their ship.

"It always will be," said a voice from the hatch leading into the cockpit. Ranma turned looked in that direction, and saw Keala standing there, leaning against the hatch, her helmet shaking back and forth. "Cousin Bo once told me that it was like herding cats. All of the aliits want to act as if they are these fiercely independent osik'uliks (beasts), and there's still some pushback from the most traditional among them against the revisions my cousin made to the Resol'nare. It doesn't help matters that independence of action and clan unity are some of the key concepts of the Resol'nare that haven't changed."

Ranma and Shaak looked at one another, shrugged, then turned back to their controls, shifting the ship's descent a bit, still following the coordinates they had been given. Moments

later, they were touching down in Sundari at one of the many private ports. Exiting the ship and moving out into the corridors made by the blast doors that separated this landing zone from its next-door neighbor, they found Master Dooku waiting for them.

He stood like a statue, his hands in his Jedi robes as he looked at them, only allowing a faint twinkle in his eyes to appear as he nodded to Ranma, who nodded back to the older man. "Greetings all. I arranged some transportation for us. Unfortunately, given the closed nature of the meeting with the clan heads, Bo-Katan hasn't been informed yet of your arrival but she will be the moment it has ended. Until then, it will fall to the palace staff and myself to make your stay comfortable. Although..." Dooku became somber then, his gaze flicking around the group. "Considering who I see among you, and who I do not, I suppose this is not a social call, even such a one as could be held in such trying times."

Ranma nodded grimly, a flash of pain going through him again at the memory of Janice's death. *It was just so, so nonsensical! If she had fallen in battle real battle, hand-to-hand combat, or even at long-range in infantry-type combat, that would've been something. But to lose her as we did in a starfighter battle, to have Janice's body blown up into constituent atoms, that hurts.* "You might say that."

"We lost Janice in the last battle of Wayland," Shaak answered, shaking her head.

Dooku had known Janice during his time here before she had joined the Wild Blade's crew, and he sighed, murmuring "May she find peace in the Force." He shook his head then. "I will admit we didn't get very many reports about the last battle of Wayland, although obviously, the Mandalore and much of her available forces from the battle of Corellia joined the second battle of Wayland before that. In fact, young Sev'rance is staying in the palace with Bo-Katan, her sister and young Korkie."

Keala made a spitting noise inside her helmet at the name of Korkie, the fourth member of the extended Kryze clan, telling Ranma there was no love lost between the two of them. *And why should there be. Korkie bought into Satine's whole New Mando peace is the only way forward crap, whereas Keala followed the Resol'nare. Yeah, that ain't no surprise.*

Dralshy'a perked up instantly at that, causing Fabian and Kad to snicker. This in turn made Dooku pause as he was about to greet Kit Fisto and his Master. He looked at them but no answer was forthcoming until Ranma announced blandly, "Dralshy'a here has a bit of blue skin fetish."

"Just for that I'm going to figure out how to weaponize custard cream and introduce your room on the Wild Blade to it!" Dralshy'a growled.

"Interested observation: Now, that would truly be a feat of science. And would also follow my secondary priority of making my victim's deaths as hilariously humiliating as possible," HK mused.

Dooku snorted at this bit of byplay then ignored it as Ranma and Shaak protested this idea volubly. Instead he nodded at Kit, then looked over to Master Yoda, formally bowing towards him. "Master Yoda."

"Padawan," Yoda answered, using an old joke, trying to see if he could get under Dooku's skin. Dooku didn't respond to that however, simply smiling just a little wider as he turned and led the way off of the landing pad towards where two hover cars were waiting.

There, he waved at the driver's seat as he sat in the far back. "One of you fellows can drive it, I wish to talk to Master Yoda for a time."

Ranma's hands twitched, but Shaak gently took one of them, squeezing it gently and shaking her head. She knew her husband had just been seized by the urge to prank Dooku in some fashion, perhaps by driving the car like a maniac. But she was not in the mood for that kind of thing at the moment.

Ranma turned to Shaak, sending her a pout, then smiled at her rueful shake of the head again, before winking and helping her up into the driver's seat. Not that she needed help obviously, but the gesture and what is implied was still very appreciate it, if the squeeze she gave his hands an indication. Nor did either of them move to release their handclasp.

Soon the hover-cars were on their way, with the Nova Guard and Mandos sharing the second one, with Cro doing the driving. As they wound their way out of the port, Ranma engaged Anakin Kit, Talli and Ahsoka in the conversation about the first time he and Shaak have been here before. It was a story Ahsoka had heard before obviously, but the others hadn't, and she let the words wash over her, listening with half an ear to that story, while also listening to the conversation going on behind them, where Yoda and Dooku sat in the last row of chairs.

"I was shocked and appalled when we saw in that video from the Senate that the hidden Sith was the Chancellor himself. I knew Palpatine, or I thought I did. Indeed, he was as close to what I would've termed a friend as I had outside the Jedi Order. I'd lost touch with him since the Yinchorri intervention and I began to interact with Ranma, but even so, to learn that I had been so close to a Sith for years, that I had interacted with him dozens of times in person, that was a hard thing to swallow." Dooku sighed, shaking his head. "Learning that, and going back over some of our conversations, it became clear to me that Palpatine might have been trying to lead me astray, to lead me to search out the Sith or perhaps even to become one myself. That appalled me."

Dooku drew himself up then, his gaze hard as he looked over at Yoda. "Although I still maintain that much of the trouble that the Jedi Order was having before this war began was caused by how closely we tied ourselves to the Senate, rather than people of the Republic. I am pleased that might change, and hope that the Order continues to grow as it has since Ranma introduced his abilities to me."

Yoda snorted, lightly poking Dooku side with his gimer stick. "Changes wrought on the Order there have been enough. Changes more coming time they will. Master Faye, her thoughts on this score, parallel your own they do. How to solve it, leave it in her hands I will." Yoda then shrugged his shoulders, shaking his head slowly from side to side looking every inch his near thousand years. "For too long, part of the problem I was. Part of the solution I was after Ranma, I met. But change, not easy it is for me. Stepping down from the Grand Master position, past time for me to do so, it was."

"I personally believe the Grand Master position should be on some kind of rotation. Although I was ecstatic to hear that Master Fay was the one who would be taking the lead on helping to reform the Senate and the Republic as a whole." If there was a bit more than polite 'of a better her than me tone' in Dooku's voice, Yoda did not make any comment. After all, it was true. Of all living Jedi, Master Fay had the best mix of moral standing, mental fortitude and empathy that this chaotic moment in history needed at the head of the Senate. The Republic needed her there, now more than ever, to restore some trust and honesty in the Senate government.

And as he thought of that fact, once more Dooku reflected on how Ranma had been the catalyst of so much change. *First to me, then to the Order as we woke up to the threat of the Sith. Then in his meeting with Master Fay, and all the changes that came out of that, most particularly the fact that Fay allowed a bodyguard to join her on her journey. We have much to be thankful for, not that Ranma would ever want thanks for much of what he has done. He would no doubt call some of his opinions on the Jedi Order that changed it so much simply common sense and his fight against the Sith undoubtedly had taken on a personal tone. That does not change facts, and truly, Ranma has acted as the Chaotic Fulcrum that Yoda called him so many years ago.*

Aloud, Dooku went on stating, "And the idea of leaving Master Rancisis there to lead the Jedi Order's war efforts is a good one. Despite my disagreements with him in the past, Rancisis is an excellent strategist and logistician. But I must ask, what was the Sith's overall plan? Setting both the Republic and the Confederacy against one another is obvious, but that alone is not truly directed against the Jedi Order as I would have expected."

"A secret this still is, more of the plan Master Bnar is finding even now. But much of it, know already we do thanks to taking Sate Pestage prisoner. Knight Fisto, we have to thank for that."

Kit turned from his conversation with Ranma and the others to nod in acknowledgment at that, while Dooku favored him with an approving look, one of which surprisingly also carried over to Anakin who had also turned with his master, looking a little sheepish. Dooku wondered about that, but didn't inquire. He didn't have any idea of how much Anakin's personal actions had nearly cost them. All he knew was what the Senate security cameras had caught of his battle with Sidious and which had since leaked like the footage of Ranma's fight with the Sith

Chancellor. This video had been a magnificent display of Force Powers and lightsaber ability, which Dooku, as one of the Order's greatest duelists, approved of a lot.

Yoda went on. "Original plan, use of the clones it called for. Heavily indoctrinated they were to follow orders, each batch being worse than the last. A mental command, placed into their hypno-conditioning. Obey first among all others it was to be. Sixty-six, the Order was, to turn against the Jedi they would. Shoot their officer in the back they would have."

Hypno-conditioning was the term used by the Kaminoans for the information essentially downloaded into a clone's brain during the cloning process. While the clones were in the tubes growing to their adult ages they would be subjected to the equivalent of twenty years of military education, as well as 'basic' loyalty indoctrination, which Ranma had protested back on Corellia.

At that, Dooku's eyes widened, then narrowed speculatively, as his mind raced a mile a minute, before he looked over at Kit and Anakin, both of whom had now turned completely away from the conversation around Ranma to look at Yoda and Dooku. "How many of the Jedi Order are serving at the front line now? Two thirds, more? I can't imagine more than one out of twenty would've been able to live through that kind of ambush."

"It's true. Thankfully, while a lot of our fellow Jedi are serving out at the front lines, were also serving in teams. Without that change to our doctrine, yes, if the clones had turned on us, we would have been gunned down. But that would've only happened later," Kit explained. Since he had captured Pestage, Kit had been in on some of the questioning of the man. "The war was to continue on for a while to weaken both sides and to let Sidious draw more emergency powers to himself, while also completely ruining the Jedi Order in the public side. We would've been both seen as warmongers and as incompetents."

"But thanks to our discovery of Wayland, and the eventual ousting of Sidious, none of that will happen," Anakin added fiercely.

Kit nodded to his padawan before continuing in a much calmer tone. "The clones that are out in the war now don't have that order imbedded in their hypno-conditioning. And it will not happen now with Master Windu there on Kamino to oversee the clone's hypno-conditioning and training going forward."

"The clones will be a problem going forward in terms of incorporating them into the greater Republic, however," Shaak warned from where she was driving not turning aside to look back over her shoulder at the other Jedi. "And it is one that the Jedi Order **must** watch closely.

"But even there, discovering who Sidious was, quickly have saved us quite a lot of trouble down the line," Kit answered, not disagreeing, but drawing the conversation back to the main point.

Dooku nodded thoughtfully, then looked back over at Yoda. "How were the Sith able to hide themselves so well? How was Sidious able to hide himself so well? Even before he was Chancellor, Palpatine was in the presence of practically every Jedi Master of any note over his career as a Senator and even those with extremely good Force Senses did not discover him. Can we truly blame all of that on the Veil or his own Force Stealth techniques? It feels as if there should be something more there, or else..."

He trailed off, but all the other Jedi there understood what he was going to say. Or else how to even know if there weren't other hidden Sith out there, just waiting for the Order's guard to drop again in a few hundred years or so?

"Good at hiding themselves, the Sith had become. Began this campaign of deceit, trickery and stealth directly after the new Sith wars ended, they did. A thousand years, a long time it is, to practice stealth. That, and the Veil helped it did. Further..." Yoda sighed, gently reaching up to tap his own chest for a moment. "Ego, played a part it did. Suspected we did not that the Sith were out there for too long. Once know they were we did, searched elsewhere we did. To look beneath our own feet, none of us conceived of the possibility."

"It's always darkest directly underneath the candle," Shaak murmured. It would not have occurred to her to look exclusively on Coruscant for the Sith either, not until after they had captured Wayland anyway. At that point perhaps the idea could have occurred to her that the Sith was fighting within the republic's Senate but it would have seemed a far-fetched idea.

And there actually might be some more reality to the phrase I just used than most would assume, she thought. Shaak Ti had some inkling about that score, about how the Dark Side could hide better within the shadows cast by the light. But they were as yet unformed, and Shaak wanted to sit down and work it out via mediation at some point on her own before sharing it with everyone else.

Anakin stared at Yoda for a moment. "You're admitting it was partly arrogance?" he asked, honestly shocked.

Yoda harrumphed at him, waving him away with his gimer stick even as the hover car began to slow down in preparation for entering the small security zone around the palace. "Point out the obvious you need not. Blind and insular, the Jedi were. Arrogant in our victory against the Sith, we were. Then, when threat reveals to us it was, our assumptions remained arrogant they did. At fault I was, along with others. Admitting fault, not something you grow out of young Anakin."

At that, Anakin had the grace to look slightly abashed, but even more thoughtful, and the older Jedi all around him nodded slightly in approval at that. And Ranma from where he had been still talking quietly to Ahsoka and Talli also made a note of it.

At that point, the conversation around to Dooku and Yoda petered out, leaving both of them to their thoughts. Yoda began to meditate once more. Dooku stayed silent only for a few moments, as he was interested to speak with young Talli, very interested to see what had drawn her and Ranma together. Learning that it was a true padawan bond was astonishing, and caused him to smile at the back of Ranma's head for a few moments, before commiserating very loudly with Talli about how her life would be, "One of strangeness and fraught with adventure I do not doubt, but fulfilling all the same."

From his own seat Ranma shook his head, looking over at Shaak, who glanced back at him out of the corner of her eye. Both of them were getting weary of the 'adventure' part. *Well Ranma reflected, Not so much adventure as simply combat.* It was astonishing to Ranma to think, but he'd begun to get his fill of fighting. There was such a vast difference between war and martial arts combat that it had begun to weigh on him. *Hell, if I wasn't fighting mostly droid armies, I would probably have skipped out long since. Killing that many sentients would have... marked me. And not in a good way.*

Shaak smiled wanly at that, letting her shoulder touch Ranma's for a moment, understanding and commiseration flowing between them. *While I will always be a Jedi, and willing to serve the Force, I think that after the Sith are finally finished off, I can hope for at least a decade of more peaceful missions. Let those older and wiser try to finish off the war and put the Republic together. My heart and I will have done our part by excising the Sith.*

While the married couple was having their tiny moment, Anakin and Kit looked around the city with interest. They'd both interacted (read: partied) with the Reborn after the battle on Corellia, and since, they had made friends with Dralshy'a and Kad along with the now deceased Janice and the two youngsters, Keala and Fabian. Both of them were somewhat surprised by how strangely... normal the admittedly entirely contained capital city seems to be. The wasteland outside of it was more what they had expected after lessons on the Dral'han but here in the city the New Mandalorians built there were a few signs at first as to the fact they were on Mandalore at all.

But it only took a few more moments of driving before Kit began to notice the dichotomy of the locals. Anakin put it into words though, using a somewhat unfavorable comparison. "This reminds me almost of Mos Espa. You have a lot of normal settlers, farmers, shop owners and so forth on the one hand and a lot of armed folk on the other."

"True, but look more closely," Kit advised, gesturing in particular to one discussion going on nearby outside a shop. Anakin looked at where Kit's lekku had twitched, and realized quickly that his Master was right. Where in his own explanation, the bully boys would be lording it over the locals, or looked at warily, here, the armed folk, despite being in the majority, were not looked at as if the other locals worried about them becoming violent. Rather, both sides were very polite if equally standoffish towards one another in the main.

"You're right, Master. And look at some of the children," Anakin realized, "or some of the younger locals, those who are my age or a little older."

Whereas the Reborn wore the full armor of traditional Mandalore warriors, a few of the New Mandos had apparently decided to meet them halfway. These wore armored chest plates, armored forearms and so forth. And this was particularly true among the younger set. Those younger than thirty or so that Anakin saw as they moved through the streets were almost uniformly wearing at least one piece of armor. "I'm thinking that whatever kind of culture war was going on here is very decidedly turning against the peace above all faction," he said dryly.

"You don't approve?" Shaak asked, humming in thought.

Anakin paused, considering his answer knowing that was a loaded question. "I do not understand people who believe that every argument or point of conflict can be solved through peaceful discourse. I believe the universe would be a better place if that was so, but it's not. To deny that simple reality is foolish in my mind. Where would the Jedi Order be if we had all been trained as Consulars instead of Sentinels or Guardians. We would have faced a lot more losses in this war for just the start and more in the years leading up to it too."

Judging by the faint smile on Shaak's face, Anakin's answer had passed muster and she nodded. "Well said. I myself once thought of becoming a Consular, but at the time, I could sense that the universe was slowly shifting, slowly darkening." She turned slightly as the hover car came to stop, smiling warmly at Ranma. "And then I met this one. In so doing, my decision to become a Consular or Guardian was somewhat made for me. Not that I have ever regretted it."

While Ahsoka and Shaak snickered at that, Kit and Anakin rolled their eyes at the amount of affection Shaak had put into her words and the blush that suffused Ranma's face for a moment.

As the trip continued, Ranma took up the discussion, going back to the previous topic, filling Kit and Anakin in on what had happened here, the peace at any price concept that the New Mandalorians had embraced, and how it had basically fractured the world's population by tossing out the Resol'nare, the book of concepts, beliefs and ideas that the Mandalorians lived by. That fracturing was now slowly being healed, while the old ways had been changed by Bo-Katan. Both Kit and Anakin had known a lot about the Reborn, but not how they had gained control of the planet, or how that movement had started to grow, and it was quite interesting to listen to Ranma's very idiosyncratic take on things, especially with HK, Shaak and the Mandos with them interjecting their own comments.

As the story was winding down, Ranma broke off as a shout of, "Ho, Green One!" came from nearby. Kit turned in that direction, knowing that shout was directed at him, and saw several helmeted Mandos waving at him from where they had been moving down a side street. One of them Kit recognized from the battle on Corellia going by the colors shown on his armor.

The owner of the voice and his fellows activated their jet packs, blasting off the ground and moving to land on both of the group's hover cars at different places, clapping on easily with their gauntlets even as the two hover car began to move again, ignoring local traffic with the ease of long practice. This didn't seem to draw any notice from the locals, something that surprised Anakin. But it seemed as if everyone around them, even other hover car drivers, were somewhat inured to the Reborn using their jet packs like this.

"Green skin and young warrior, and Master Ranma and his Togrutan! What brings you all to our lovely little ball of dirt?" a jolly-sounding Mando spoke up as they landed.

The man doing the shouting wore the mark on the shoulder of the Fire Hawks the male equivalent of Bo-Katan's Night Owls. She'd had to begin that group when she became the Mandalore, to chip away at any concerns that favored female warriors among the Reborn more than the male. She did, obviously, but Bo couldn't do so officially. With him were several Night Owls themselves, and a few other warriors besides who had taken part in the battle on Corellia and the celebration afterward.

One in particular was looking at Anakin, grinning inside her helmet as she remembered how good a dancer he had been.

Ranma and Shaak looked at one another, then Ranma replied, "Mourning unfortunately. You might notice who isn't among us or the hover car following behind us."

The man who had shouted looked back over his shoulder at the other hover car, counting heads there for a moment, as well as comparing the colors marked on each of the Mandos. He hissed then, his body language, which had been open and welcoming, seeming to close down a bit, and he shook his head slightly from side to side. "Janice Kase. Damn! That is a blow."

That sobered up all of the Night Owls around them, none of whom had noticed just yet that their wayward member was missing from among Ranma's retinue. This included the one who had been eyeing up Anakin, who bit her lip in her helmet to bite back a cry of shock. The most senior of them slowly shook her head as well, looking at Ranma. "How?"

"She felt during the last battle over Wayland. Starfighter combat. We'd gutted the enemy fleet, and were pulling back, but her starfighter and just taken too many hits. Its shield failed and..." Ranma said with a sigh, trailing off.

"A warrior's death then, even if it isn't one any of us would have wished for. I will spread the word..." she paused then, and looked over at the warrior who had been eyeing up Anakin.

"And I will tell my clan we have lost a daughter," the woman answered formally, her earlier thoughts disappearing for now. "I am Troya Kase, of the main line. Janice was my great niece. I will need to tell our clan head, and he will need to reach out to the Mandalore and

arrange a quick kote ky'ram (Mandalorian death ceremony). Hopefully the old chakaar (bastard) will be convinced she deserves full honors, even if after such a death you wouldn't have been able to bring back anything personal."

"We actually did. We have portions of her armor. She had recently replaced her helmet after it had been damaged in training, but kept the old one for sentimentality reasons," Shaak said with a shake of her head. She didn't espouse material connections like that, like most Jedi Shaak believed that creating such connections, which could lead to possessiveness and then more Dark Side emotions. But she understood others did. And funerary rites like this were something that Shaak understood non-Jedi needed. "I have it here with me in a bag."

That seemed to strangely enough lift the spirits of most of the Mandos around them, including Troya. "That's good. Having something like that, something physical will help her family mourn and rejoice at the life she lived. We'll leave you now though. I've got things to prepare and the rest of these kriffers do too."

The man with the Fire Hawk marking on his shoulder seemed almost to protest that, before he shrugged, and the group blasted off the moving hover cars, weaving away through traffic in various directions.

Moments later, Ranma and the rest arrived at the palace, where they were waved through at the gate by two Reborn on guard. "Huh, is this security just a response to that last assault on Satine when she was acting as 'duchess'," Ranma actually raised his hands to make quotes around the term, "or something more recent?"

"Something more recent I am afraid. It turns out that many of Mandalore's neighbors are not nearly so sanguine about their rising to prominence once more," Dooku answered. "None are willing to take official action, but in the wake of the battle for Corellia, several anti-Mandalorian fanatics were somehow able to get to Sundari. Whereupon they launched a series of suicidal attacks on the palace. Bo-Katan was not in residence at the time, but Satine was wholly unable to talk them down." His lips twitched in a wintry little smile. "That would have almost been comical if not for how serious the moment was."

Shaak winced. "I cannot imagine that did Satine's ego any good. Poor woman. I cannot truly fault her idealism, but she assumed her ideals were far more wide spread than they truly are, and refused to see the reality of how badly the New Mandalorian movement was seen by the majority of her own people." In all honesty, Shaak had a lot of sympathy for Satine, but beyond being far too idealistic, felt the woman had been far too quick to get rid of the entirety of the Resol'nare, the lynchpin of Mandalorian society. It had very swiftly set up the New Mandalorian movement for failure.

Ranma said nothing to that, while in the other car Keala snorted, before adding that she would check in with her cousin and see how she was doing. "While I don't like the woman much and I hate the kriff she pulled with the whole New Mandalorian thing, she's still family."

The hover cars eventually settled down into the palace's garage, and everyone piled out. At that point, Kad turned to the others. "I don't think all of us have to stay at the palace to wait for the Mandalore to get back. Why don't Dralshy'a and I show the Nova Guard around instead? They've never been here before, since you rightly recruited us Mandos first."

Cro and the other Nova Guard responded to this bit of ribbing appropriately, but given the fact that it was barely evening local time, Kad had a point and the rest of the Mandos nodded. Even Dralshy'a, who looked torn for a moment, her visor staring in the direction of the inner palace and then back out at the city. But her love of all things big and boomy won over her blue-skin fetish, and she nodded. "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. We might even find that our people have found a source of beskar, which would be a big help if we end up in a land campaign again."

HK also held up a hand as the Nova Guard and Mandalorians started to separate from the Jedi. Although Ahsoka and Talli both looked a little askance, wanting seemingly to go with their younger companions, but decided to stay with their fellow Jedi. "Honest query: Master, might I go with Dralshy'a? I wish to look at local weapons technology that it been brought in since we were last here."

"Oooh, and I know just where to start with that! I've even got a few Mandalorians out there who deals only in favors. I doubt will find anything to match your needs Gyro rockets, but maybe an upgrade to your blaster weaponry is possible, and maybe a portable shield to! I could really come in handy, and you don't have to worry about the radiation after all."

"Joyful response: whatever allows me to kill more meat bags more efficiently, I am interested in. Although I would be concerned about the onboard power systems if I do get a portable shield of some kind."

"True, still, we could build it up into a larger backpack-like structural you HK, or maybe..." Dralshy'a's voice trailed off as the murderous robot, the Nova Guard and the Mandalorians trooped out of the garage, seemingly heading out into the city on foot.

"I see you are still being followed by that rather insane droid. A part of me says that is a good thing, as you no doubt have put it through its paces following after you, and that you are probably one of the few people in this galaxy that could control it. On the other hand, my Jedi instincts tell me that it would look much better with its head separated from its body."

"In this case it's easy enough to manage once you understand him, and can prove you're stronger than him," Ranma answered with a laugh.

"Personally, there are times when he is still somewhat off-putting to me, and that is saying something. But I cannot deny that he has been extremely useful on occasion. Indeed, I would have to go so far as to say he has been indispensable at certain points," Shaak admitted,

before shaking her head with a smile. “Besides, at this point, I consider that droid a friend. Exceedingly murderous attitude and all. For now, let us head inside.”

“Yeah sure, although, how exactly are they going to pay for anything? I mean, for HK, not for themselves. I’m assuming they’ve all got bank accounts or whatever... even if I don’t... huh...” Ranma mused, his tone chagrined, causing Shaak to chuckle.

“I think I heard Keala say something about paying for them all,” Ahsoka volunteered, shaking her head.

“Well, more power to her then,” Ranma answered, trailing off as a blue-skinned woman walked down the corridor ahead of them.

The sight of the woman brought Yoda and Talli up short, not having met her before, the feel of the woman in the Force sending warning bells through their brain. However, Yoda had talked to the woman via Hypercom before, and nodded his head slowly to her. “Dark Side user, Sev’rance. Told we were, here you would be.”

Talli gaped at that, but Sev’rance simply nodded, making no move to attack or otherwise cause trouble. “Ranma and hangers-on. I don’t suppose you’ve time for a... spar... do you?” she asked, giving the word a provocative lilt, more to get a rise out of Shaak than anything else. While she had been intensely enamored of Ranma when she had been coming down from her Force-based emotional high, she knew that there was zero chance of anything happening between them.

Shaak knew it too and merely rolled her eyes. “Come. If you wish for a spar, I am certain many here will oblige you. Ranma, if you would like to lead the others outside for some training? I will speak to Satine and tell her why we are here as well as our estimate on how long.”

“Hrhrhrhm, join you I will. Wish to test this one’s skill, I do,” Yoda announced, surprising the others. “Trained her you half has, Dooku.”

“I have,” Dooku announced, palming his specially built lightsaber hilt for a moment. “And I also wish to see if young Talli truly has the hand-to-hand aptitude you all have said she does. It seems to be a very good use of the rest of the local daylight. Tonight we will have more than enough time for discussion.”

OOOOOOO

Despite the serious nature of Shaak and Ranma’s visit to Mandalore, the way Bo-Katan first learned about their arrival was somewhat comical.

In the central seat of the Mandalore in the traditional conclave of Keldabe, the planet's old capital, Bo-Katan tried hard not to reach up and massage her forehead. For one thing, it would show weakness. If there was one thing that a Mandalorian, especially the Mandalore could not do, it was show weakness. Especially not when speaking to the various clan heads. For another, it would be utterly pointless. Her helmet was in the way.

Tradition mattered a lot to the clans, as anyone who interacted with a Mandalorian could tell. And while the clan conclave was a neutral zone, a place Mandalorians could take off their helmets and know they were in a place of refuge and safety, they were now at war. And as the Mandalore, Bo-Katan could not sit safely save in her own clan's territory: the palace or the old farmstead well out into the mountains. *I wonder if that place is still there, or did the forest reclaim it all?* tsking at herself, Bo-Katan tried to shake that thought and concentrate on the current argument, only to fail.

The current argument was, of all things about property rights here on Mandalore, and whether or not property could be passed through members of the so-called New Mandalorians and on to members of the Reborn if they were the firstborn of the previous generation. A lot of young kids and teens were joining up with the Reborn these days, which she was very pleased to see, but the New Mandalorians were incensed about it, and wanted to put some lawful means of stopping that shift in loyalty from happening. The fact that anyone who wished to join the Reborn would need to leave all their worldly possessions behind, and any legal right to inherent behind would serve as a major restriction. Further, the NM's felt that, while they couldn't outright forbid adults or teens sixteen and up from leaving their current families and trying to join the Reborn, younger children shouldn't be allowed to make that choice.

In Bo's opinion would have been a good argument if not for the fact that Mandalorian children routinely started training as young as eight or nine. *Hell, my own training began then, and I can't remember a single Night Owl or Fire Hawk who would have said differently.* But trying to balance between both the traditions and the NM's desire to retain their population going into the next generation was tough, and as Mandalore, Bo unfortunately had to be neutral in these things.

Furthermore, there was a large portion of the more traditional Mandalorian clans who want to punish those who had decided to follow the ways of the New Mandalorians, both parent and child. They could still join up with the Reborn, they could reclaim the way of the warrior. But, that segment argued, they would have to do so by joining pre-existing clans, rather than take up arms for their own names as they had been dishonored by the previous generation.

Bo-Katan thought that was all so much osik (crap), but she again had to play peacekeeper. *And oh, the laugh Satine had at my expense when she heard that, the chakaar (bitch).*

But doing otherwise, making a ruling as Mandalore now, say, would cause bad feelings, solidify people's positions and moreover, get everyone angry at her for her unilateral decision. While the powers of the position of Mandalore were quite broad, even on a societal rather than military level, they weren't total. She could make a ruling, but she wouldn't, it would simply be a bad idea in the long-run. *Just keep reminding yourself of that Bo-Katan* she thought to herself. *You don't want to be a tyrant, you want to be a visionary.*

Her attention was diverted for a moment when the screen on interior of her forearm bracer lit up, and she blinked at it confused. While the clan conclave was not sealed to outside signals, no one would send her or anyone else a message short of 'enemy fleet in orbit.'

But this notification wasn't an attempt to communicate with her, it was in point of fact an automatic message from the local bank informing her that someone had made a withdrawal on one of her bank accounts, a rather large one, and at a store whose name she recognized. *That's a weapon's store, one of the best in the city.*

Bo-Katan's eyes narrowed as she took in the Order, behind her helmet, frowning in thought. That is the Clan Kryze account. *No way would my sister purchase anything there, or that limp noodle of a nephew that she got her claws into. Which means...*

OOOOOOO

That evening, as the two young Mandalorians, Ahsoka and Talli were going over the weapons with Dralshy'a as if they were children at a party where all the presents had been opened at once, Yoda slowly shook his head as he saw Ahsoka, Anakin and Talli getting drawn into it. "Most decidedly, the Jedi Order changing it has. Yet this, a change to far I feel."

"Weapons and armor are part of the culture here, Master Yoda. And you must admit that armor would probably no doubt help the young padawans as they continue to train with Shaak and Ranma." Dooku looked over to where Shaak and Ranma were standing close together, talking quietly as they went over the spar Dooku had just finished with the Togrutan woman. While the others had gone out on a shopping spree, the married couple had stayed at the palace, training their young apprentices and sparring against Dooku and the other Force users. Shaak had first had a somewhat frosty discussion with Bo-Katan's sister, who was still in residence, something that had surprised both of them.

Then, after they had worked out with all the others, they had taken to sparring, a series of ever-increasingly dangerous spars.

They'd offered Dooku and Yoda to join them, and after working with Talli for a time, Dooku had done so, letting Ranma join a free-for-all with Sev'rance, Anakin and Kit. Dooku had proven to be Shaak's better in a pure lightsaber duel, her own modified Makashi losing against his purer form as she wasn't quite as good at using Force powers along with her strikes. Nevertheless, when they fully had shifted to full body contact he had lost, if only slowly.

Indeed, Yoda was astonished at how well Dooku had done, and ignored his comment for a moment as he made a mental note of that. *Moved as fast as a much younger man, he did.*

That was something Yoda had made a note of, as well as Ranma's surprise and interest in the fact. But Yoda had not taken part in the combat himself despite both Shaak and Ranma asking if he wanted to. Master Yoda could still swing a very mean lightsaber, as Ranma put it, but at the moment, Yoda had no interest in joining the physical exercises all around him

"Perhaps right you are. But becoming solely warriors, we Jedi cannot," Yoda intoned coolly. "Commented on the opposite earlier we did, but this is true as well. Warriors only, a proper solution to all the problems Jedi face it is not. Balance, in this, there must be."

"Hmm, and furthermore, I think any attempt to make one temple or another specialize would undoubtedly backfire. An idea would be to have a perspective Knight pass his trials and then be forced to take on missions outside his or her comfort zone. That way, they can gain respect and understanding for the problems the other sects face. That, and pairing Consular, Sentinel, and Guardian leaning padawans and their masters together," Dooku mused.

Yoda nodded in agreement, before turned in the direction of the palace, with Dooku, Sev'rance and the other Force users following suit a moment later.

From that direction, Bo-Katan Kryze strode out onto the backyard of the place.

By the time she reached them, Bo-Katan had removed the traditional helmet of the Mandalore, setting it on the back of her backpack, and was practically glaring at the two of them. That told Ranma all he needed to know. "You already heard."

"About Janice? I did. Tell me more about how she died," Bo-Katan said, her voice tight with restraint grief. No Mandalorian would ever truly be sad at another's passing in a battle, but to hear that her protégé, one of the first Night Owls that she had ever inducted into the Order, the one she had personally chosen to learn from Ranma, had died in a starfighter battle? That was an ignominious death.

Sighing, Ranma crouched down on the grass where he had been standing next to Shaak. Shaak did the same, and after a moment, Bo-Katan crouched down in front of them, taking what Ranma thought of as the Indian position, waving several other Night Owls who had entered the training grounds with her to join them. They quickly moved over as well, sitting almost like a delegation across from Ranma and Shaak as they removed their helmets.

There were only five of them, and Ranma realized with a start that might well be all the original Night Owls from when Bo-Katan had formed the Night Owls out of the greater Death Watch. *Like our crew, they taken losses over the years, particularly since this war began.*

Looking over at his wife, Ranma began explaining about the battle for Wayland. Bo-Katan had taken part in the battle that had brought Sev'rance into the Mandalorian fold and knew all the background, so they only had to cover everything since, rather than the overall strategic picture before and after the battle. It still took a while though, as Bo wanted to know everything about both the land and space portions and didn't want to miss anything. These were Mandalorians after all, and to a woman they lapped it up, nodding sagely to one another occasionally as the tactics were explained, hissing as the battle went on and the Confederacy simply plowed forward using their greater numbers to best advantage against the layered defense of the defenders. The tale continued as Ranma described how the Confederacy had pushed the defenders back and further back, until finally Janice was blown out of space, and the Jedi and their fellow defenders in orbit and on their last legs, even their last few tricks not having been enough at the sheer number of enemies. Only to be saved by a force led by more Jedi, which cut off the Confederacy fleet and forced to retreat.

After Shaak finished explaining what happened at the end of the battle, Bo-Katan was silent for several minutes, simply staring down at the grass in front of her, then she abruptly nodded. "It was a good death. An honorable one. She helps stave off the Confederacy, and that in turn lead to you having enough time to discover Sidious. I will accept that and I think the old ass who leads Kasle will see it that way too."

With that seen to as much as it could be, Bo-Katan turned glaring over at Keala. "By the way, cousin of mine, what was with this giant order of weapons? I don't remember giving you the clan account number..." she drawled, snorting in laughter a second later as Fabian smacked Keala upside the head.

OOOOOOO

Evidently, Bo-Katan's sentiment was a bit of an understatement as not an hour after dinner that night, the palace received a call from Crocal Kasle, the head of Janice's clan. "He's ready for us. Come on." Janice stood up from the long dining table, gesturing Shaak and Ranma to join them. A single glance towards Dralshy'a brought her, Fabian, Keala and Kad over as well, with Keala quickly moving to Bo's side as was proper. They would keep some distance from each other during the ceremony to mark out how they had come from different clans. "You all will be part of Clan Jedi for this purpose."

Yoda and Dooku bowed out. While Kit and Anakin had served with the Wild Blade alongside Janice for numerous missions, mostly centered around Wayland, neither of the older Jedi had known the woman. Dooku simply felt it inappropriate he join the group, while Yoda wasn't all that at home with the idea of a long, formal ceremony for the dead like this. Jedi did not have such ceremonies for the passing of their fellows beyond a simple pyre.

Bo-Katan seemed to hesitate looking at the Nova Guard and the other Jedi around them, then said simply, "As members of a warrior culture, you all can join us for this I think."

She then sent a smirk towards Kit and the other Jedi. "Be grateful Jedi, I do not think any other Jedi in history other than perhaps Revan has ever taken part in this ceremony.

Ranma and Shaak fell in behind her, listening as Ahsoka murmured, "I didn't even know the Mandalorians conducted a ceremony for the dead before this. Did they do that after the battle on Corellia?"

"They performed a large ceremony for all those of their creed who passed. But as none who had died had truly done enough to stand out from the crowd, that was enough. Janice on the other hand, she performed many deeds worthy of being passed down to her descendants, on the clan honor roll," Kit answered. He'd had a conversation with Bo-Katan and several others the night of the massive party the Reborn had thrown, which had happened after that simpler ceremony.

The group took a shuttle out into the mountains well away from the more 'civilized' cities. There, in a small out of the way dell, they found a series of massive buildings built out of local stone. Everything here gave off a feeling of strength and age. They were met there by a few Mandalorians, none of whom had their helmets or armor, but had daggers and blasters at their waists. These were members of the clan who had not taken the full rites to become warriors for one reason or another, or who had failed in them but not in such a way as to be banished from the clan.

These worthies ushered the group of newcomers to a small out-of-the-way portion of the estate where a dome-like building lay just to one side of the main building. The non-warrior members of Kastle turned back then, and they were ushered inside by six of the clan's warriors, all who were on Mandalore at present. Inside, the building proved to be a single room, its contours following the dome visible on the outside.

Around its edges were a series of alcoves, within which warrior helmets had been placed. Most were of Clan Kastle, although a few 'foundlings' those Mandalorians who did not have any real clan, were also represented men and women both who had died truly heroic deaths. Below the helmets were some small items or other that the Mandalorians in question had owned, and in some of them, a third alcove at the top was dominated by a hologram. These holograms were each different, sometimes just a bust of the individual without his helmet on, or a full body action picture taken as they were fighting.

As her knees led the others in, the leader of the clan stood in the center of the room. Instead of the regular Mandalorian armor, he wore an ancient suit, one that was obviously a clan relic. Gone was the backpack, while the helmet seemed of an age with the Mandalore's official one. Gone was the normal, space knight motif in terms of armor, in its place was what looked like an ancient series of armored bits, most of them looking more like animal scales than beskar plates, with portions missing, showing the wear of age.

His voice boomed out from her helmet, as he glared at Bo and the other warriors who had taken up the lead of the small procession as they passed the room's threshold. "Who comes to the sacred ground of clan Kastle, seeking entrance for a departed soul?"

"I, Kad of the clan Solus, do come before you to speak for a slain sister of battle," Kad said. "This warrior, Janice, fell in glorious battle, after a lifetime of battle and war, following the tenants of the Resol'nare."

Both were speaking in Mandalorian, and for a moment, Ranma couldn't follow what was going on, until Shaak gently took his hand, whispering into his ear, using her Force powers to translate and bring the words to his ears with no one else the wiser.

"What item do you bring in recompense for her corpse?" the man's voice seemed to break a bit at that, but that was the only sign of a deep emotions all the Jedi could feel from him and the other clan members.

If ever I had thought the Mandalorians had no feelings, this ceremony would have proven that to be a lie. I actually think those two over there, Janice's parents I believe, are crying in their helmets. Yet for all their grief, there is also great pride here. Warrior cultures are truly different... as is my own understanding of them after so long working with them. Where other Jedi would see primitive moral codes and mere emotional connections, I see something that is as worthy as our own Code, in a way.

"We bring a helmet, damaged in her second to last battle, it could not be repaired in time for the battle that claimed life," Kad answered.

Bo-Katan strode forward and held out the helmet, and the Kastle clan head lifted the helmet that Janice had left behind on the Wild Blade and that Shaak had brought along over formally. He twisted this way and that, as Bo stepped back and placed it on small plinth in the center of the room. "And now tell me the deeds of the departed, so that I may judge them worthy to join the halls of honor of our clan."

Hearing that from Shaak's translation, Ranma strode forward now, gently tapping jet fighter pilot on the shoulder and taking over. "Janice was a Night Owl, chosen to train under me, to learn my ways of combating war for I had proven them to be deadly beyond even the imagination of the Reborn. She excelled in them, and fought beside me for months. In that time, on numerous occasions she thought Sith, their Dark Side tainted creatures and their tools in the Confederacy."

The old man nodded slowly, and stated, "Your words paint a pretty picture but that picture must be filled in detail. Tell me more!"

Ranma was joined by Shaak, her own voice soft, mellow against the backdrop of the old man's nearly cold, trumpet like voice within his helmet. She spoke of the first battle the crew of

the Wild Blade had entered, against the Terentatek. Then she moved on to the ambush at the wedding, where Bo-Katan had led her troops in a deadly battle through the forest nearby, culminating in the death of the renowned bounty Hunter Cad Bane at her hands.

And so it went. Each of the crew of the Wild Blade who had known her best took time to explain one of the battles they had been in alongside Janice. And eventually, as they did, the clan head picked up Janice's old helmet, and took it to one side, placing it in one of the alcoves. He then placed a hologram she must've taken at some point in years past of Janice in a training battle, turning it on and placing it in the alcove above the helmet. "I, Crocal Kastle, head of clan Kastle do acknowledge that Janice died the death of a true Mandalorian. Her deeds will resound here among those of clan Kastle for all eternity."

Crocal then moved to the far side of the room, gesturing everyone who had taken part in the ceremony to enter and sit as chairs rose out of the floor. Two droids entered behind them, carrying large decanters made of some kind of beaten metal, looking almost crude, but deliberately so. They went to each of the individuals who had taken part in the ceremony, even the Nova Guard who pulled down a small drinking tube from their masks as the Mandos finally removed their helmets. "And now that we have spoken of Janice the warrior, now, speak to me of Janice the woman and the friend. Let us each share a story of her, and those who have passed with her."

This started out somber, but whatever the hell was in the decanters tasted like cherry cordial, and hit like no alcohol Ranma had ever tried before, laying thick like honey in the mouth. Eventually, with the amount of drink passing along, the tale-telling began to be quite raucous. Jokes and laughter were shared, helmets once more came off among the Mandos and several of the Nova Guard drinks themselves into unconsciousness. Kit and Anakin surprisingly were able to keep up with the hard drinking Bo-Katan and Crocal, who seemed to have a cast iron liver. Keala, Fabian, Ahsoka and Talli were almost out of it quickly, but were just as easily taken out and put up in beds for the night throughout the clan compound. Dralshy'a also left, taking a shuttle back to the palace.

And eventually, Ranma and Shaak left the rest to their fun. The two of them retreated to the Wild Blade for the night, somewhat emotionally drained and just wanting to be alone for a time but both glad that their friend had gotten a proper sendoff.

OOOOOOO

The next morning, hangovers notwithstanding, the Alioni Nova Guard had their own duties to perform. Not to the dead. The dead had been consecrated and sent to the earth where they had died back on Coruscant, or on Wayland before that and Shili before even that. But it had been some weeks since Sergeant Cro had called home. And he had a great deal to report. Not only had he been involved in taking down the Sith Temple on Coruscant, which had helped in ousting the Sith from power within the Republic, but he had finally succeeded in the one thing that even Janice had yet to achieve before her death.

And as the elders stared through the pickup, he held up a hand, which began to glow with a faint bluish energy. "As you can see, Marshals, I have succeeded in creating the beginning of Ranma's energy technique. Needless to say, this is but a start, but it is a start of great things."

All the crew of the Wild Blade had continued their training, while Ranma and Shaak were out of it, with HK instructing them or fighting them as the case may be. Moreover, when Ranma had finally taken over training them on the trip to Mandalore, Cro had finally crossed the divide.

"So this is the secret energy called the Force? Or, no, the power of a living body given form I believe is the way it was described," one of the Marshals murmured, staring at the light. "Yet all I see is a pretty light."

"I cannot project it away from my body, but according to Ranma, that is only a matter of time. Until then..." He held up a dagger in his other hand and stabbed the glowing hand lightly with it. The blood oozed out quickly, but just as quickly, began to close. "Ranma says that ki healing like this is best done on the subconscious level, but I need to still direct it at the moment. Still, he says as long as we continue to build up our living force reserves, we will be able to do much the same. We will never be able to reach out to the Unifying Force as the Jedi can. We won't be able to predict the future or translate alien languages and so forth. But what does that matter to us? We can be faster, stronger, more powerful. And that is all a Nova Guard warrior could want."

For a moment there was silence through the Hypercom transmission, and more than one of the Nova Guard with Cro wondered if the leaders on the other side were watching the video of Ranma fighting Sidious, or the so-called music video that had been made of his battle against a portion of the droid army, which had invaded Wayland. Whichever, it would prove the point that there was a great deal of upside to learning about life energy.

However, the words out of the next leader to speak surprised Sergeant Cro and his people. "Excellent. We will send a ship to Mandalore to pick you up. You will be brought home to Alion and placed in charge of a training cadre. We want this technique spread throughout our people as quickly as possible. We envision the Confederacy Republic War continuing for some years yet, whatever else happens with these Sith cretins, far too much blood has been spilled on both sides for them to just walk away now. And the same leaders who were the pawns of the Sith are still in place within the Confederacy. We wish for the Nova Guard to prove its worth on far more than just one battlefield."

There was a certain amount of pride, perhaps arrogance in the man's words, but Cro could understand why. As two warrior civilizations, it was almost natural that the Mandalorians and Nova Guard would be in competition in some fashion. Indeed, when he had first come aboard the Wild Blade, Cro was somewhat annoyed that he would be in direct competition with a group of Mandalorians like Janice, Kad and the rest. They had won his respect and even

friendship, but that did not mean that the two warrior cultures had buried the hatchet. The Nova Guard had been somewhat upstaged by the Mandalorians in the Corellian campaign. They'd received a lot in terms of respect and notoriety in the campaign for Wayland, bringing them back to even, in a way. But now, with Cro showing how far ahead of the Mandalorians he was in learning Ranma's techniques, the Nova Guard had a chance to truly take the lead.

"I will have to inform Ranma and the rest of the Wild Blade's crew of our departure. I also think that we should stay on for this last mission we are on," he stated cautiously.

When asked to explain, he did so, but the Marshals were unmoved. "No. Luck plays a factor in any battle, and this sounds as if you will once more be faced with a space battle on top of that. We will not allow you to die as the head of the Mandalorians did in your report earlier," the same leader began.

A second Marshall cut in at that point. "However, your troops can stay there and take part. They can even keep training with Ranma. But you must return home."

Cro scowled inside his helmet, his phalange is flaring out and in in a pattern that only other Nova Guard would recognize. The truth was he didn't want to leave. Not only had he made friends with Ranma and Shaak, but in removing himself like this, he would no longer be able to avail himself of Ranma's training. He felt that was a mistake. But Cro was a measly Sergeant. And orders from on high within the Nova Guard were absolute. "Very well sirs. I will need to inform them, as I said before. And I do not think that at this point in time Ranma will accept any replacement either from amongst us for the Mandalorians."

"That is a risk we are willing to take. We must begin to incorporate your Living Force knowledge into our greater community. This is nonnegotiable."

Called away from his ongoing duels with Shaak, Bo-Katan and Dooku that morning, Ranma was somewhat in a bad mood, but he listened as Cro explained what was going on, eventually nodding his head. "They're kind of right. I mean you're right in saying that I won't be willing to train up any more troops. I've already told Bo-Katan not to bother trying to find other Reborn to join us. But you aren't exactly the best pilot among your crew, are you?"

Cro grimaced at that, but nodded. He had nearly lost his starfighter several times as had the other Nova Guard. The only thing Cro had going for him was excellent instincts on when and how to pull out of the battle. Indeed, Cro often wondered if it should've been him who had died rather than Janice, it had simply been luck of the draw the time.

"I'll be sad to see you go on a personal level, but beyond that, tell your leaders we won't be heading out against the Sith right away. Remember we're going to be stopping in at Zonama Sekot. If you come with us that far, the Nova Guard can also start building up a relationship with Sekot, his inhabitants... and that just sounds weird, and the Jedi Temple that's been constructed there."

"You're right, I had forgotten that. And certainly my folk would greatly benefit from such a connection," Cro mused and then watched with something will like mixed trepidation and delight as Ranma cracked his knuckles.

"And if you are going home, I think that just mean I should train you and your people into the damn ground!"

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"As long as you agree to keep on niece, Dralshy'a, Kad and the Fabian, I don't have a problem with you not taking on any more students," Bo-Katan said later that day, leaning back in her chair overlooking the training area at the back of the palace on the fourth floor. This balcony was large enough to serve as a dining area as well as an observation point for the training down below. Currently that was a series of meditations on the Jedi side, and some weapons drills led by HK on the other. "However, if you think you're getting away from here without more of my people along, you have another think coming. We deserve to be in on the kill."

Bo-Katan's gaze was fierce, almost predatory as she looked up at Ranma, who was leaning against the balcony railing, while down below Shaak was working Amanda and Talli through a series of katas, emphasizing the breathing pattern and how it could be used as meditation as well as physical exercise. "We deserve it, and we will be. Myself, the Fire Hawks, the Night Owls. We'll be taking at least ten full wings of starfighters along. We don't have enough starfighters for them all, so going to this Zonama Sekot and getting some there is a good idea in any case. That and the four dreadnoughts as well in orbit."

Ranma frowned, about what the sensors had told him, and almost wishing he could interrupt the conversation to ask HK to go over their sensor readings from when they had landed. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that like **everything** you have in orbit?"

"It is. It doesn't matter. As good as we Mandalorians are at warfare, we're small change in this war." Bo-Katan snorted a bit. "Trust me, I had a lot of trouble convincing the various clans that we couldn't just take over the whole battlefield. We can have an impact, but not if we try to cover the entire conflict like that. One clan per battlefield? Nonsense. Three clans maybe on the ground sure. But we don't have enough space going capacity to make a difference in space like that. Our best bet is to keep doing what we have been, small fire teams of elite troops, while we work on equipping our warriors."

"Hence why you have more pilots than starfighters to put them in. I get that, but considering the history of the Mandalorians, I would think a lot of the Confederacy systems might want to take a shot at you. There's no Republic fleet near enough to help you if they do, right?" Ranma argued.

Bo-Katan hesitated a bit, then rained in her enthusiasm somewhat. "...fine, we'll leave three of the dreadnoughts back then along with the smaller repurposed vessels. I'll contact the nearest Ord system, and have them send us some transports." She snorted then, "Fact of the matter is, I've more ship personnel than I have ships too. A lot of them are former Coreellia, who joined our creed after the battle in Coreellia. But we've been wondering what to do with them all."

"That actually makes sense. Coreellia is one of the main construction and design centers in the galaxy. And knowing that they nearly went the way of Kuat will no doubt have angered a shit ton of them. Although I am surprised that they are joining up with you instead of simply the Coreellian defense force. Ain't it still acting like a separate fleet from the Republic Navy?"

Waving a hand airily Bo-Katan laughed. "Yeah they are, and I've no doubt they are making trouble for the CIS. Coreellians have never been called cowards. But a lot of them heard of the Resol'nare, of our creed, and it called to them." The Resol'nare was more than simply a book of tenants for warriors, it was a way of life, a true creed, much like Confucianism or similar on Earth. "I'm quite pleased with the majority of the new blood. Indeed, by the time this war is over, I might have authorized the creation of several new clans from the newcomers. The old clans will look at that askance, but it will be a good move on my part, I think."

"And you realize that I can't and neither can the Jedi guarantee that you'll be able to make it deal with the Zonama Sekot and its speakers? Zonama can be surprisingly stubborn." It was interrupted by Bo-Katan nearly falling out of her chair as she laughed, pointing at him and Ranma sighed. "Yeah, you might say that coming from me, that's the equivalent of one master acknowledging the skill of another. That doesn't mean I'm wrong though."

"All we can do is hope. If they want payment of any kind, we can do that at this point. We're rolling in Republic credits, its resources and ships we need," Bo answered firmly.

"Fine. I won't argue further. But how long will it take you to organize all that?"

Bo-Katan frowned a bit at that, holding up her wrist computer for a moment and tapping out some instructions. After a moment, she made a face. "Give me a day and a half. The trouble will be getting transports here from Ord Mudar. It's actually not in this sector of space, and there isn't a hyperspace lanes between here and there."

Ranma thought about it, then shrugged, nodded, and gestured over his shoulder towards the training down below. Specifically where Sergeant Cro and his Nova Guard were preparing to switch to team-based combat against the Mandos. "In that case, I'll leave you to your boring paperwork and organizational tasks. Have fun~~!" Ranma mock-trilled, leaping over the railing and landing down below, before racing over and shouting for HK to stop put all the guns away and join them. He was however interrupted by Master Dooku arriving on the scene, lightsaber already activated as he pointed it at Ranma.

Bo-Katan stared after Ranma for a moment, her feet itching with the urge to go after him. But she had been sparring most of the morning as it was, and if she wanted to meet her self-imposed deadline she need to get to work. *It's worth it to finish off the Sith.*

From where he sat within the Hypercom control room, Master Yoda would probably have agreed with that sentiment. If he had any attention to spare for such anyway, as at the moment, he was instead sifting through the brawl reports from every intelligence asset that the Republic still could call upon and trusted. A lot of this was automatic robotically gathered data, either literally by droids or by programs sifting through the CIS news agencies or those communication lines that had been broken. This was honestly not a lot as the moment it was known any coms encryption had been broken, the Cis would change. It was a never-ending battle on both sides, and it brought in a lot of low-key, unimportant data for the most part.

But that didn't mean it wasn't viable data. It just meant that most of this would have taken days of work for the best analysts back on Coruscant to go through in order to discover important information. Yoda on the other hand, had the Force. And without the Veil, he once more could use it to guide his senses and thoughts with a degree of control that was beyond practically any other Jedi alive. Indeed, the only ones who could perhaps have done an equal job were on Coruscant, and Master Bnar had already helpfully sifted through some of this information.

As sunset turned into night, Yoda had discovered where Dominus had retreated to in order to make good any repairs his fleet needed when it had escaped from Coruscant. With the information on the various ships and the damages thus repaired, Yoda was able to trace where they had gone from there, and vaguely the direction they were heading.

Master Yoda also learned in this fashion about the tragedy that had occurred with the Parliament of Independent Systems. Of course, he knew for certain that the Sith were behind it, it just made far too much sense in his mind, so much so he didn't even need the Force to tell him.

Ruthlessness, cruelty, building hatred, always the first tools of the Sith, even when other ways, better there might of been towards their ends. Proving it, difficult it will be, however. Master Yoda fought back the urge to sigh. Knew many of those who died, I did. Felt a tremor in the Force when it occurred, I had, knew its source I did not. A great tragedy it is, prolonged the war it may well.

Setting his thoughts on that tragedy aside, Yoda once more concentrated on the Sith and finding them. *If see the Sith we can, perhaps proof of their culpability in that we can find. If that, and the war faster we can. Know already the Confederacy does, manipulated they were. Population of the Confederacy, stupid they are not. Angry, bitter they are, desiring a target they are. But such thoughts, changed they can be.*

With that, he delved even deeper into the Force, practically forgetting his physical body for a time as his spirit soared out into the Unifying Force beyond, beyond this system, beyond the sector, into the future, into the past and the present, seeing all, concentrating on none until a vision came to him. A vision of a strange diamond shaped metal object floating in space. Huge it was, although there was nothing nearby to give Yoda any perspective on that. Ancient it was, although that was simply an impression through the Force that accompanied the image.

Dangerous, it certainly was, glowing with the Force in a way he had never seen in an object before. This wasn't the Living Force like a bio construct from Zonama Sekot would have contained. No, this thing was fueled by the Unifying Force in a way that Yoda had never seen before save ancient lightsabers held as early examples of the art within the Jedi archives. And comparing them was like comparing a flashlight to a dreadnaught-sized light. They were technically the same, but very different in scope.

This image was something Yoda had never seen before, or even heard of. But he knew now what the Sith at least were searching for. All that remained was to follow them to its actual position in space. Quickly, he began to give out orders to various agents, information brokers, and even Republic Intelligence itself, bypassing a tremendous amount of bureaucracy to do so. While Republic Intelligence cannot obviously turn all of its attention on this, they could at least send him any further information on the various ships that had made up Dominus' force.

But with that vision had also come urgency. The moment he was done with giving out orders over the Hypercom, Yoda stood up from his chair, hopping off of it and grabbing his gimer stick raising a communicator to his lips to call for Dooku and Kit to join him. *On the heels of the Sith we **must** be. If to do so help the Mandalorians organize their forces we must, do so we will. If nothing else, name of Yoda, cut through the red tape to bring in the troop transports it will.*

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At the same time that Master Yoda had finished his meditation, the surviving two Darths were conducting a similar meditation. Dominus had regrouped with Diabolus, well pleased with her work with the Congress. At that point, they also added four more Lucrehulks to their surviving fleet. He had been forced to leave nearly forty behind at Yabol Opa due to the severe damages they had taken, and that had constituted a large portion of the ships he had taken into Coruscant. In addition, Dominus did not want to draw more attention to his personal fleet by adding more ships.

This left him with only fifteen Lucrehulks, but six dreadnoughts, and twenty-four munificent class ships. This was a quite a small force disregarding the dreadnoughts, but it was potent for all of that, and it would be able to hopefully not be noticed amongst the backdrop of even larger armadas moving all over the Republic from both sides.

The fleet had also covered enough distance for Dominus and Diabolus to triangulate his earlier vision of the strange diamond-shaped thing that would lead them to another powerful Dark Side user. One whose power when combined with himself and Diabolus would allow them to re-create the Veil, as well as permanently skew the Force away from the Light Side.

It took them several days of intense meditation, during which neither of the two Dark Side users eight drank or removed themselves from the specially created meditation room, where no light could be seen. Until that was Dominus flicked on a hologram, and gently turned himself in the direction of where the Dark Side was telling him this monolith was hidden before starting to draw two lines, one from Coruscant and one from their current destination. "I have it, the direction at last. Do you, my apprentice?"

"I do, Master," Diabolus announced, pointing in the same direction Dominus was. And moments later, the two lines intersected in a system out in Wild Space and Diabolus worked the computer's controls for a few moments, first zooming in, then reading out a tiny list of details. "The Chrelythiumn system. No planets, grey dwarf star. Was last visited... never. But it has an actual name. Curious."

"Whatever the reasons behind the name, it matters not. Head to the bridge," Dominus ordered. "We will need to calculate a series of jumps in that direction. We cannot go straight there obviously, nor can we really afford to be seen by any Republic forces. There is no reason to tempt fate or the Light Side of the Force to once more ruin our plans after all."

Diabolus nodded quickly, and stood up, opening the door to the ship's corridor beyond, nearly blinding herself in her haste to leave the room and head to the bridge, leaving Dominus behind in the darkened room. Standing alone there, the Weequay to stare at the outer bulkhead, and out in the direction of his target, the whisperings of the Dark Side filling his mind with the hope of turning the tide against the Jedi and the Republic.

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Elsewhere however, events were not proceeding as well as the two Darth might have hoped. Because they had forgotten the same thing that tyrants and individuals would manipulate others had forgotten throughout history: that other people could make plans too. And populations, for all they could be led, manipulated or lied to, they were not inherently stupid.

Admiral Trench had been chosen as the new head of the Confederacy military for the very simple reason that he was easily the best remaining Admiral that the Confederacy had. He was a Harch, a predatory race, which looked like a cross between a spider and a humanoid, who could hunt and ambush, either working together or alone. His people's inter-planet warfare and the war against their colonies, which had attacked them in turn, had provided Trench with a strong background in land and space based tactics long before his people had chosen to join the Confederacy. He was an extremely sound tactician, and an excellent strategist.

But at this level, strategy didn't matter nearly as much as logistics. And even with robot aides galore, that meant he was slowly, as commanders often put it, losing the bubble. And this was a very, very large bubble indeed.

Luckily, Harch had a few days of his own people to confide in, which he did so now, as he marched around the command center on Ord Zynthar, which he had designated his headquarters due to its proximity to his home planet of Secundus Ando. He carefully did not look at the droids guarding the entrance leading into the control center as he spoke, knowing that they were not there to guard the control center so much as they were to watch him. A brief meeting with the Dark Side using twins Karoc and Vinoc had proven that beyond a shadow of the doubt. "There's been a solid shift in the opposing command structure, it is obvious."

"True. A competent commander in the field would have been one thing, but the overall defensive strategy of the Republic has changed entirely. No longer are their fleets being ordered to stand and die where they fly. They are instead leaving, pulling back from planets that are not worth dying for, concentrating into ever larger fleets," one of his aides muttered. "Some of the space battles that have erupted are even larger than the one over Coruscant that Master Bulq led."

The other Harch, who was his liaison with the Confederacy of Independent systems intelligence service grunted in annoyance. "And some of those fleets still have not yet made an appearance. Even when we consider the new information coming into us today from the hidden shipyards."

Both of the other Harch flexed their shoulders and arms in a movement of pure predatory annoyance. The annoyance of a predator that had been surprised when the prey had turned on them in an unusual fashion. For that series of attacks, and what it implied had come as a shock to the entire Confederacy, when they began the day before. That the Republic had known where at least fourteen of the twenty hidden shipyards that the Confederacy had used to build up their fleets in peacetime.

The first they've known of it was, when multiple attack fleets had shown up near their targets and began to attack instantly. Those shipyards were in dead space, star systems without planets or asteroids of any interest, or within space between star systems, well away from the light of any sun. And still the Republic had known about them. At this point, every shipyard so attacked had been destroyed along with their defending fleets.

"It is a sign," Trench murmured in a low tone, gesturing angrily towards the hologram, as if he was pointing something out, when he was doing anything but. "A sign that the Sith truly were playing both sides against one another in this war." He looked at his aides, both of whom nodded their heads. Nothing else needed to be said. No Harch worth his trichobothria would ever willingly be someone else's tool. Willing to follow, yes, unknown, unwitting tool, no. *And our representative was one of those slain by the so-called Republic intelligence attack on Raxus Secundus.*

Without any further word, the three Harch turned their attention back to the war as a whole, and worked for another twelve hours, before one of them went off duty. This was the allotted time for him to do so, so it raised no flags among the watching droids.

Nor did his communicating home. It was known that young Craklo had a mate back there. And if the message itself was nonsensical stuff about his daily life and asking about hers, the droids on counter-intelligence duty didn't recognize any of the words as anything they need to be on the watch for. Although if they had someone who knew Harch psychology on hand, they would've learned that, the message was quite easy to understand.

It would take some time for the united nests, the Spiverelda to be told the message, and deliberate as to what to do. But Trench knew his people, and knew they would decide if he would. The Harch would no longer be played. They would instead become players in turn.

The problem then is the droid override code, He mused later that night, not going off duty as his aides had instead continuing to work with several dozen more aides who had come in to replace them and help him communicate orders out to the disparate combat zones. Any attempted rebellion on our part to put down swiftly. We could populate several fleets with our people, and we do have two home fleets under our command. But if we cannot shut the droids down, there is no way any attempt at true freedom could be achieved. However, the Dark Side using brothers are no Dominus. We can get around that in some fashion, I think. Or obtain a copy of the code ourselves given enough time. Putting my people in place to do so will take a few days, but I think it will be possible, and until then, I can do more to help my people's cause, and force the two of them to look elsewhere...

With a faint sight of pleasure but no other sign of enjoyment, Harch directed two fleets in to attack an Ord system, which had been used as a jumping off point for three fleets that had destroyed the hidden shipyards. Those fleets would come back to a planet denuded of all material that could possibly help them repair their damages or restock their supplies, as well as an incredibly dense minefield, which would tear any ship that entered apart.

Given the competency, the Republic high command had been showing recently, Trench didn't think he would be lucky enough to catch those fleets in that manner, there would no doubt be reassigned elsewhere as they retreated from their destroyed targets. But every such system helped. And the mines would hopefully cause the Republic issues in other ways.

Harch allowed himself to smile then, baring his mandibles towards the hologram. Unlike humans, the Harch had never forgotten that smiling was simply another way to show their fangs. And let the watching droids suppose it was a reaction to his moment of offense of brilliance. Let them think whatever they wanted. So long as he could keep the war going, his people would start to put into place the necessary pieces for their eventual freedom from both the Confederacy and the Republic.

And if I am not the only ones making plans within the Confederacy, what of it? The more turmoil and chaos, the bigger a piece of the pie we can grab...

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“Does anyone want to explain to me why the locals are glaring at me so much?” Ranma asked as he made his way from the landing area where the Wild Blade and the dozen Mandalorian shuttles that accompanied them to the surface touched down on Zonama Sekot. There were dozens, perhaps as many as a hundred of the locals around, mostly Ferroans moving fuel nozzles into position or directing the incoming shuttles where they wanted them to go. There were also a few Langhesi assigned to the various waiting vehicles that would spirit them to their various destinations. For most of the Mandalorians, that meant a barracks on the planet where they would wait their turn to possibly be assigned some of the Coralskippers. For the Jedi, that meant the Jedi Temple here on the planet, whose construction could be seen at the edge of the horizon from where they had set down.

For Ranma Shaak and Yoda, that meant the command center, where they could communicate with the planet’s overmind.

And nearly every local in sight was surreptitiously sending glares Ranma’s way.

“I have no idea. I sense their annoyance with you, although I do not sense any true anger or hatred. It is simple annoyance, as if they feel you had played an incredibly horrifying prank. It’s a very strange feeling,” Shaak admitted, stroking her lekku thoughtfully as she strode beside Ranma, trying hard not to let her mind dwell on the time they had spent on this planet as the Wild Blade had been designed and built. They had, after all, spent a magnificent year together here, their bonds of love and devotion solidifying further. “I had thought we had left on quite a high note frankly. This is highly strange.”

Ranma must have heard something in her tone, because he turned to send her a small, loving smile, his eyes also alight with memory. But before either could do anything more, Ahsoka decided to intervene.

“I don’t know Master, it seems pretty simple to me. These people had what more than a year to get to know Ranma? And now he’s back. If I were them, I might be annoyed too,” Amanda announced, dodging out of grabbing range quickly as Ranma made to reach for her. “Don’t deny it.”

“It’s true I can be kind of annoying, but I don’t think I was all that annoying while I was here,” Ranma mused, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Unless, are they still annoyed at the fact that I taught Zonama Sekot how to use a Moko Takabisha?”

“More than that, you taught Zonama to take pleasure in combat you kriffer!” a Ferroan growled out trying to push past Ranma only to bounce off his shoulder, taking his entire team

with him to the ground. Ranma was lucky that the fuel gauge hadn't been turned on by that little disaster, or else he would have been soaked by fuel.

As it was, he simply looked down at the group quizzically. "Wait what?"

"We were attacked here by a Confederacy fleet," a much calmer voice announced from nearby. "A rather large one. It overwhelmed our starfighter contingent, and our other capital ships' defenders were forced to retreat. The battle would have been lost if not for the fact that they had no idea whatsoever about the firepower that Zonama itself could use."

Ranma and the others turned to look at the man who had addressed them, finding Langhesi local there, his hands folded in front of him, his eyes closed as he bowed towards them in respect. But his face was certainly not respectful as he stared at Ranma, more cold and aloof than anything else.

"Zonama succeeded in using his force weapon to annihilate the majority of the enemy fleet. And once we were assured that the fleet had been vanquished, Zonama spent several hours cackling about it. You have never heard a sound more disturbing than the mind of a planet cackling. It could be heard throughout the entire ecosystem, from one end of the planet to another, and was not only emotionally disturbing, but physically causing several tremors, changes to the landscape, and prey animals to flee to the farthest woods from its synapse nodes. To say we did not enjoy it is an understatement. And we have you to...," the man sneered, "**thank** for the experience."

Ranma tucked at his pony pigtail thoughtfully, while Shaak nudged him hard in the shoulder. Her face was the universal wife face of 'don't you do it. Don't you do it!' that females of every species had worn similar expressions from one side of the galaxy to another.

But in response Ranma simply smirked, and ignored his wife's attempt to play diplomat. "Honestly speaking, if I could create a Moko Takabisha large enough to destroy an entire enemy battle fleet, I'd probably be cackling too. Although I will admit," he added as Shaak trod on his foot, and Master Yoda nearly broke his gimer stick on his shin, "Though I probably would not have cackled for so long. Five minutes would've probably been enough for me."

The local rolled his eyes, then gestured them all towards one of the waiting vehicles. "Come, I will take you to where you can commune with Zonama."

"We're waiting for Bo-Katan to..." Shaak began, before sighing as Bo arrived from above them, zooming over from her own shuttle on her jetpack to land nearby. "Did you do that on purpose?"

"Do what on purpose? I certainly wasn't watching the whole confrontation through my magnifiers and waiting for everything to be settled," Bo-Katan stated guilelessly too much snickering from Ranma and a sigh followed by a faint smile from Shaak.

Yoda glanced at them all somewhat askance, not seeing the humor in that, before he decided to just let go, and join the others. The odd camaraderie between Bo, Ranma and Shaak was almost as incomprehensible to him, as the idea of taking a mate in the first place. Still, he did not have to understand it to know it existed.

Moments later, they were all piling into the hover car, and zooming out across the landscape. Even at the top speed of the hover car, it took them the better part of two hours to arrive at the command center, which Shaak realized was probably a security feature. This way, if the arrivals were not as friendly as they should be, it would still take them a slog to get to the nearest truly important defensive point. A defensive point that was, furthermore, designed to blend into its environment so much so that when the door to the underground control base was closed, anyone with normal senses would be hard pressed to discover it.

And surrounded by Sekotan trees. Which no doubt hide lots of nasty things and Jentari to boot, Shaak mused, exchanging a knowing glance with Ranma and Kit. The Nautolan snickered a bit, miming a giant hug, while Ranma pointed to his feet and then made a booming noise as the hover car pulled to a stop. Shaak smiled at that and then sighed faintly as Ranma helped her out of the hover car, squeezing his hand gently.

They were quickly shown down and inside the command center, where Bo-Katan became the first Mandalorian to ever meet Zonama Sekot in person, so to speak. As much as a planet-sized brain could meet anyone in person. It was a very strange experience, as was the resultant haggling. Nevertheless, eventually, Zonama admitted that shutting down the Dark Side users the Sith for good, was important enough to allow him to release his rebuilt Coralskipper reserve. "Furthermore, the Sun Destroyers we're building should also probably go with you. We have three of them in orbit close to completion along with *Argent Light*. They will help your capital ship's punch, which you might otherwise lack. I'm actually tempted to say I could go myself, but..."

"No!" came from many a local throat, as practically every Sekotan citizen in the meeting room turned to stare at the cerebral spire in the center. "Lord Zonama, we are at the center of a major logistical system here. We need to keep churning out living starships, the starfighters and the Sun Destroyers, along with the smaller variety we have been designing recently. We cannot simply up anchor and away," said one of the humans, Commodore Morgan.

"And yet at the same time, the sun destroyer's a good idea," Jedi Master Pong Krell said trying to move past the idea of Zonama Sekot making this voyage itself quickly, and trying to ignore the fact that Zonama had muttered something about never having fun, as if he was a little boy denied a treat. *My brain simply cannot handle the idea of a millennia old planetary intelligence acting in such a manner. No, it was a trick of the sound waves in here. Nothing more, nothing less.* "We have enough Jedi personnel on hand, and the Sun Destroyers can carry up to five wings of Coralskippers and create still more on hand if need be. But finishing all three might be impossible."

“... Fine. I think however, we should divert as much of our orbital construction as we can to finishing off the Adventurous. It’s the closest of the three to completion, all of its biological portions have been finished, all it needs work on is its turbolasers, shield nacelles, and engines. That will give you two Sun Destroyers within three days, and as we saw the battle here, those ships are a match for anything the Confederacy has,” Zonama answered in a tone that Ranma identified as petulant and somewhat mulish.

“Since we don’t yet know where we’re going, we can take the time to do that. And fit out Anakin and Kit for their own personal living starfighters, instead of the mass-produced type.”

“I will have you know that my mass-produced type has proven itself far better than those vultures the Confederacy use,” Zonama Sekot said snippily, still sounding a little annoyed that it couldn’t go with them.

Ranma could understand and could admit to some sadness at that himself. Having an entire planet for backup would be kind of awesome. But unfortunately, it wasn’t going to happen. Zonama was simply too important to the ongoing war effort, and for that effort he needed to stay right where it was, where the Mon Calamari could send their cargo ships, where the Jedi could send their people, and where Zonama could in turn send off his own on a known schedule.

“Sense, I do, the answer soon will be coming to us. Further, believe I do that we have in some fashion drawn closer to the item the Sith are seeking. Cut them off we could not, be on their heels we will be once the answer arrives,” Yoda advised.

“In that case, we certainly do have enough time to see to your friends and giving them a few proper ships,” Zonama Sekot announced. Two of the red-skinned Langhesi stepped forward, gesturing Kit and Anakin to follow them. Kit was well known to the locals, having stayed with Master Fay, Ranma and Shaak (and HK) aboard Zonama during its long journey from the other side of the galaxy to this one and afterward. They were pleased to see him once more, even if he did arrive with Ranma, who the locals had issues with thanks to what they called ‘The Cackling.’

Another local stepped forward and gestured the others to follow him. He would take them to the Jedi Temple.

There, Ranma and Shaak were somewhat displeased to learn that they would not be given quarters that had soundproofing, such things not existing within the Jedi Temple. They were at least given their own room, with their padawans being given adjacent ones, which could be accessed by a door in the side of the walls between the two rooms. That was good enough at least. Ranma and Bo-Katan spend a few hours sparring together, Bo-Katan taking the opportunity as she had back on Mandalorian to learn again from Ranma

However, their combat came to an end as Shaak walked up to them, holding up a datapad. "Ranma," she said, mirth quite visible in her voice and expression, "you might want to see this."

Ranma looked over at Bo-Katan, who shrugged, and the two of them powered down their lightsabers, Ranma taking a brief moment to examine the Dark Saber as Bo-Katan put it away. Then he took the datapad, and all thoughts on the strangeness of the Dark Saber left him as he took in the two pictures there. Then he was laughing, handing it over to Bo-Katan, who snickered at the site as well.

She had been told about the seeding process, through which those who wanted their own specially designed and bonded starfighter would go through. And it sounded hilarious. And now, she had proof.

On the screen, Anakin and Kit were both shown side by side. Kit was covered with a significant amount of seeds to be sure, ten or eleven if Ranma was counting them correctly. However, Anakin was literally covered with the things, so much so that Ranma felt offhand he had nearly as many as Ranma had when he and Shaak had gone through the process. This included two of them stuck to the young man's head. The overall image was not helped by the fact that Anakin had been caught looking in the direction of the camera with a face right out of a horror film.

Thankfully for everyone concerned, Zonama's living ship construction had grown in leaps and bounds since the time the Wild Blade had been designed. It was still very limited in how many capital ships that it could create at a time, and there were still only a few seed rooms scattered across the planet. But those were the only real bottleneck remaining. Even the technological ship parts was not a true bottleneck given how much effort the Mon Calamari were putting forth in helping the sentient planet keep up with the demand.

Wish to be fair, it really wasn't. If Zonama had been forced to produce even as many Coralskippers as three CIS Sector fleets needed, it would've found it impossible to do so without significant leadup time. But it could certainly keep up with the demand of the Jedi order, in terms of how many Jedi had been sent there by this point to be bonded to their starfighters.

None of the other Jedi had ever come close to matching the number of seeds that Ranma had, until Anakin came along.

"With this much computational power, with this large a gestalt, we can create something truly special for you!" The ship designer assigned to Anakin said enthusiastically later that day. "Do I take it alright that you believe you are a starfighter pilot?"

"I'm trying not to be insulted by that question," Anakin muttered, while Kit chuckled, "and I'm failing. Yes, I do consider myself a starfighter pilot. I don't want a ship like the Wild

Blade. No matter how maneuverable it is, it isn't as fast or as speedy on the stick as a starfighter could be."

"But it is speed and reaction time that is most important not size."

"Well if something could be close to that size and still as maneuverable as a starfighter, it'd be okay, but it would still be a bigger target," Anakin warned.

"True, but as you must have seen from some of the other specially designed starfighters that the Jedi have already been equipped with, survivability is not an issue for our designs. Thanks to our Mon Calamari fellows, and their amazing shielding philosophy any ship we personally designed for a Jedi will have the modifications necessary to have at least two layers of shields."

"Furthermore," the Ferroan's aide, a Mon Calamari interjected, picking up the conversation as he nodded at his fellow in thanks for his words. "We have the innovative Living Force Armor. Even if they get through your shielding, enemy starfighters or even capital ships will swim through the darkest depths to get through your armor to anything vital."

"Yet somehow the more you are speaking, the larger the ship is getting in my mind and the less I like it. I mean I like a lot of what you're saying, but remember guys, please?" Anakin said, actually clapping his hands together in a prayer position as he looked at the two men across from him. "Small speedy and maneuverable. I willingly give up extra shielding in terms of extra speed, because I prefer not to get hit in the first place."

Watching this from nearby, Shaak leaned over to Bo-Katan whispering, "Why do I think that was a shot across the bows of my and Ranma's piloting skills?"

"Because it was. Although don't look at me to come down to his side of the argument. I'm not that good at piloting a starfighter either. I mean I want my own special ship, for damn sure, it's too good an idea to pass by, but..."

"Actually for you and yours Madam, we have devised an entirely new generation of strike fighter," the chief local ship designer said. "Working with Zonama Sekot, which had enlarged the original Zonama starfighter design. It's a two-person starfighter, with heavier weapons and shielding. If you have any volunteers to..."

"Sir, we are Mandalorians. I could pick up a rock and throw it and I would hit someone who would undoubtedly volunteer to try out your new strike fighter," Bo-Katan quipped with some amusement, shaking her head, knowing that the man couldn't read her expression thanks to her helmet, and as always being amused by it. "Not me though. I want something like the Wild Blade."

This, two days later, was precisely what she got. The ship was stubby almost, about two-thirds of the size of the Wild Blade, but with no internal space, even ki expanded space, devoted to starfighters. This was purely an attack vessel of its own. It almost looked like a manta ray in terms of its wings, but it had next to no head, most of the forward mounting position taken up by four magma cannons, much like the ones in the Wild Blade. It didn't have as many ion cannons, but it had six anti-air guns scattered across its body, and the Mon Calamari specialized three layered shields defending it.

Bo's ship wasn't fast, but it could keep up with the Wild Blade in a straight line and hit almost as hard. Better, Bo-Katan had bonded to nearly as many seeds as Kit had, which meant that when she wore the synapse helmet, she could pilot the ship entirely on her own if she had to, though at limited fighting capacity. She wouldn't have to, however. Kad had volunteered to actually pilot the ship, while she handled the guns.

Kit's ship was built somewhat similarly... in that its overall size matched Bo-Katan's. That was where the similarities ended. Its weapons were almost entirely different, as was its overall appearance. This should have been expected seeing the ship was grown by a sentient planet and its own designers had become bosom buddies with the Mon Calamari. Outside of the Coralskippers and their new, bigger brothers tentatively called Coraljumpers the locals felt that the term mass-produced was a dirty, dirty term.

Where Bo-Katan's ship looked almost like a manta ray without a face, Kit's looked like a somewhat flattened fish flying through space on its side. It had four anti-air guns, two on either of its flat segments. The main punch of the ship was two larger than average magma cannons, like the ones on a Sun Destroyer rather than the four on the Wild Blade. They would not have the range of a turbolaser of equal size, but would have twice as much damage potential. Beyond that, it had four proton torpedo launchers, with a ki-expanded magazine. Two of those were on special pivoted mounts that could lock on and fire at anything in a one hundred and eighty degree angle for each of them paired with two Dovin Basal shooters. The other two were forward facing, much like the two main guns. All of which was only possible because of the ki expanded space technique the Sekotan spaceships made liberal use of, just like on Bo's.

Kit fell in love with it at first sight. It was a very striking craft, and reminded him of several aquatic species from his home planet.

But perhaps the most striking of the ships was Anakin's.

It was smaller again than either Bo-Katan or Kit's, being almost the size of a system patrol craft, a cutter in layman's terms. And whereas the two other ships could almost be called pocket destroyers, his ship only had a single weapon that could be used against an enemy capital ship. His ship was also streamlined, looking almost like a Nabooan yacht, with backwards sweeping wings that covered his entire body from the point of its nose to its engines at the back. On each wing was a single Dovin Basal launcher for defense, with two laser cannons facing forward from the tips of its wings, similar to those found on a vulture fighter, but paired

with the smaller bioweapons of the Coralskippers, the magma projectors in the ship's nose. It had only a single plasma projector to point backward, mounted on a turret that could turn and fire at enemies coming in from above or below depending on how the pilot rotated the ship. It had not the normal three, but four layers of shielding, the blisters spotted here and there across its back in a pattern that did not take away from the overall streamlined appearance of it at all.

On the underside, the ship carried two proton torpedo launchers and a single underslung ion cannon. That weapon was a spinal mounted design, running the full length of the ship. It could hit ships larger than its own for certain, but nowhere near as well as Kit's or Bo's ships, let alone the larger Wild Blade.

That didn't matter to him whatsoever. When he took it through the asteroid field on his trial runs and the synapse hood over his head, the ship became almost like a part of his body. Even Ranma, watching from the bridge of the Wild Blade hat to whistle, impressed. "Damn! He really is a natural pilot, I never had the time to just sit back and watch Anakin's work before. And that ship of his makes the Wild Blade looks slow."

From where she was piloting the ship, Shaak could almost feel the disapproval coming from the Wild Blade's gestalt, irritation at its younger brethren being praised over it. She patted the console almost like it was an animal, and shook her head, saying, "I think I would prefer to pilot a ship that can go toe to toe with capital ships, Ranma. Anakin's ship, even with how fast and maneuverable it is, simply lacks the punch to be able to do that."

"Yeah. We definitely got what we wanted and the Wild Blade, and he definitely got what he wanted too. Very different mission parameters I suppose you could say. But you know what else I could also say. I think that that Sun Destroyer is also ready to go. All we are waiting on is Master Yoda." Ranma said, shaking his head slightly.

They weren't waiting just for Master Yoda, and despite his words, Ranma knew it. Master Yoda had called in some help from the Mon Calamari. Dac had yet to fully put forth the sector's strength to join the Republic Navy elsewhere with in the galaxy, so they had several divisions of capital ships still at home. And as Kit, Bo-Katan and Anakin put their ships through the paces, the Mon Calamari ships began to arrive. Within half a day eighteen calamari refitted heavy cruisers joined the Argent Light and the Adventurous in orbit. They would be joined by sixteen refitted cargo-haulers which would be bringing in a wing of Coralskippers apiece to support the larger Coraljumpers the Mandalorians would be piloting.

Shaak, to the annoyance of Master Krell, took over briefing the captains on their mission. Many of the Mon Calamari remembered the Togrutan woman from the time she had come to Dac to search out a possible youngling, and to take part in a debate about how much they should open their borders to trade with the greater Republic. She was well regarded among the Mon Calamari and Quarren, as was Ranma if in a very different way. And all of the ship captains had been briefed on Zonama, and were extremely intrigued

When a call came in requesting the Jedi to come to Zonama's command center the next day, Kit had to nearly order Anakin to return to Zonama Sekot's surface. The young man had spent the entire time since that first trial in his bonded starfighter, and when they arrived, it was all any of them could do to get a word out as Anakin practically babbled about his new ship. "I'm Going to call it Space Strider, sort of a play on my own name and because we're going to stride the galaxy one end to another, and slice through whole fleets of those damned droids... no offense HK. But oh my god, Space Strider is soooo fast, it's like it can react to the Force just as much as I can, I barely have to think and it's moving, and my sense of the combat space, I'm used to having the Force obviously, but this is sooo much more! No, wait, its more like my mind is more, or like, like everything is moving in slow motion around me. I can use the Force to predict but now I've got soooo much time to..."

Kit shook his head, looking over at Ranma. "Save me?"

"I could toss him out the hover car?" Ranma said helpfully, but then laughed. "Still, I remember the times me and Shaak have used the synapse hoods. It's an amazing experience for sure, and even I'm not as at home in space-type aerial combat as Anakin is. Let him have his moment. Or better..." Kit looked at him while Shaak had dipped into meditation to drown out Anakin's enthusiastic words and Bo-Katan seemed to have muted her helmet's sound system.

But Ranma remained silent for a second then, as Anakin was forced to pause to breath, interjected, "So where do you think you'd be best placed in an assault force, Anakin? You think you could do like the Wild Blade does, draw out the enemy Vultures away from your friends, or just slicing straight through. Your straight ahead speed is good, but I'm worried about how many of your guns you could actually fire on your own."

"Ha! That's just because you haven't tapped into the full ability of your synapse connection to the ship. You and Master Ti, you treat the Wild Blade like it is a guard dog or animal, I don't see it like that. My Space Strider is a partner, a fully realized partner, who I can trust to watch my back. With our joined powers and abilities it's nothing to shoot all our weapons at once," Anakin answered enthusiastically.

"Use your brain, Padawan," Kit began, getting what Ranma was doing. "You can't do everything on your own, despite your Space Strider. That is a lesson you have had rubbed into your face several times. Spread out your feelings, and tell us how you would fight with a full fleet, like the one we have assembled here."

Anakin paused, and as Kit watched with a pleased expression he calmed down, centering himself in the force. Between one breath and the next he closed his eyes and breathed in deeply before opening them once more. When he spoke his voice was much calmer, but edged with that same intense excitement. "I believe that my place would be best served as part of a quick assault on the enemy fleet. If we come out of hyperspace well away from it, I can use that distance to first close then retreat after doing a lot of damage to whatever starfighter group they have. I think that perhaps the best way to use my ship though

would be if we split the whole fleet. First send in myself, our fellow Jedi and the Coralskippers, then pounce on the enemy fleet with our own capital ships and the Coraljumpers. I think with the Space Strider helping I might even be able to control up to a full wing of drones so..."

From there, Kit and Ranma began to push Anakin's tactical mind, with Bo Katan coming out of her helmet-imposed exile to take part. Yoda, for his part, listened with half an ear, and Shaak did the same, only interjecting occasionally, instead feeling out the Force around them. Like Yoda she could sense it, a final moment of decision coming. Much like the battle between Ranma and Sidious, there was a, as Master Windu would have put it, a cleft point coming. A last moment where the Dark Side could overcome the Force. What it could mean, what manner of victory that would be, Shaak was not skilled enough to see. But she could still sense a last trial coming, and found herself slowly tensing, readying herself for it, whatever manner that conflict would come in.

As they arrived, Yoda spoke up for the first time. "Young Skywalker, certain you have been your ship and you, make a difference you could wherever you went. Yet tell me, where best would you be of use?"

Anakin stared back at the ancient master, then to the pleased grins of both Shaak and Kit, simply answered, "Here, Master Yoda. Whatever else, the Force is telling me that my place is beside you all wherever we go from here on. That we are coming to a final decision of our lifetimes."

"Well answered," Yoda said, allowing a smile to cross his face as the hover car pulled to a stop.

Ushered within, they found that a call had come in from Coruscant as well as a massive data packet containing massive amounts of information about how the overall war was going and most particularly what was known of the CIS fleet movements. High Admiral Yularen and Master Fay were both taking part, although at first only Yularen spoke. "The war has shifted in terms of how it is being fought for certain at this point. We know who the enemy's overall commander is now, a Admiral Trench, a Harch with commendable ability, unfortunately. The total number of battles has decreased incredibly."

He gestured, and a map of the galaxy bloomed to one side of his face, slowly shifting onto another screen and then onto a hologram to one side of the command center. "You know, I've not mentioned it before, but how exactly does Zonama see things?" Anakin hissed in Ranma's ear.

Ranma snickered. "Don't look at me man. I think he sees through some of the Ferroans and the tree folk myself."

"Creepy, yet interesting thank you," Anakin snarked, then the two tuned back in as Yularen began to speak.

“As you can see, thanks to our deep penetration assaults on their secret shipyards, the CIS has been forced to expend more effort on defense. This has made them lose their numerical superiority slowly in terms of capital ships on several fronts, although obviously they still have starfighters in monstrous numbers. However, those attacks cost the too and we will need to choose our targets very carefully now. The loss of Kuat is really hampering us at this point. The war in general has become a thing of counter-feint, and body blow. The CIS has yet to land another body blow since their assault on Corellia which smashed nearly sixty percent of their shipyards. But this means that the next major battlefield will be Rendili.”

Now it was Anakin’s turn to explain something to Ranma, who only had ever heard of Rendili before. He nodded as Anakin explained about the world which, while not as large or as quick to build ships as Kuat, had long been a major source of starfighters, yachts and specialized ships. Rendili could turn out starfighters even faster than Zonama Sekot, although the Aethersprites were not quite as good in Anakin’s opinion as the new Coraljumper design.

“You Jedi might be interested to know that your... ally, Thrawn has been sent to Rendili to see to it’s defense. Meanwhile, he and I have planned out another assault of our own.”

The hologram shifted as Yularen explained. “The attacks will first be launched at Bilbringi and the shipyards there, as well as their home system of Sluis Van. The enemy will respond, but depending on their response we have two more fleets ready to be committed to either front. Whichever assault succeeds we will then move in and claim the territory, putting boots on the ground to enforce it while we make use of the shipyards as a staging ground for a campaign along the Rimma Trade Route.”

Yoda was already going over the data that had been sent along with this communication, so it fell to Shaak and Kit to comment on this along with Master Krell. Shaak hummed in thought, then nodded. “I can see that. The Rimma Trade Route feeds their raw resources. We’ve hit their shipyards, so they would assume another assault on that end of their logistics, but this takes them from the other end.”

“It’s a good plan,” Krell said with a nod. “But it will be costly to keep the Sluisi under control.”

“Diplomacy will be tried first, but I fear that there will need to be some boots on the ground. We have been getting reports of minor revolts, on several worlds including among the Sluisi colony worlds. But the problem is the droids, and their loyalty programming,” Fay interjected, speaking up for the first time. “Nonetheless, I have a delegation ready to discuss peace terms with the Sluisi.”

Ranma’s eyes narrowed at that, a faint smirk appearing on his lips as Shaak asked shrewdly, “Peace terms, not surrender?”

“Exactly,” Fay answered her tone a wellspring of tranquility despite what must have been a very vociferous discussion non this point. Both Shaak and Ranma knew the Senate

would be loath to not demand complete surrender from CIS planets, despite the revelations about the Sith. But evidently cooler heads had prevailed.

“Yes, well, Master Windu will be in charge of that campaign, with several other Jedi and admirals helping. I think we can leave it to him. He’s done a magnificent job in reducing the murderously uncaring attitude the clones felt towards their own losses due to the Kaminoan’s societal bias creeping into their hypno-conditioning. He along with several droid commandoes have begun a full revamp of that training, to make certain no other traps have been laid there beyond the sixty-sixth order. But that is it for an overview of the war effort. I will leave you all now to speak to Master Fay. I have a war to run,” Yularen finished briskly, cutting his part of the conference call out at that point.

Kit and Anakin had no interest in the political side of things, and Yoda was busy going through the raw data they had been sent of CIS fleet movements. But Master Krell and Shaak were both interested on what was going on with the Senate. Master Krell was quite respectful as he addressed the elvish woman. “And what has been going on in the halls of power, Master Fay?”

“Quite as bit actually. I won’t cover all we have done in the past week and a half since you left Coruscant, but we have cut into the... what does Senator Organa call it, ah yes, the old boys networks I believe? The number of years a Senator could serve before this was chosen by their sector or planet, but now we have forced a limit of seven years, with no Senator able to run for a second term. There is now a hard limit to the number of active committees that the Senate can have running, and many of the backroom dealing has been excised, held at bay by new laws.”

“All that sounds good, Master Fay, but you’re stringing us along a bit,” Shaak interjected, somewhat amused. “If you and Master Yoda wish to talk shop on everything going on in the Senate, that is fine, but the rest of us lack sufficient knowledge of the Senate’s inner workings to follow much more detail.”

“True,” Fay laughed quietly. “But it does me good to speak to those who have not been colored by years or decades of political maneuvers. Suffice it to say that we have also been following up on everything Master Bnar has pulled from the Sith temple’s computers and Pestage’s brain. Coruscant is now almost entirely clear of Sith agents, although several were able to escape rather than be captured or killed. I am not in on the loop of that portion of the investigation, although three more Senators have been implicated as working with Sidious willingly who had not come forward before.”

She shook her head, her good humor still visible, and a small touch of delight in her voice. “And as for the wider galaxy, we have split Republic Intelligence and Naval Intelligence into three new services. One will be incorporated and work closely with the Jedi Order, and will be in charge of overseeing the other services as well as local intelligence apparatuses.”

Krell looked confused by the fact Fay was so happy about that, while Shaak and Kit both nodded. Knowing Fay quite well they knew that Fay had long believed that serving as judges, investigators and wandering peacemakers was the purest way the Jedi could serve the Force. Once the Sith and their web of control was dealt with, this new Intelligence service would let the Jedi serve in all those roles far better than they could alone.

And her delight in the work done did not stop there. "Furthermore, the Jedi will no longer answer directly to the Senate, and will only take orders from them if the Senate has become aware of large scale threats to the galaxy as a whole. The Jedi will be part of the judicial branch in the main, but there will be allowance for the Force guide us, or specific requests on the planetary or smaller level. We will be advisors, judges, investigators and problem solvers serving the whole of the Republic instead of through the lens of the Senate."

"I can't imagine a lot of the Senate was happy about that," Shaak stated cautiously, although she fully approved of it.

"The Senate as it is now will not exist once this war has ended," Fay answered bluntly. "It had become too unwieldy, too moribund and concerned with it's own power, as well as the good of the Core Worlds which had so many voices within it. No, I will be completely reorganizing the government of the Republic in the next few years. Making the Jedi officially part of the judicial branch, able to dictate law and act with special powers, was but phase one. Phase two will be splitting up the Republic into five different houses of equal power, and then separating the position of Chancellor from all of them into a third branch of government."

"Five? Five different Senates? All on Coruscant?" Ranma asked. He couldn't follow much, but he could tell that was a strange and unworkable idea.

"No. That too will change. But never fear, Ranma. I rather doubt that you will be at any point involved in that process in any way shape or form," Fay answered with a chuckle. "But I have been working with other Jedi Masters who have made a study of the various forms of government, and we have plans. Trust us in this, as I would you, my friend Kit or young Shaak when it comes to daring-do."

Both Shaak and Kit flushed a bit at the good regard of the ageless Fay, while Ranma just gave her a thumbs up. But Krell had a significant question to pose. "Master Fay, what of the Order's own organization? I do not mean our high council and so forth, but our physical organization. Will we retain the separate temples we set up in preparation for our war with the Sith? At this point, it seems unneeded."

"Indeed it is more needed going forward. Too long most Jedi have forgotten the people of the Republic for it's government bodies. If I had my way the temple here on Coruscant would be shut down in favor of spreading to the others on Dor, Zonama Sekot and Kashyyyk among others. But that will probably be a bit too far," Fay answered blithely to the horror of Krell, who

could not imagine that leaving Coruscant would be a good move. “But suffice to say, those temples will remain where they are, and the Order will continue to use them going forward.”

That conversation continued for some time, until interrupted by Yoda. Specifically, Yoda’s chuckles drew all eyes, even Fay’s to him. “Hrhrhrhrhh...”

“Oy old frog, if there’s something funny going on, share it with the class, will ya?” Ranma quipped, eager for the conversation to end. He understood it was important to Shaak, and wasn’t going to interrupt or try to change the subject, the Order being an important part of her life. But that didn’t mean it was all that interesting to him.

“By small things, often tyrants have been toppled,” Yoda announced, looking up from the series of data screens he had been scrolling through to one side of the main conversation. He held up a tiny hand and pointed at one of them in particular. “A report, handed in by a group of independent prospectors, it was. Out in Wild Space they were. Spotted ships coming out of space they did. Hid themselves they did, watched and took scans of the direction the ships jumped out, they did. Have a direction I do for Dominus’s personal fleet at last. Simple people, wanting to do their part, they wished to. Arrogance on the side of the Sith, it was to not be on the lookout for such.”

With that clue, Yoda gathered the Jedi on the planet and together they worked together to plum the depths of the force and discern the distance the Sith fleet would travel along the direction the prospectors had spotted them jumping on. Somehow Yoda knew they would not be deviating from that course again, they were that close to their target.

Searching through the Force along that line, Yoda was eventually once more was taken by a image of a giant diamond shaped monolith of some kind. The further clues of the system, the star and the lack of planets or asteroids, let them narrow it down further. Another day passed as this went on and more ships arrived, before they had the target system: the Chrelythiumn system. No information on the monolith existed in either the Republic or Order records, but the name of the system and the star was known, a minor mystery that had to be set aside for now.

Because not an hour after that discovery, the Wild blade and the allied fleet was powering out into hyperspace, heading for a final confrontation with the Sith.

End Chapter

This really isn’t the chapter I wanted it to be. I had hoped to have more Anakin/Ranma interaction, and follow up on the Mando lady interested in the youngish padawan. I also wanted to have at least the upcoming space battle in this chapter. **But I just didn’t have the time.** RL bit me in the ass every day bar Tuesday this week, and honestly, I was lucky to get done this much. UGH. Still, I estimate even with that folks, we are within two chapters of an end to this fic. WOO. Remember it isn’t a fix-everything fic. The conflict between the Republic

and CIS might still be going on, but Ranma, Shaak Ti and their little crew won't be fighting in it anymore at that point. Anyway, sorry if time dragged in this fic, but everything that happened here needed to be shown.