

I am not Disney, nor am I Japanese.

Chapter 27: Betrayal's Bitter Cost

Within minutes of speaking to Knight Vos, the Wild Blade made orbit over Wayland, while Shaak and Ranma noted the changes as they went. For one thing, the six captured Lucrehulks were all surrounded by what looked like gantries. Strung between small or large repurposed bits of ships, or shuttles that presumably worked as living quarters and workstations, the gantries looked almost like spider webs as they encompassed the Lucrehulks.

"Those must be the Kuat Remnants attempt to create construction yards," Shaak mused. "Very primitive, but I would assume that they work. And if they can get those Lucrehulks we captured up and running, that would be a major boost to Wayland's defense."

Ranma shrugged. "Meh, that's fine and all, but ta me, that looks like a great training idea. I wonder if I could recreate that kind of area down on the ground."

This caused a round of chuckles and hums of agreement from both his new padawan and two of the Mandalorians. Janice and Dralshy'a were standing in the hatch as they watched the sensor information on the cockpit's various screens. The rest of the Wild Blade's coterie were waiting in the main sitting room, not having much to contribute to a peaceful maneuver like this or much interest in it.

Hearing her humming, Ranma glanced over to where Tallisibeth Enwandung-Esterhazy, or just-call-me-Talli, sat. *It's going to take some getting used to knowing that I've got my own little rugrat now expecting me to teach her things, yet at the same time, it feels... Not right exactly, but important that I train someone from the ground up in martial arts. Not just in a spattering of his more advanced techniques, not just in terms of overall combat ability like with the Mandalorians but someone who would become a true student of Anything Goes.*

Although, given how much ki can extend your lifespan, I'm really not in any rush to find one, and I still ain't certain I like the idea. Although I gotta say, it is kind of funny thinking about teaching Talli enough to kick all those naysayers in the teeth. Perhaps literally... heh.

Sensing the somewhat comedic and bloodthirsty bent of her lover's thoughts, Shaak decided to fish around for another topic of conversation before Ranma could voice whatever he was thinking about. "Let's have a quick little quiz Talli, Ahsoka. And you two as well, Fabian, Keala." Hearing this down the hallway, the two youngest Mandalorians blinked, and a few seconds later, the main hologram in the sitting room blinked into life. "Tell us what the sensors

are seeing, and discuss what has been going on both in orbit and throughout the solar system since we left.”

At Shaak’s request, Ranma obligingly put the ship in orbit rather than heading down instantly, watching as the Ardent Defender broke orbit halfway around the planet. “What is the Ardent Defender up to?”

Tune obligingly zoomed in on the sensors in that area, and everyone watched as hundreds, then thousands of small sensors return appeared, while the massive Sekotan Sun Destroyer continued heading out-system. Talli looked confused at the returns, but the others had seen these signals before. “It’s dropping off Coralskippers. But why?” Keala wondered.

“I believe that Master Saa told us at one point that the ship could build Coralskippers given enough time and resources. Remember, it did build our boarding vessels after all,” Shaak reminded everyone who had been part of the earlier battle to defend Wayland. When Shaak finished, Ranma briefly explained about Zonama Sekot and Sekotan ships.

“Wait, wait! I know you said the Wild Blade was alive, and I could feel it too when I came aboard. B, but you’re saying there is an entire Zonama Sekot, a sentient world? And it builds ships?” When Ranma and Shaak both nodded, the young human girl’s eyes sparkled as a small grin came to her face. “Kriff, but that is awesome!”

“I know, right?” Ahsoka answered, tapping her shoulder against the other young padawan’s. “I can’t wait until we can head to Zonama Sekot and I can bond with a ship of my own.”

“Depending on where the hidden Sith is in point of fact, hiding, that could be in our near future,” Shaak remarked before redirecting the discussion back to what the youngsters could tell her about what the sensors were seeing.

“Well, we’ve got mines over here, and over here and...” Fabian’s voice broke off, frowning. “We also got mines around where the Ardent Defender just released those Coralskippers.”

“Tune, could you expand the sensors readout? As wide as possible,” Ahsoka requested politely.

Tune tweetled, rocking in his small alcove, his voice coming out from one of the nearby speakers. For some reason, he had decided to use the voice of an elderly gentleman this time. “Yes, little mistress.”

“Little mistress? Just... No. Please, no. I get teased and taunted enough by HK,” Ahsoka groaned, while Fabian Keala and even Talli snickered, although she at least looked a little apologetic about it when she looked at her new friend.

As the quartet of teens went back to analyzing what they were seeing, Ranma looked over at Shaak, leaning in and whispering at a volume only she could hear. "I know it's kind of late, but are we certain we should be taking four teens along with us? I'm not saying we can't teach them. But if our history is anything to go by, we'll be hurling ourselves into the fires repeatedly. Ahsoka has gotten lucky so far, but who is to say that Keala, Talli and Fabian will get as lucky?"

Fabian and Keala had only joined the crew in Corellia. They hadn't taken part in the land battle on Wayland, nor had Ahsoka. Before that, Ahsoka had been involved in the Wedding Debacle (ver. 2), but that was it.

"I understand your concerns, yet not only is this very late for that kind of concern to occur to you, but Keala and Fabian are also both Mandalorians. They fought in Corellia, which was the largest land-based battle we have been involved in. They would feel immensely insulted if we thought they couldn't handle things," Shaak whispered back into Ranma's ear, shaking her head.

Then she gave him a light kiss on the cheek. "I realize that you are concerned about Talli, but don't be. She is slightly old to be a padawan and has no doubt faced many hardships which have toughened her up not only physically but mentally. Would you have considered taking her on as a padawan if she didn't have the mental fortitude to handle combat? Do not let your sudden fears about being a good Master to your padawan guide your thoughts."

Grumbling at having been seen through so easily, Ranma looked away. "Fine, but ya gotta admit, there's a difference between being trained as a normal martial artist or a Jedi and facing a real war zone."

"There is.," Shaak acknowledged. "And this war has proven that is a danger even for fully trained Jedi. But Talli will have you beside her, as Ahsoka has me, as Fabian and Keala have one another, Janice and all the rest. Nor is it as if this will be your first time training someone so young. You have helped me several times with Ahsoka. And I will help you with Talli if you require it. It is not the Jedi way, but I do believe that in this, like in many other ways," she teased, flicking one finger on the wedding torque on her left lek, "we can break from Jedi tradition."

Ranma smirked and then leaned in, kissing on one of her montrals in response. "Thanks for the pep talk, love." With that, he shook off his concerns like an ill-fitting cloak and turned to the duo of youngsters gathered around the weapons stations. "Well, rugrats, what have you found out?"

The result was quite a lot, although Talli and both Mandalorians first asked about what a rugrat was and then became very annoyed at Ranma for the term. In particular, Keala told Ranma precisely where he could shove that idea. "Fabian and I have gone through all the rights

of the Mando'ade, we are blooded kriffing warriors, and you will not talk to us as if we are kids, you pigtailed dick!"

This, obviously, simply meant Ranma was going to use the term as often as he could until she stopped responding to it. Ahsoka knew that and might have said something but decided not to. *Keala could do with some of her ego torn down a bit anyway.*

At that point, the conversation returned to Shaak's little assignment to the youngest quartet. First, the newest thing on the sensors was a group of cruisers escorting several freighters coming in from out-system. Three squadrons of two cruisers each for the defense of an equal number of freighters was overkill, but these freighters were huge, not quite as large as Lucrehulks, but still in the same general weight class.

Something of a ship nut, Keala recognized them as Kuati in-system freighters. "They do have hyperspace capable engines, but they rarely use them, and they are slow, some of the slowest known in space."

"But it makes sense that freighters like that are so important, doesn't it?" Talli mused, staring at the planet ahead of them, tugging at her new padawan braid, which Ranma had helped with a few hours back. "This planet might have a lot of natural resources but it also doesn't have anything in the way of infrastructure. Setting up that infrastructure will take months and you'd need resources to do it."

"Right, although with Kuat doing the building, I doubt the orbital infrastructure will take that long. But with those six cruisers included, there are twenty-eight of them in the system. And look, six more are heading out with other freighters. It's a convoy system," Ahsoka mused. "I'd wager that we're looking at the entirety of the Kuat Remnant fleet here. The only ships I do not see that could possibly have been part of the evacuation are people transports."

"I'd wager you're right. This planet doesn't have much in the way of infrastructure, and there's no way in hell that the Jedi and the Nova Guard would allow civilians to crowd up the mountain. So, they'd need to send construction crews ahead to build housing," Janice mused, nodding at the two youngsters sitting in the main room with the rest of them. "What else?"

"Thirteen dreadnought-class cruisers," Fabian answered, pointing to where they were clustered together right over the mountain, whereas the other cruisers were scattered across the planet's orbit, mainly around the equator.

He would've gone on, but Ranma groaned so loud that everyone turned to look towards the cockpit or him respectively. "I am still having serious issues with ship nomenclature and you know, size comparisons and everything. A Lucrehulk is the same weight class almost as a star dreadnought, right? But it wasn't called one before the war and still isn't now because of the difference in firepower. A star dreadnought is a ship size, but there is a dreadnought **class**? Cruisers in one nation are called frigates in another, and only Corellia uses the term light

cruiser, and those are really destroyers in their combat doctrine, which no one else uses and ugghh...”

Amused, Shaak patted Ranma on the back as he slumped down theatrically. “I know. Why, it is almost as if there were several thousand different types of sentients in the galaxy, with far, far more worlds. All of which have developed their own terminology.”

“I think I haven’t been hard enough on you recently. I’m going to make a point of doing just that in our next sparring session,” Ranma mused, glaring through half-slitted eyes towards Shaak. “I’ve got a lot of annoyance to get out, so prepare for a pounding.”

Shaak smiled beatifically, replying that she could take anything he dished out, while every other adult on the ship looked at one another in second-hand embarrassment. Janice whispered to Cro, “Do they know what that sounds like?”

“Sounds as if we should be thankful their room is sound-proofed,” The Nova Guard captain snickered in his helmet, then said loudly, “Unintentional double-entendres aside, continue your report, you four.”

“Lots of mines. Lots of, well... I don’t know what they are. I’ve never seen them before. They look like weather satellites or just sensor buoys, but there’s so many of them in clumps close together.” Keala sounded frustrated in her helmet, crossing her arms. “Although I know that’s another group of Coralskippers among them. Around two thousand strong too.”

“Those would be single shot satellites. Quad laser, turbolaser and ion cannons slaved to a single shot worth of battery power, so to speak,” Shaak supplied. “Normally, you would be in orbit over planets which don’t have enough industrial capacity to build starfighters, let alone capital ships. They are seen as a cheap and not very strong substitute for starfighters and space stations in terms of local defense.”

“Interrogative note: indeed, such systems were around even when I was last online. But if they powered down, they’re almost as undetectable as mine. If we didn’t have the IFF codes, they’d be invisible to us as well,” HK mused from where he was sitting with the others in the main room.

“And the Coralskippers are there to make certain that they’re not spotted!” Talli said. The others in the cockpit all looked at her, and she shrugged. “Well, those starfighters are living ships, right? That means they’re probably hard to see on the radar or anything like that. No way would they be targeted by the single-shot satellites. And once powered up and moving, they would represent a visible threat to the enemy. They’d probably move out, attack, retreat through that area, turn it bay and then...”

“And then satellites would get involved at point-blank range, which is really the only range there any good for,” Dralshy’a finished enthusiastically, her voice carrying over the

intercom as HK's had. "MM, I love the thought of violence in the morning. Nice analysis Je'dai girl."

"And those Coralskippers are all drones. Even if they are destroyed, we don't lose anyone," Ranma mused, also looking at his padawan thoughtfully, who was staring down the hallway, seemingly somewhat annoyed at the 'girl' comment from the peanut gallery. "Good instincts, Talli."

Turning back to him, Talli shrugged, pushing down her irritation with ease. "I've always been good at noticing things like that. Maybe because I don't have much Force power, I am used to straining myself so much that I am better at listening to tiny hints from it?"

She yelped as Ranma reached over and flicked her forehead with a finger, causing Talli to stumble back, rubbing her forehead with both hands. "None of that. You might not have much power in the Force, kid, but who cares? So long as you use what you've got to the best of your ability, that's all anyone can ask. You've got the drive, and you've got combat instincts. I've seen them too. Don't put yourself down."

Shaak held a hand to her mouth as she coughed delicately, speaking low enough that only Ahsoka and Ranma could hear her mutter, "Pot calling kettle, Ranma?"

Ranma mock-glared at her for a moment then voiced the thought of taking Talli and the others out to explore the jungle when they landed. "After all, I don't really have anything to add on the strategic or computer-breaking front... except physically, you know, actually breaking them. And when it comes to space tactics, Shaak knows just as much about my abilities and our ship's abilities as I do."

The Nova Guard and the older Mandalorians instantly volunteered to go with him since they wouldn't have much to add on the strategic or slicer front. Then Ranma was guiding the ship down into the atmosphere, while Shaak pointed out something they had all missed: that the Kuat Remnant had already begun to land people on the planet. They were only doing so on a few islands around the equator, but it was a start. "And recall that these people are Kuati. They know how to treat a planet and quickly build up their industrial capacity in orbit. Those gantries we saw are only the beginning."

"Will they have enough people to man the Lucrehulks? Or will they have to rely on the vast amount of droid assistance that the Confederacy was using?" Dralshy'a inquired.

"Actually, they probably do have the number of people. Whether or not they are trained for those tasks is another matter. Remember, much of the Remnants are simply refugees rather than ship personnel. Regardless, they might be quite grateful for the space those Lucrehulks could provide if nothing else," Shaak answered. "I just hope they get those Lucrehulks repaired before the next Confederacy attack."

Coasting into a landing in Wayland's large hanger, the Wild Blade settled down next to the ship that Quinlan had arrived in. As they did, Shaak noticed that much of the hanger was taken up by the boarding shuttles the Ardent Defender had made prior to the last battle here. It looked as if several more had been added to the six they had used then. And that there was some work being done by the mountain's construction droids on several of them. *I wonder what they are up to?*

Quinlan himself was waiting by his ramp as they settled down, talking to Anakin and... Ranma blinked. "That droid looks familiar. Isn't that the droid I convinced to kind of help me when I invaded that Lucrehulk? What is it doing down here?"

"Let's go find out," Shaak said, although she pointed at Anakin. "I will, however, wager a good message that it is something to do with Anakin."

Ranma might have answered to this quip that he was always up for giving Shaak a massage, although they would probably have to kick everyone off the ship if they wanted it to go in the direction such things they normally did between them. But HK spoke up before he could. "Antagonistic observation: the dirty little clanger is unimportant. So what if Ranma was able to knock its circuits lose so much that its programming changed to put self-preservation over everything. It still has that stupid, pathetic, mass-produced piece of trash for a body!"

"No, HK, tell us how you really feel," Ranma drawled as he gestured everyone out of the cockpit.

Anakin stood beside the droid, speaking quietly to Quinlan, although he broke off as Ranma and the others came out of the Wild Blade. He stood silent, waiting as Quinlan greeted them, bowing from the waist, his hands in the long sleeves of his Jedi robe. "Before anything else, I must thank you, Master Ti, and you, Ranma. Years ago, you helped my former padawan, Aayla. I deeply regret the emotions that forced the Masters to make the decision to retrain me, but I am more than grateful that you two were there to help her when I could not."

While Ranma simply held out his hand to the other man and shook his hand firmly, Shaak nodded and replied that any Jedi worth his or her lightsaber would have helped Aayla, regardless of anything else. However, most of her concentration was on a flash of some kind of disturbance she had momentarily sensed in Quinlan's mind. Resentment perhaps? *But then again, if anyone has cause to feel such a thing towards the Jedi Order, Quinlan is that man.*

"The Order was deeply in the wrong there, Quinlan. They should've listened to your concerns. They should have listened to Aayla's concerns before sending her on that mission. A near tragedy could have easily been avoided if they had. Tell me, did they ever apologize to you?" Shaak inquired. "I would hope, but given some of the hidebound Masters within the Order..."

Quinlan's lips twisted and he shook his head. "Master Koon did, as did Master Yoda, although they did so as individuals. None of the rest of the Council ever apologized to me, something that I still, well, I cannot say I resent it. That is not the Jedi way. But I will say that they lost much of my trust at that point.

He turned away, staring towards the distant entrance to the hangar. "Strangely enough, Master Bulq helped me rebuild some of that trust, along with my own Master, Tholme, and Master Saa. Looking back, I wonder if Bulq was beginning to doubt the Order himself even then. If that perhaps opened him up to the dark side? Or was it Vaapad that opened him to the dark side so long ago, so subtly none of us noticed?"

"That is something I castigate myself on now, just as I do about not being with my Master on the mission that caused his death. I was deep in the Outer Rim at the time, hunting down a rumor that the Trade Federation was flaunting the ruling against them about building up their fleet, and while I found that evidence..." He sighed, shaking his head. "A Jedi should not allow regret to color his mind, but even so, I do doubt myself sometimes."

"Good. Asking and finding answers to your questions, even about yourself, is always good," Shaak supplied with a nod, mollified now that she had seemingly correctly identified the earlier flash of resentment and its source. "So long as you do so with an open mind and an acknowledgment that you cannot be anywhere or solve everything. Analyzing your actions and that of the Force will lead you to a greater understanding of both."

"Not to change the subject but changing the subject, what are you doing with the droid Anakin?" Ranma asked, pointing at the droid. "I ask because I think HK is about to burst with curiosity."

"Annoyed riposte: Master, you should know by now. I make meatbags burst and otherwise die in various interesting and messy ways. I do not myself burst. Conciliatory addendum: although I will admit to some curiosity. Specifically, if I can use this droid as target practice for the day. That is all that these mass-produced clankers are good for."

The droid instantly retreated, holding up its hands in surrender. "Please, no. I would rather not like to be fired upon today. Or sliced, or exploded, or torn asunder."

Snickering a bit, Anakin patted the droid on the shoulder. "Scaredy-cat here and I have been doing some experimenting."

"Scaredy-cat?" Shaak asked, while Talli and Ahsoka both snickered.

"Heh, it's a very accurate name. Anyway, I was fascinated that Ranma somehow broke Scaredy's self-preservation programming so much that it replaced his loyalty programming to the Confederacy personnel aboard the ship. I am wondering if we can somehow create a virus to do that very thing, then somehow upload it into a Lucrehulk or command transport's system,

and have it downloaded into the connected droids. That's a lot of steps, obviously, but even so, it could get past their firewalls since it isn't a direct assault on their programming, just a reformatting of their priority list," Anakin explained. "Give me a few weeks, and I bet I can do it. Otherwise, he's got no weapons and no access to the computers in the mountain, so Scaredy isn't a threat."

HK cocked his head to one side, thinking. "Thoughtful analysis: that sounds both possible and quite amusing too. I approve. Especially if we are somehow able to do it to whole army groups. Giddy amusement: think of it, armies of droids attacking, attacking, finding they cannot damage me or Master and then just fleeing in every direction!"

"In that case, the logical choice would be to either surrender outright or turn on our former masters. Showing we are useful and that Ranma should not go to the trouble of destroying us would have a much higher chance of survival than merely fleeing, sixty-one percent chance versus nineteen percent in fact," Scaredy-cat answered.

"Huh, that sounded rather practiced," Ranma observed.

Scaredy-cat looked at him, nodding his thin, ant-eater-like head. "Roger, Roger. It would not be intelligent or logical to not consider various means in which my existence could be threatened."

Snickering a bit and feeling proud of himself, Ranma ruffled Talli's hair, gesturing the rest of the crew towards the open hanger doors. "Alright, you lot, get moving. Shaak, we'll be back by sundown. After that, unless you think we can offer help here in the mountain, we might want to put some distance between us and the mountain for a bit."

Shaak nodded but looked around thoughtfully. "I note that the former Sith apprentice is no longer here?"

Anakin nodded, while Quinlan's eyes widened, and he looked between them in some surprise. "Yes, Sev'rance went with the Mandos back to Mandalore. Bo-Katan was quite... insistent on it. She said that since Sev'rance wanted to join the Mandos, she was their responsibility."

"Oh, kriff it!" Dralshy'a cursed, turning and stomping away angrily deeper into the mountains, ignoring Janice's attempts to get her attention.

"Er, excuse me, but could someone explain what that is about? A Sith apprentice?" Quinlan asked querulously.

"A Sith apprentice was part of the fight on Corellia, saw the battle was lost and hid away. She got some kind of Force-assisted emotion high during the Mandos victory party afterward and stowed away to see if she could feel it again. Sev'rance then decided to join the

Mandos to get more of it, while Dralshy'a has a thing for blue-skinned people," Ranma explained rapid-fire, then walked off hurriedly, having no interest in explaining how Sev'rance acted around him. "You can get the longer version from Shaak."

Rolling her eyes and not showing any of the relief she felt at the woman not being around any longer, Shaak gestured Quinlan to follow her deeper into the mountain. "I will explain along the way. Suffice to say that life around Ranma is never dull."

About an hour later, Ranma had led the rest of the *Wild Blade's* crew through the defensive zone around the mountain, idly noting that it had been enlarged and enhanced in the time since the battle. Another hour later, they had left the last sight of the off-worlders behind, and Ranma found a small area dominated by larger trees without much in the way of underbrush where he turned.

"Alright, Janice, Cro, I want you two to work on a few things: training for boarding actions and team-based combat. I'll work out with you after I work the youngsters into the ground," Ranma ordered. "You're close to building up your ki to the point you can consciously use it, Janice, let's see if we can push that through my month's end. But leave Fabian and Keala here."

Without any discussion, Cro and the Nova guard instantly backed away, moving through the trees to one side on the hoverbikes they had taken from the hanger bay. Janice and Kad followed, leaving Fabian and Keala behind, much to their protests.

"Don't bother. You two will get something more out of this than what they are up to. If you still have the energy, you can join the training later. For now, let's see how well you four can work together. All of you attack me." Ranma gestured, then stood there, his hands in his pocket as he stared at the remaining quartet.

Fabian groaned, while Keala sputtered. Ahsoka said nothing, just moving to the side and activating her lightsaber, much to Talli's surprise. "Um, isn't this going to be really unfair?"

"Yeah, to us," Fabian grumbled as he blasted off on his jet pack to one side of Ranma, dodging around trees trying to hide his current position. "Spread out!"

Talli was about to protest but then remembered her master – oh, and didn't that still feel weird, but in a good way – was Ranma, the chaos causer, the droid destroyer, the... well, there were a lot of rumors about Ranma really. Many of which obviously did have some reality to them. "Oh. We're going to get our rears kicked, aren't we?"

"Yep," Ahsoka answered before charging in.

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Quinlan Vos, or, as he was known in certain rarefied circles, Agent Invictus, sent a glance at the wedding torque on Shaak Ti's lek. She wasn't flaunting it and had apologized for wearing it to Obi-Wan when he pointed it out. But Obi-Wan and Kit Fisto were her friends, and Kit laughingly pointed out she did not need to worry about seeming to be arrogant in front of them. Yet Quinlan, who had waved off the issue had barely kept his anger under control.

Why not me? Why not Aayla and me? Why could we not have the chance to make such happiness as I see Shaak has found? Why!? The padawan bond could have been transformed into something more if only the decrepit, foolish Order didn't...

With an internal shake of the head, Invictus banished those thoughts, making certain his Force Cloak was still in place so that none of the other Jedi could feel how Dark his presence had become. *Mind in the game, Quinlan. You have a job to do, and you need to do it. And remember to keep one step ahead of Master Saa. If there is anyone who can perhaps feel the Dark Side within me, it is her. To say nothing of K'Ruhk. Thankfully my childhood friend is busy with the Kuati and the natives, but his ability to see through Stealth and Cloak is worrisome as is his personal knowledge of me.*

"...So the Kuat Remnants brought in their own slicers, several hundred strong, so much so we had to set up separate rooms for them around the central computer center. To add a bit of security, we broke up their teams and have assigned one Jedi and one Nova Guard Slicer to every six Kuati. The teams rotate in and out day and night," Obi-Wan said as Quinlan turned his attention back to the moment. Thankfully Quinlan hadn't been out of it for very long, so he hadn't missed much of the presentation.

"Very good, but I would suggest adding a padawan and Knight pair just in case, and have the Nova Guard vet the backgrounds of the Kuati slicers." Yurrick indicated that was possible, and Shaak nodded. "In that case, can we please turn to the overall strategic and local tactical pictures? What we saw coming in was intriguing."

Obi-Wan nodded. "The Confederacy isn't quite ready to attack us here just yet. The Ojoster Sector, especially Balmorra, is embroiled in multiple small-scale battles and blockades. Well, small scale for this war, anyway. Republic Intelligence passed on that Grievous is in overall command of this sector and several others. He is the same admiral who led the attack on Corellia and the decimation of Kuat. Several systems have lost all of their orbital infrastructures, but Balmorra is still holding out, which has apparently begun to infuriate him if our spies' reports are accurate."

"From the combat reports, Balmorra has built up a defense in depth, aided by it's incredible in-system infrastructure. The three asteroid belts have been heavily mined and seeded with defensive installations, and all three planets have a lot of planetary-based defenses. Balmorra also has a lot of surprises when it comes to defensive installations, various weapons systems, designs and so forth on the various planets that makes them a far tougher

nut to crack than most,” Yurrick elaborated. “Beyond that, there are too many demands on the local Confederacy forces to let them pull together a new assault fleet quickly.”

The two of them explained several aspects of the local sector’s conflict, pointing to how Grievous was unable or unwilling to pull troops off of the interdiction around Balmorra. But eventually he would simply be ordered to do so. While not important strategically, Tyrannus would obviously know exactly how important Wayland was to the Sith cause and would not take no for an answer for long. They had a grace period, but nothing more. An attack would come, it was only a matter of when. And when it did, it would be overwhelming, whatever defense the Jedi and their allies could contrive.

Shaak frowned. “How prepared are we to stop infiltration-type assaults? Did not Grievous attempt to hide a subtle smash and grab operation under cover of his main attack on Kuat?”

“I can say with certainty that the Sith’s intelligence apparatus is incredible,” Quinlan interjected smoothly, nodding to Obi-Wan, who passed him the computer’s controls. While he was friendly with Shaak, Obi-Wan was more likely to notice something off about his old friend than the Togrutan. “I was sent here not just to see if I could help with slicing the computers but also because I know how to spot the signs of someone using Force Stealth, just in case. I also know the tricks that spies of all sorts use to hide landing, signals, etc. Specifically, the Confederacy has a few tricks. And the Sith too also have developed a pattern when they wish to put pressure on someone. When your people look at the slicers background...”

From there, Quinlan spoke for some time, bringing up a few examples of records, both public and private, that had been changed by the Sith to hide their involvement with someone. He then moved on from there, speaking about the number of droid types occasionally used to infiltrate behind enemy lines. “But do not become tunnel blind on this, the Confederacy do have living saboteurs they can use as well. They tend to be harder to pin down than the droids.”

“Excellent,” Marshal Yurrick nodded. “I will hand over this information to our analysis teams. Beyond that, I would like you to look over our exterior defenses and our patrol schedules. Then our signal protocols.”

“Done. Anything I can do to help end this war,” Quinlan answered instantly, getting a nod from Obi-Wan. “And when it comes to the battle, I think I would be of more use on the ground than in the sky. My Starborne isn’t made for fighting but espionage, and while I am a somewhat decent pilot, I certainly am not up to Master Fisto’s level, let alone someone like the wonder-boy, Anakin or Master Tiin.”

The others smiled at the little joke, while Shaak had to sigh internally. Master Tiin flatly refused to be in charge of anything larger than a fighter wing, despite being the most senior Master in the system thanks to his position on the High Council. That left Shaak, Saa and the

others to pick up the slack. *And K'Kruhk is no help thanks to the ongoing need to make certain there is no conflict between the native races and the Kuati. I could wish they had waited to try and put down roots on the planet itself, though I understand the need.*

From there, the discussion turned to the rest of the tactical side of things. "Master Saa should be here to talk about the space-based side of things, but what we have decided on is a take on the defense-in-depth concept done in space, with a massive helping of subterfuge on the side. After all, we don't need to worry about civilian construction or traffic, so..."

Listening intently, Quinlan Vos, Agent Invictus of the Sith Order, noted everything he was hearing. There were far too many Jedi around right now, eighty Jedi having arrived since the last battle. Most of them remained within the mountain at present, working up on the Coralskippers or slotting into command roles with the Nova Guard. But come the battle, Invictus would have a chance, as the vast majority of them would be gone. *Me and my dozen little friends will have our shot then. I will need to keep away from Saa and K'Kruhk, and make certain no one else boards my ship, but that last bit should be easy enough.*

Yet judging by the sheer number of slicers here, we are quickly running out of time. Master Tyrannus must launch his attack soon, or else the true Master will be discovered, and my... our vengeance will never be accomplished! His mind roiling with fury at the thought once more, Quinlan pushed his anger down, deep under his Force cloak, vowing to do whatever he had to do to make certain that didn't happen. *The Sith will rise and I will have my prize!*

OOOOOO

Master Fay opened her eyes as she felt the ship come out of hyperspace. Glancing at the readout, she saw what she knew she would, that the ship had finally arrived in Corellia. It'd taken a significant number of jumps to get here from the extremely obscure Outer Rim system where they had met with Mitth'raw'nuruodo, even with Fay doing the jump calculations.

I had a remarkable amount of trouble finding our course forward, she reflected. Is that because of the difficulty of this task or because of the swirling, whirling dervish of uncertainty that Ranma's recent actions have created in the Force?

That was a rhetorical question, and the elf-like Jedi Master snorted in a very unladylike manner as it occurred to her. Fay had piloted her previous yacht back and forth through dense nebulae with greater ease than she had made this trip. Whatever Ranma was up to of late had created a literal vortex in the future to her senses, which had somewhat carried over into the present-Force.

It made seeing the future practically impossible because the future was so in flux. This was a good thing, Fay thought since before this, the future beyond a few months had been clouded to even the wisest of Jedi. But in that case, it'd been veiled from their sight by the Dark Side. Now, while the Dark Side was still ascendant, its power had been reduced tremendously.

And from what little sense I can get looking into the future, that ascendancy is also in danger if they can just hold on. And when it breaks...

Shaking her head at that, Fay's lips twitched as she thought about her latest mission. *While Ranma is a force for good, he is a chaotic one. And here I am, hoping to introduce a... let us call Thrawn an order loci instead of a chaotic one.* Fay's smile widened slightly at her bit of mental wordplay there, knowing that Thrawn would call himself a being of order if the point was posed to him in a way he could understand. *Although I wonder what will happen when he and Ranma meet in person. They are such polar opposites, will they implode like matter and antimatter? Or will they simply circle around one another, like two polarized magnets pushing at one another but not hard enough to fling one another away?*

As four squadrons of local LAF 250 starfighters zoomed towards her, Fay sent out her IFF code and a moment later was speaking to one of the Space Control officers regulating the incredibly busy space lanes all around the system.

After a brief conversation, Fay was pleased to learn that master Yoda was here in Corellia. He had come out here to coordinate with the Green Jedi on their further amalgamation into the Order two days ago. But in reality, it had been decided to make Corellia the center of the Order's military efforts, those that were not intimately connected to the Republic's own, at any rate. This was actually quite a significant operation, although master Fay wasn't entirely clear on its size. *While I have long known of the Sith problem, beyond Zonama Sekot and his efforts, I do not know everything the Order has been up to.*

The Space control officer sent out a flight plan, and after ordering the astromech droid to follow it, Fay stood up, leaving the cockpit. In the freighter's main sitting area, Fay found Aayla talking to Thrawn as she knew she would. The two of them were extremely subtle in their attraction to one another, but they did tend to gravitate towards one another when Fay wasn't around. *Not that there is anything physical going on between them as yet. But the desire is certainly there.*

"Mitth'raw'nuruodo, Aayla, we have arrived. I hope you are prepared to prove your capabilities, Admiral."

Thrawn smiled at the mode of address and the gentle teasing note in the older Jedi's words. "I am indeed prepared. Every time we stopped, you let us pick up all the data we could that was readily available on the war effort. I have a general idea of the overall picture and several suggestions and three overall strategies that the Jedi Order can follow to decisively change the outcome of this war."

"Change the outcome of this war," Aayla repeated, staring across the table at her conversational companion. Thrawn's red eyes flicked to her, and Aayla's own blue eyes locked on them. Others might've been disconcerted by that gaze, the cool, aloof expression. But Aayla

had never been disconcerted by it and now was very good at seeing under the surface of that gaze. "You chose those words quite purposefully."

"I did. Alone, the Order **cannot** win this war outright. The Confederacy is too large for that. However, bringing the war to an end can mean many different things, and the Order can change that conclusion," Thrawn elaborated, his lips quirking into a smile.

Aayla returned the smile with a wider one, while Fay nodded thoughtfully and asked if they wanted to join her in the cockpit. There, Aayla waved Thrawn into the seat by the sensor equipment, standing behind both him and Master Fay in the hatch leading into the cockpit. There, she reflected once more on the man that Master Fay and she had gone so far out into the Outer Rim to find.

No longer was she questioning that trip, if indeed, she had ever really doubted Master Fay's vision, her ability to read the Force. Nor did Aayla doubt that as a military mind, Thrawn was worth the trip. No, what the Rutian Twi'lek was thinking about, although it somewhat pained Aayla to admit, was the attraction between the two of them.

I'm not willing to close myself off to the idea of having a relationship with someone, With Shaak and Ranma as examples. Although I will need to think about it very carefully and consults with Master Yoda or perhaps Shaak herself if I can. And I will have to retake my oath in the Old Way if it comes to it. But before that, I must be certain that this is not only a physical and intellectual attraction between us but an emotional one on both our parts.

Given how emotionally contained Thrawn was, the idea of splitting her feelings into three separate categories simply made sense. Aayla knew that she was intellectually interested in Thrawn and vice versa. The two of them had taken part in dozens of fascinating discussions and games of dejaric. Their conversations ranged from philosophy to art, military matters, tactics and strategy, the various lightsaber forms and hand-to-hand styles that Thrawn had come into contact with, and numerous other topics. Those discussions included Master Fay most of the time, but sometimes they didn't. Aayla also knew that intellectual attraction went both ways, since Thrawn had often sought her out for those discussions, not just Fay.

As did, very obviously, physical attraction. Aayla knew that she was extremely attractive. More than once on missions, Aayla had used that attraction and once had been horribly burned by it at one point. Aayla could easily sense when someone else was attracted to her. The reverse was also true. Aayla had pushed past her horrible ordeal at the hands of the Jabba on Tatooine years ago with Master Unduli's help, and Thrawn was not the first man she had felt attraction toward since. Master Fisto was the most prominent such, the only one she had really considered acting upon her attraction with. But the Force had seemingly worked against them, keeping the two of them from meeting often enough for that interest to go anywhere.

Emotionally? That was the question. Thrawn was so self-contained, so dry and analytical, that it almost seemed impossible that he could feel the depth of emotion that Shaak

felt towards Ranma or vice versa. A depth of emotion Aayla still remembered all too vividly thanks to traveling with them to Jabim to rescue Fay.

And Aayla had promised along with Master Fay to not try to use her force powers on him. She could still sense flashes of emotion from him, amusement, concern, attraction... especially when she had to bend over for something in his presence, to her amusement. It seemed as if Thrawn definitely had a 'preference.' But Aayla did not consciously reach out to attempt to feel his emotions. Something Thrawn had given her permission for. And even though she knew that Thrawn lacked even a hint of Force ability and thus would not know if she did, Aayla had kept that promise. To do otherwise would not be honorable.

This all meant that if the two of them wanted to deepen their relationship, the ball was very clearly on Thrawn's side of the court. *If Thrawn wants something to grow between us, he will have to make the first step. Which will be a tremendous indication of whether or not there is an emotional connection between us. Thankfully he's not the kind of man to have a casual dalliance.*

Her thoughts on Thrawn broke off as he hummed thoughtfully, tapping his fingers together. "It would appear as if the repair and refit priorities of the local space industry have changed recently. Or are they always so disorganized around here?"

"Corellians are very... enthusiastic about ship construction. They are also extremely good at adaptation and build a certain level of adaptability into much of their construction," Fay answered, looking over at the sensors. "Aayla, what are we looking at here?"

Aayla looked at the readouts and pointed out the local space defense forces, the few remaining groups of mothballed ships being brought in to be refurbished. Most of these, and indeed a large portion of the out-system industry, had been destroyed in the Confederacy attack on the system. "As for how muddled everything is, I think that is because of the lengths the locals went to defend their worlds. Huge swaths of space have been turned into flight hazards, which I believe was deliberate on the local's part."

She then pointed to various areas of the system, counting out forty-nine katana fleet ships currently in slips throughout the system. Only a few were in orbit over Corellia Prime. It was the only world whose orbitals had been directly engaged in the previous assault, and that damage had been tremendous.

"These ships are not local. They are part of the Jedi's secret war effort, the Katana fleet. It looks as if Master Yoda decided to bring in the majority to Corellia for refit."

"Hmm, will Corellia alone be able to man those ships? And how long before they are refitted?" Thrawn asked quickly, looking at the information Aayla had quickly booted up on the ships in question. Not the biggest, not the toughest, but tough enough, strong enough. They

were good all-around vessels, and if their weapon systems could be upgraded, certainly a match for the midrange ships of either the Republic or the Confederacy.

"I don't know enough about local conditions to tell you that last bit. But I would say... Maybe a month?" Aayla paused momentarily to run some numbers before giving her verdict, whistling quietly as she did. "By the Force, it's one thing to know that Corellia has as many construction yards and building ability as Kuat and Rendili, quite another to actually watch the whole system in action, turned to a single goal. I would say as long as the system isn't attacked again and resources keep flowing in, refitting those ships won't take very long at all."

And that is only the first allotment! There must be another... eighty, maybe a hundred more waiting to be brought in? Unlike Fay, Aayla had been told about the Katana fleet, and researched more about it. Due to the need to keep the effort a secret, the Order's attempts to reactivate and spread the Katana Fleet around its allies had not fared very well. Only sixty or so had been scattered across the Republic by this point. They had come as a surprise in more than one combat zone, but Corellia could quickly turn out the rest of the fleet. "They, those ships could serve as the start of an offensive buildup, right?"

Thrawn looked at her thoughtfully, nodding in both acknowledgment of her point and at Aayla's speed at coming up with that answer. "Excellent. Then let us hope that your fellow Jedi are willing to listen to my suggestions."

"Suggestions is a good way to put it," Fay reminded Thrawn, causing him to nod once more. "Remember that you will need to prove your abilities in a set computerized naval engagement to retain your rank. And the High Council will undoubtedly want to interrogate you as well. And not just on your competence to command."

"Understood. I have decided to aid the Jedi, Master Fay, as you too have made a promise to me," Thrawn answered, his tone mild, although his choice of words was perhaps a bit too pointed to go with the tone.

Regardless, Fay simply nodded, her entire being radiating both purpose and a sense of serenity. "I did. And I will keep to it. If we can remove the Sith and bring this war to a close, I will promise that the Republic will change. I will help it do so."

Two hours later, the three of them exited the freighter to find Master Yoda, Master Windu, and two of the other High Council members waiting for them on the Green Temple's personal landing pad.

Yoda smiled up at Fay, and the two of them bowed to one another, the other Masters following suit in the Jedi manner, their hands deep into the sleeves of their Jedi robes as they bowed slightly from the waist. Thrawn was amused to note that beyond the short green one, the Jedi waiting for them bowed slightly deeper than Master Fay did, and Fay looked somewhat embarrassed by it.

A Jedi-style tease, perhaps? An acknowledgment of her seniority, which Fay feels she is unworthy of because all of them are Masters and thus of equal rank? Or perhaps Fay does not feel as if she should be given any special treatment, it is the Force that should be honored? Something along those lines anyway. Whoever said the Jedi lacked a sense of humor did not study their body language nearly enough.

Setting that mild amusement to one side, Thrawn introduced himself and then was surprised Yoda harrumphed and stated the name of his race. "A Chiss, hrhrhrhm, you are. Such we have seen in the past week."

"While Master Fay indicated that the Order knew of my race, surely that is somewhat unusual, given our insular nature," Thrawn probed gently. Since insular was putting it mildly, being the second Chiss Yoda had seen in a week was astonishing.

"A Dark Side user, Sev'rance Tann is. Banished from your people, she was, along with her lover, another Dark Side user," Yoda answered bluntly. "Turned from the Sith she has. Questioned her closely over Hypercom we did, along with local Masters. Open about herself, Sev'rance was. Never fear, discussed your people, she did not."

"I see. That is interesting," Thrawn mused. "Still, it is also unimportant at present. I am here to offer my services to the Order, and eventually to the Republic as a whole."

"Masters, the Force guided me to Mitth'raw'nuruodo. He is a pivot point, an individual that would have impacted the future tremendously. We have changed that future by meeting with him and convincing him to work with us instead of the Sith, who he has also met. But we can do even more by allying Thrawn's abilities to our own."

"And why do you wish to work with us?" Mace asked brusquely. He didn't doubt Fay's ability to read the Force, knowing she was his superior in that area, even with Mace's Shatterpoint ability. Indeed, Mace was making a point of acting humbler now with the result of his 'meeting' with Bulq still somewhat fresh in his mind. But this didn't mean he wasn't going to question an unknown element like Thrawn.

"Master Fay has convinced me that the Order represents the greater good in terms of galactic peace and stability. I remain unconvinced that the Republic as a whole can make such a claim, but I am willing to offer my services to the Jedi Order to make that assessment and to see Fay put into practice her promise of change after the war has concluded."

Thrawn looked back at Master Windu, completely un-cowed by the other man's presence. The two of them continued to stare at one another for several moments before Yoda harrumphed once more, waving his gimer stick in the air. "Enough. Time for egos, we have not. Test you, we will, Mitth'raw'nuruodo."

Master Fay gestured to one side towards where she could see the gardens of the green temple. "If you gentlemen require any input on the diplomatic or social side of things, I will be in the gardens. I do not have any understanding of the military side of things."

"And yet she beats me routinely in strategy games," Thrawn murmured, following after the others, although inwardly, he was thankful that Aayla made no move to join Master Fay. Instead, she walked beside him, speaking quietly to one of the other Masters, a short, blue-scaled alien who looked to have evolved from a flying species.

"Dislikes violence, Master Fay does. Noticed you no doubt have, personally unwilling to even carry a lightsaber she is. Believes firmly, Fay does, that the way of peace is the most important path the Jedi to follow. Yet, blinded herself to the necessity of conflict her belief has not," Yoda replied with a surprising amount of affection in his voice as he spoke of the other ancient Master. "Speak softly yet see clearly, always her way it has been. Since she was an apprentice, this has been true."

The other Jedi all shook their heads at the very idea of Master Fay ever being an apprentice. But Yoda and perhaps Master Saa were the only two Jedi alive who could remember such a time.

"To bring the conversation back onto the real topic at hand..." Thrawn began. "But how are you going to test me, as I presume you will, above and beyond the test I will need to pass before being acknowledged at my present rank by the Republic?"

"With your permission, we will quiz you on various topics, scenarios and moral issues while feeling out your presence with our Force powers. Knight Secura will be involved in this, although given her participation in Fay's mission, this will not take overlong. Her presence along with Fay's removes much of our concerns, really," Master Koon answered.

Thrawn nodded, and then engaged all three Jedi in a discussion about their species. Mace was cool and detached, Koon open and firm about his answers, while Yoda was dismissive and shut off. His species was extremely rare in the greater universe, and they preferred to keep it that way, answering no inquiries about themselves. On top of that, Yoda had been sent to the temple as a baby, so it was uncertain if he knew anything about the society of his race in the first place.

Eventually they arrived at a room where a makeshift space control center had been set up, a secondary system to the Corellian Security Force's own setup. "Due to the sheer number of ships involved, we have a full play-by-play recording of the Confederacy's invasion of Corellia," one of the local Masters began, watching Thrawn closely. "You will play both sides, one after another. Show us what you can do."

Thrawn nodded, then requested time to familiarize himself with the fleets involved. For the Confederacy this was easy. But the Masters could see the moment he found the

information on the Wild Blade and the Coral Skippers. Yet beyond a brief flicker in the eyes and a slight tightening of the jaw he showed no response.

But Aayla still took it upon herself to address his surprise. "Master Fay told you we knew about the Enemy Beyond, the ones who use living weapons. We can tell you more about it now, can't we Masters?"

"There is no need. I was indeed enquiring about their participation here, and also the readings on this one ship, the Wild Blade. Is it accurate? Not an attempt to catch me out?"

When told the reading on the ship was as accurate as the computer could make it, he simply nodded then said blandly, "That conversation is going to be quite interesting." With that, he turned his attention to the combat scenario.

Even when the attackers had to deal with the fog of war, or not knowing everything about the defenders, Thrawn proved that he was more than up to Grievous in terms of tactical acumen. While it was not a clean or bloodless victory, Thrawn was able to win the day for the Confederacy, pulling the defenders out of position, fighting the defense fleet in the outer system, mousetrapping it there in a series of moves. The Wild Blade and the other reinforcements were similarly dealt with, although the Blade was able to retreat time and again to fight for each planet consecutively. In the end, Thrawn still won through, though by his narrowed frown, he was not happy about the outcome.

Similarly, the defense went far better than before. While Thrawn lacked the wild abandon with which the Corellians had fought, he made up for it in cool analysis. In a series of sharp engagements, he blunted the enemy's starfighters with the use of capital ships and the same kind of navigational traps that the locals had used in the real battle. Then he had used the Wild Blade and the Jedi forces to micro jump the enemy's reserve, and broke their main fleet over the Twins, the battle occurring around Centerpoint Station.

"That station..." Thrawn mused as the results rolled across the screen.

"Yes. An anachronism, it is. Ancient technology, studied carefully over time. Hrrhrhm, dangerous it could be in war, too dangerous. Too unknown. Locked and unable to be open, much of the station is," Yoda answered.

"Interesting. No. Fascinating," Thrawn murmured, staring at the image. "Perhaps once this war is over, I can make a study of it. I do not think I will discover any hidden entrance or anything of that nature, but to a historian and a study of individuals through their art, that construct is a means to understand the minds of those who built it."

"We would be interested in your opinion on the Builders, but for now let us turn to other matters," Master Iladen, the spokesman for the Green Jedi, suggested, looking wary. Any

interest in Centerpoint Station worried those who knew of its existence in the first place. The power it represented was simply too large for anyone to be happy about contemplating.

“Say, you did, a student of people and their art. Weequay art, tells you what it does, about Master Bulq?”

“Very little. Like most Jedi, Master Bulq no doubt had very little interaction with his race’s society before joining the Order. I would need to look at examples of any art, sculpture or similar he created during his time as a Jedi to understand him,” Thrawn replied calmly. “Overall, the Weequay are a race who do not communicate via speech, but telepathically. Their art is dedicated to their gods, and to the desert which birthed their race. In war, the Weequay consider themselves dedicated, well trained and dangerous, a wind that blows across their enemies, letting them take spoils and slay at will.”

The Masters, Aayla was amused to note, were all listening intently, with Yoda and Mace, both of whom knew Bulq personally, nodding. Mace even opined that was indeed how Bulq fought: an emphasis on speed and striking power, with very little in the way of cooperation. “Controlled aggression and speed are his way.”

“Yes. But that lack of cooperation will make Bulq somewhat slow to adapt, and may hinder communication skills from him down to his local admirals. Further, his race’s method of war does not lend itself to grand strategy. They, and possibly the Sith, wish to instill fear and awe. But on a galactic scale, such things do not work except at the truly apocalyptic level. The destruction of Kuat, for instance, is a step in that direction. Whatever Bulq, or Tyranus and his Master, might think, that act was born in the Weequay’s method of war.”

“He’s made mistakes,” the blue-scaled Master admitted, introducing himself as Tsui Choi, while also connecting some of what Thrawn had said about Weequay art to that of his own people. The Kel Dor, after all, were also born on a world of deserts and vast, powerful windstorms. “The Confederacy has hit too hard in some places, harder in others where they should not have hit at all.”

“Yes. And in this Grievous whose place I took in the invading force during the test he has a weapon made to his hand. But the problem is that the rule of fear cannot work without a series of follow up assaults of equal measure, especially on the strategic level. That has failed.”

“As did the first attack on Wayland. A place he must take back,” Mace mused.

Thrawn’s eyes narrowed, and Yoda explained about Wayland briefly, causing both Thrawn and Aayla to become surprised. And ecstatic in Aayla’s case. *By the Force, if we can but find the hidden Sith then...*

“If there is such a target, then Bulq will overcompensate,” Thrawn spoke crisply. “His initial attack failed, the next one will be large enough to succeed whatever the locals try to do.

But in that, he will overreach, and no one is available to point that out to him. Certainly Grievous will not. He lacks the logistical bent needed. We have an opportunity..."

"If we listen to you and your suggestions you mean?" Iladen asked harshly.

"Yes," Thrawn responded, staring back at the Jedi Master without any change of expression. "If you listen to my suggestions you have a chance to turn the tide in an entire sector. I will not say more than that, given the size of the war, but from that victory can come still more."

"Do so we will," Yoda announced cutting through the minor confrontation. "Interested I am to see more of what you can do." With that he changed the images on the screens around them to show Wayland and the Ojoster Sector. Soon the star map was filled with information on the Republic forces in the area, along with what the Kuat Remnants had done to defend the planet and what was known about the Confederacy forces in the sector. "What you would do, show us you will, Admiral."

Smiling slightly, Aayla slid down into a meditation pose, watching as Thrawn began to work.

OOOOOOO

Late in the afternoon Ranma led the now battered group back to the mountain, where they found Shaak more than willing to leave. There was nothing she could add to the defensive plan or the ongoing computer slicing, so she decided to go along with Ranma's ideas about moving away from the mountain.

For the next few hours, the Wild Blade crisscrossed Wayland, looking for a place that spoke to Shaak or one of the other Jedi. Eventually she found one, an area at the opposite end of the mountain range which eventually led to the lone mountain the Sith had made their fortress. The area was marked by several large trees sticking out of the mountainside between boulders at strange angles, and a single deep-seeming stream, falling through the area, the sound soothing to many of the blade's crew.

The Nova Guard weren't fans, but that was because they didn't like water all that much.

"Alright folks, here we are. HK, you might want to go into sleep mode for now. I'll wake you up if something interesting happens or if we need you to act as the enemy in an exercise," Ranma suggested.

"Affirmative response: Thank you, master, some down time does sound better than taking part in the meatbag bonding ritual labeled 'camping'." Without another word HK moved to the side of the cockpit, plugged himself into the sensor suite to an indignant squawk from Tune and then powered down.

Talli blinked slowly, staring at the oddly murderous, if funny, droid, and her Master. “Um, was he right about us camping out?”

“Yeah. Unless you had enough of that, while on the run on Talu with the rest of the Agri-corps?”

“No, Master,” Talli answered with a headshake, sending her hair this way and that. “Even that was kind of fun, though I appreciate having a new sleeping bag.” Ranma had told Talli to talk to the Nova Guard’s logistics officer about a new sleeping bag, for now, as the room devoted to the women among the crew (bar Shaak, obviously) needed to be redone to let a fifth cot fit.

“I thought you Jedi weren’t supposed to have fun,” Keala taunted, smacking her shoulder against Talli’s.

Looking at them, it was obvious the youngsters had bonded in the oldest way possible: by getting their butts kicked. Whatever lingering issues might have cropped up between the three girls were now gone, with Fabian seemingly willing to play the deadpan straight-man for the comments of all three. Although Shaak was going to keep a sharp eye on things, just in case. She remembered the reaction from all three girls when Fabian had taken off his helmet...

“Yeah, that’s what everyone says, but even Jedi know that kids learn better when they’re having fun. And learning about nature and so forth is a lot easier when you’re able to immerse yourself in a real nature rather than the manmade variety,” Talli snickered.

“Right. Janice, can you take Scout and the rest out, see if there are any animals around here, and check Talli’s woodcraft. I bet it’s good, but I want to see if it can translate from one type of terrain to another,” Ranma requested. “Oh, and see how good she is at moving quietly too. Heck, do that for all of them and Dralshy’a. I can’t remember if she’s able to move quietly.”

“Huh... now that you mention it, moving quietly hasn’t been a big part of nearly anything we’ve done since coming aboard the *Wild Blade*,” Janice mused, nodding. She looked over at Cro, who nodded, then gestured his own men to follow her.

“And what will you be doing?” Ahsoka asked, Shaak having indicated she should go with Talli.

“We’ll be making some wind breakers and a few firepits,” Ranma answered, waving her off.

With the others gone, Shaak and Ranma moved around the area, with Ranma shifting several large boulders around to block the cold wind coming down from the mountain. As he did that, Shaak began to make three fire pits. They could supply heated blankets or just plain

heaters which could work as both cooking fire and heat source but as a Togrutan she was a traditionalist.

When Ranma joined her, Shaak smiled up at him, one eyebrow rising in interrogation. “Well?”

Ranma snorted but knew what she meant well enough. “Talli’s an interesting one. I didn’t see much of in the force precognition her like that but her observational skills are crazy. She was able to figure out some of my Aerial Style in one spar, even came up with a few ways to try and fight it. And she’s a really quick learner, took my suggestions to heart and everything. Talli’s also a bit of a spitfire. She argued back whenever she thought the others were making a mistake. This could honestly be fun. Although, I don’t think I’ll be able to form the kind of padawan bond that you and Ahsoka have.”

“We knew that wasn’t a possibility Ranma. And honestly, I don’t see that is all that important to Talli I think,” Shaak hummed thoughtfully, taking a step back from the first firepit and moving on to the next.

“She won’t feel shortchanged?” Ranma asked. Now that he had a real student, he wanted to take it seriously.

“I doubt it.” Shaak shook her head. “You saw her grin when we redid her padawan braid. Talli will never feel short-changed at anything you do or don’t do now that she has a Master.”

Ranma nodded and the two fell into a companionable silence as they worked, occasionally bumping into one another, touching or caressing, just enjoying once more having ‘them’ time.

For the rest of that day, the group worked on creating a small camp for themselves. Tents were set up between the firepits and the makeshift windbreaks, while Ranma created a small makeshift pool to one side of the deep river. Meanwhile, the rest of the crew returned, and the Nova Guard and Shaak began work on creating a training area further out into the woods. Janice took it upon herself to put up a firing range as well. All in all, it was a neat little camp, which would work as a base for the disparate group so they didn’t have to live entirely within the ship itself.

That night, Ranma volunteered himself and Talli to chop up the vegetables and meat for dinner, a hearty stew that Ranma knew Ahsoka and Shaak would enjoy, it being heavy on the meat. And after the day’s training, the others could use the protein too. The Nova Guard of course had to look after themselves and they did so with their normal aplomb.

As she chopped, Ranma questioned Talli about what she felt after her first day of training under him. She hesitated, and Ranma flipped the knife he was using into the air, before

poking her several times with a finger, grabbing the knife out of the air as it fell. "Come on, you can tell me."

"UM, well, it's not what I expected. You haven't had me meditate or even told me to call out to the Force when you were fighting me and the others. You haven't even talked about a lightsaber yet."

"Do you want me to?"

Talli shook her head. "No, I, I was halfway to finishing my lightsaber before I was sent to the Agri-corps. I still have my crystal, but I don't think I want to go there just yet." Ranma hummed and made a go on motion and Talli shrugged. "Well, I suppose I would have thought we'd have done more training one on one, as well as some more Force training. All you did this afternoon was asked Captain Janice to check on my woodcraft."

"It's just Janice kid, not captain. You're not under my command, nor are you a Mandalorian," Janice interrupted from nearby.

"Huh... you know that's a thought kiddo. You and Ahsoka should probably be fit for armor," Ranma mused. "At least before we take you into a real hand to hand type fight."

"Ooh, that could be interesting," Ahsoka mused.

Talli on the other hand looked a little bemused. "Um, I see why you might want us to, but er, Jedi don't wear armor."

"But do you want to?" Ranma asked quickly, and Talli looked away, staying silent. She did really, but the idea of doing something like that, especially after saying she didn't want to start building her lightsaber again, seemed a little too non-Jedi for her to talk about right now.

"I don't know Ranma," Janice teased. "You mentioned wanting to give her some Crush gauntlets on the trip here, and now you're talking about giving her armor. Are you sure you want her to be a Jedi instead of a Mando?"

"What I want Talli to be, is whenever she wants to be," Ranma answered easily. "I'm not a Jedi, remember? I can teach ya a lot, even meditation and all that jazz, communing with nature around you, not just how to punch a droid's head off. But what you make of it, Talli is what **you** make of it. Okay?"

Part of Ranma wanted Talli to follow his footsteps and become a martial artist instead of a Jedi, but he wasn't going to push.

Hearing the trust and understanding in Ranma's tone, Talli's face firmed and she nodded. "I want to be a Jedi. That is what I'm going to be."

“Good. And about the armor?”

“Sign me up for that too! I mean, come on, the whole Jedi not wearing armor thing is stupid!” she suddenly shouted, and then went on into a minor rant about how often Jedi had died when they could have lived if they had just simple police style armor underneath her robes. It was as if Ranma’s backing her up had awakened a long buried grievance she had with the more traditional Jedi. “I can understand not wearing it if you’re going on a diplomatic mission, or if you are long-buried really, really good with a lightsaber or if you’ve gone through the whole toughness training that you introduced to the order. But if you haven’t done any of that, why are you not wearing armor? We’re in a freaking war now!”

Talli breathed in, only realizing she had gone on a rant there as she paused for air. She stepped back, her hands going up to her mouth in utter mortification.

But Ranma simply laughed, shaking his head with a grin, while Shaak snickered slightly. “While I believe your reasoning was bordering towards the histrionic, you undoubtedly have thought this over. Most Jedi would say that armor slows you down, or sends the wrong message, but we are, as you said, at war. Armor is better than none for certain.”

Talli breathed in a sigh of relief, and Ranma ruffled her hair before ordering her back to chopping the vegetables.

Later that evening, as Talli and the others all engaged in a game of cards, Shaak moving behind Ranma, her hands falling to his shoulders. There they began to massage his neck and shoulders. Ranma twitched under her touch, leaning back. “Hmm... I think this was a good day, yeah?”

“I think you completely shattered her expectations, reinforced her desire to be a Jedi by making Talli grasp it herself, and that being different isn’t an insurmountable problem. I believe that is a very good first full day Ranma,” Shaak drawled, before leaning down, allowing her lekku to drape down onto his chest, as she pressed her own chest against the back of his head. “Now,” she murmured, “even as her I believe that you have completed your master-type duties for the day. Your wife however acquires a bit of attention...”

“Yes ma’am,” Ranma said, leading up to capture her lips in a brief kiss, before standing upwards, his arm going around her waist as he did. He looked over at the others. “See in the morning guys, I trust all Talli, that you’ll know when to go to bed?”

Talli grinned at that, but her brows furrowed as she watched the two of them heading towards the ship. “I thought they said we were going to be camping out. Not that I mind, but it doesn’t seem to fit what I’ve seen of either Master Ti or Master Ranma’s character that they’ll tell us to do something they don’t want to.”

Snickering, Ahsoka patted Talli's shoulder. "Trust me, you want them to stay in their room." Talli looked a little used at that, and Ahsoka explained. "They can get kind of noisy when they are having husband-wife time."

Talli blushed rosily, shaking her head and looking away. "By the Force, I am not going to get used to that kind of thing anytime soon, am I? A Jedi allowed to marry and um, um, c, carry on like that. Weird."

"Nope, considering I haven't gotten used to it yet, and I've been around the two of them for months now," the slightly younger padawan said with a shrug. "But come on, tell me. Are you really serious about wanting Crush Gauntlets instead of a lightsaber?"

Late the next morning, Shaak smiled a lazy, satisfied smile as she sat with Ranma taking a late breakfast together. Nearby Fabian, Kathy, Talli, and the new Nova Guard members went through a series of katas with Ranma calling out corrections as they did. This was a series of kata that Ranma had developed working with Janice and the other initial batch of trainees, and Ranma felt it could help the newcomers build up further hand eye coordination, which they would eventually need.

After this, Ranma would run all of them through the new training area, after which Shaak would lead Ahsoka through an hour of meditation as Ranma did the same with Talli. His version of meditation wasn't quite the same as the Jedi type, and he was interested to see what Talli would get out of it.

Before either could finish eating, they married couple looked up from their semi-romantic breakfast to see a shuttle coming down towards them. A moment later, it landed, and Master Saa appeared at the top of its landing ramp.

Shaak had already stood up by that point, and now moved towards the other Master, bowing respectfully. "Master Saa, can we help you with something? Has trouble occurred at the mountain?"

Saa looked at her thoughtfully, then around at the area smiling slightly at the trees and the river running through them. "Nothing like that. I was simply wondering if the two of you would mind walking with me this morning?"

Looking at the Neti Master, Shaak wondered why she was here. While Shaak had quite a bit of respect for Master T'ra Saa, they were not close. But she could sense some kind of disturbance in the other woman's Force sense, sadness perhaps? "Very well Master Saa. Ranma?"

Shrugging, Ranma went along with it. "Sure." Hopping to his feet Ranma quickly finished his breakfast, scarfing it down with a speed that would've made his father proud, although with

far better manners than he would normally of should have shown in one of their mealtime duels.

At first, Saa asked the two of them about how they had interacted with Zonama Sekot, confessing to being somewhat bemused by how alive Sekot was when she interacted with him. Then she asked them about Ood Bnar, the ancient Neti master they had roused from a deep hibernation on Ossus, smiling in delight at the first-hand description of meeting such an ancient Master. "From what I understand, Master Yoda has dispatched a team to bring Master Bnar to Zonama Sekot."

By this point Ranma had realized the older Jedi was just making small talk, trying to work up the courage to speak about something else. *Huh. That doesn't really match the impression I've gotten of her the few times we talked before this. Weird.*

Saa chuckled dryly. "I suppose that you would prefer the direct method. I... you, Master Ti, had the courage to go to the High Council to request permission to take the Old Oath, and then to openly court Ranma as you have. I...I could wish that I had, the conviction to go to them as you did."

Both Ranma and Shaak stopped looking at her on surprise, and Saa smiled wanly. "Nearly a decade ago now, Master Tholme and I began to feel emotions and a greater connection to one another than is normally allowed among Jedi. We fought those feelings for some time, but then eventually, after communing with the Force, we decided to let these emotions grow. But we both agreed that the moment it interfered with our duties, we would set those emotions aside. And so we did, numerous times. Looking back, I feel... I feel a deep regret that we did not have the strength of conviction that you did."

Shaak shook her head. "Do not take that upon your shoulders, Master Saa. The two of you were Masters already when your connection began to grow. You were the Watchman of the Kiffu Sector and Master Tholme was a Jedi Shadow constantly on the move. I was still just a Knight when I was assigned to be Ranma's minder."

"Oy," Ranma grumbled. "Standing right here, you know."

"Am I wrong to use that term for how our acquaintance started?" Shaak challenged.

Ranma looked at her, sighed and shook his head. "No, that just makes it worse."

Saa chuckled watching the two of them. *They are so different than Tholme and I, and yet their connection is so unshakeable. Were we wrong to hide our relationship? Were we wrong to put our duty to the Order first?*

But even as she thought that, Shaak had turned back to the Neti Master and continued on. "You had a much greater duty to the Order than I did. Both Tholme and yourself were part of the Order, whereas Ranma..."

"I ain't," Ranma snorted. "And I am a really bad influence."

"Heh, I am not going to be drawn on that one," Shaak snorted before coming serious once more as she looked at Master Saa. "Further, not every relationship is like ours. Do not compare you and Master Tholme to Ranma and I. If the Force brought you together with Master Tholme, if it did not warn you against forming a relationship, that is enough."

Saa looked at Shaak, and suddenly wondered which of them was supposed to be the older, wiser Master. *But that does not mean she is wrong.* "Thank you for that. I realized months ago I needed to speak to someone about Master Tholme and I and about my regrets. Someone who had felt the same connections. Thank you for listening."

Shaak nodded her head, while Ranma just shrugged, looking uncomfortable. His whole opinion about the whole no emotional connection thing of the Jedi was unprintable. So, he didn't quite agree with Shaak on this one. But he didn't know Tholme at all, and had only talked to Saa a few times, so wasn't about to pass judgment. *Besides, I know all about trying to keep secrets so people don't look at me or judge me.*

"Have you talked to Quinlan?" Saa asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"We did, we had a quite pleasant conversation yesterday talking about the war, what he had been up to and so forth," Shaak replied.

"And you Ranma?"

Ranma shook his head. "No, I don't know the guy all that well. We only met once in passing, and then we heard that he had lost his temper and actually attacked one of the other Jedi or something."

"And then, he came under suspicion because Master Bulq leaving the order. Master Tholme spoke up for him, but I had not seen him for many years. Quinlan's time in the shadows has marked him I feel."

Shaak frowned thinking about it, then shrugged. "I think he still holds a certain amount of resentment towards certain Masters on the Council of Reassignment, but he is also very mindful of his connection to Master Bulq, and I think once to expunge that connection."

"Hmm... let us hope that he becomes willing to talk about that and release such destructive emotions. A drive to prove himself is one thing, a desire to expunge guilt or, perhaps sin is a better term, is not," Saa mused.

"I'm certain he will be happy to speak to you, Master Saa," Shaak said.

"I hope so," Saa nodded. But even with Shaak's words she was still feeling a bit... ambivalent about Quinlan. "I will try to speak to him about it. I feel there is a hidden weakness within Quinlan, and as one who has just recently released such feelings, I hope I can help him do the same."

"I suggest speaking to Obi-Wan. He and Quinlan are friends and if there is something bothering Quinlan, he can help," Shaak advised.

Saa nodded as that made sense, and Ranma and Shaak led the Neti Master back to her shuttle.

OOOOOOO

For the first time in a long while Sidious felt pure undiminished pride at how a day had gone. True, on the military side, the Jedi were suddenly beginning to move with far more in the way of overall organization, and the number of katana-class dreadnoughts showing up had skyrocketed to the point where his analysts had finally begun to notice. Sidious made a note to make certain that the droids he had assigned to keep track of such things were replaced. After he used them as therapy of course. These days, Sidious felt occasionally that he needed to vent some of his anger due in large part to the work of the chaotic locus.

However, that was still a minor problem. For today, today had marked a milestone. The first of many Emergency Powers Acts had passed through the Senate with nary a whimper. Amidala, once more healed and in her position as the Chommell sector Senator attempted to bleat about trying to limit the powers of the military, trying to limit the scope of the war, but she was getting nowhere. Only fifteen senators remained diehard peace lovers like Organa voted with her, and their voices were meaningless, seen as foolish and completely ignored by the rest of the Senate.

Indeed, his day had gotten even better when Tyranus had finally sent him the plan to reclaim Wayland. Sidious new why it had taken so long, so he did not overly blame the other Sith for his lack of speed when it came to this most important of tasks. And he had come up with a good plan, with multiple bolts in their magazine. *One way or another, this plan will go forward. And this time tomorrow, my position once more will be secure and the Great Plan will continue on as it should! The chaotic locus might even die and wouldn't that just be magnificent.*

Alas for Sidious, even Force users should know better than challenge fate...

OOOOOOO

The next four days allowed Shaak, Ranma, and their crew some much needed downtime. Or at least, Ranma had needed it, still dealing with his reaction to having to execute Saato during what was now being called the Second Battle of Wayland. Time with Shaak and, oddly, Talli helped a lot, and by the end of the second full day on Wayland, Ranma was back to his normally wild, gregarious self, not just acting that way but feeling it too.

During those four days, the crew's time at their little camp fell into a daily routing. During the morning, which began at sunrise, Ranma and Shaak put their padawan pair through their paces, while Cro and Janice did the same for their folk. After a late breakfast, Talli and Ahsoka were turned over to Janice for lessons in navigation and starfighter combat, while Ranma worked with the Nova Guard in staff-combat. Cro started to show distinct signs of ki during this time, which Ranma was both happy and astonished to see, having believed Janice was the only one close to doing so. But the Nova Guard captain was certainly showing both strength and endurance well beyond his fellows.

After that, would come marksmanship training for everyone but Ahsoka and Talli, who would get one-on-one instruction with Shaak as Ranma trained with the Mandos. This was followed by a few hours of meditation and rest for the majority, while Ranma trained Scout, as Talli was quickly becoming called, in martial arts. At night, everyone would split off for a time to do maintenance and other things of that sort, while rotating through a series of one-on-one matches with Ranma.

It was at that point that the other Jedi on Wayland would occasionally stop by. Shaak Ti would occasionally reach out to Kit or the others, but only Quinlan and Kit became regulars. Anakin would occasionally come with his master, but he and Tiin were very busy training up the Jedi who would be joining the starfighter-based defense of the planet. It took most of them some time to get used to remote controlling the Coralskippers.

The only one who barely stopped by at all was K'Kruhk, and the one time he did was to complain to them and to Quinlan, who had also been there at the time. "It is as if every time I have the local sentients willing to take a wait and see attitude towards the Kuati, one side or the other does something foolish. The locals have their own hotheads and fools, while the Kuati are just this side of humano-centric. It does not help matters that their upper crust is dealing with major social upheavals and are very matriarchal in nature."

To keep on surviving as a culture after losing their home planet was already proving a trial to the Kuati. Their traditional clan-based oligarchy was still in place, but the common men and women were already pushing for far more control of the government (the running of the fleet and monetary resources) and one such matter was being allowed to settle on Wayland. Normally, living on the planet was something only members of the Ten could do, with the rest of the Kuati society living in orbit in the massive shipyards that had given Kuat its fame and, well... everything else.

Now those shipyards were gone. Now this new planet had been seeded to them, so long as they helped defend it. This made the Kuati almost fanatic in their devotion to the Jedi cause but was also causing significant social upheaval. The numbers – billions – who wanted to settle onto Wayland was running headlong into their own societal mores and the local races, who were unhappy to say the least to see more ‘Sky People’ arriving.

K’Kruhk had his work cut out for him to keep the tensions from boiling over into large-scale conflict. But while he had been unable to come back to the mountain very often because of it, he was actually doing so with the help of a Consular named Alis Harel, who was from Kuat herself.

Of the others, Shaak still occasionally felt Quinlan was hiding some kind of resentment despite his discussions with her and Master Saa, but he seemed to have a hold of it, so Shaak did not think it would amount to anything. And both Saa and K’Kruhk, who knew Quinlan far better than she did, seemed to think there was nothing wrong there.

Regardless, Kit and Anakin’s joining them occasionally equated to a great deal of fun for the whole group, as they would join the rest in fighting Shaak and Ranma in a full battle scenario. Anakin’s extreme connection to the Force occasionally allowed him to surprise even Ranma occasionally, although never to the point the rest of the group could win.

And at night, while the youngsters headed to bed quickly, the Nova Guard and Mandalorian warriors left camp to join one of the Nova Guard brigades. This brigade, split down into platoon-sized units was being trained in one of the captured Lucrehulks on boarding actions via simulated combat. This training had a specific purpose, which, when he heard of it, made Ranma cackle like a madman, and immediately volunteer HK to lead the opposing force.

“After all,” he said after getting control of himself, “If you can achieve even one objective when my murder-bot is controlling the enemy, you’re gonna be golden in real life.”

Needless to say, HK was quite happy at that, only somewhat annoyed that he could not actually wipe out the Nova Guard meatbags. In turn the Nova Guard got better at boarding actions, but requests to slag the ‘kriffing murderous slag of metal’ continued to pile up.

But the evening of the fourth day, this routine was interrupted, and in precisely the manner Shaak, Ranma and everyone else in a command position had feared: the Confederacy had arrived.

Moments later, the *Wild Blade* was lifting off, heading for space as it connected into the local data net. The stronger sensors of the mountain fortress sent them everything they could see, and what they could see was very, very bad. “Damn it. There goes any hope of the Tyranus being so desperate to reclaim the mountain that he made another mistake,” Janice murmured, although her opinion was shared by the rest of the group currently in the cockpit looking the information over.

What was currently reorganizing itself after the jump-in's normal effect on their formations was a full Confederacy battlefleet, larger by far than the force that had attacked Wayland before.

Sixty-eight Lucrehulks. Two hundred and seventy Munificent-class heavy cruisers. Two hundred Hardcell assault ships, troop transports who could deploy their troops, droids or tanks within seconds of landing.

Staring at the screen, Ranma watched as the readout of the enemy armada was almost completely blanketed out by sheer number of Vulture fighters the Lucrehulks and Munificents were launching, while beside him, Shaak felt honest despair for the first time in a very long while. "...That, that is a hammer fit to smash everything we have here to dust, no matter what we try. By the Force, even Corellia, Rendili or Coruscant would be hard pressed to fight such a fleet."

"Yeah," Ranma muttered. "It makes what Yoda passed on the other day make much more sense. They must be completely changing their organizational structure in this sector and the surrounding ones to send a fleet like that here, a world with no obvious strategic goal."

"Analytical tone: More than that mistress, it seems as if they are learning. Note the disparity in numbers between the Munificent and the Lucrehulk classes. They have learned to protect their larger ships with the smaller, and that each ship class has a different task. They still lack a proper gunboat or destroyer class, however."

"Maybe, but even so, those are a lot of ships, HK. I fear as if my first space battle is going to be my last," Scout muttered, trying to sound somewhat humorous but failing.

"Feh, that's only because you haven't seen what this ship can do," Ranma quipped, ruffling her hair. If there was one thing he liked about having Talli as a padawan above her desire to be a hand-to-hand fighter, it was she had hair he could ruffle. "Trust me, the Wild Blade can survive this. It's stopping that fleet from just smashing our defenses and then bombarding the planet that is in doubt."

"Yes. But we need to try regardless," Shaak agreed, then opened up communications with the mountain and everyone else. When she did, Shaak was surprised to see Master Saa in the command center on Wayland. "Master Saa? I would have thought you would be aboard the Ardent Defender."

"Captain Morgan is more than up to the task of commanding the Ardent Defender. As for myself, I felt it necessary to remain on-planet to coordinate the Jedi side of the defense. I take it you and Ranma are going to take part in the space battle."

That came out more of a statement than an inquiry, and Ranma and Shaak both nodded, the movement picked up by the pickup. "We will, we're heading out now."

“Good. I have Anakin and Kit on the line. They too, along with many of our brethren are already aboard the ships in orbit. Wait a moment.”

A second later, Kit and Anakin’s faces reared in smaller windows, and the group began to plan out the first strike, which would hit the enemy’s swarming Vulture fighters with Coralskippers and the *Wild Blade*. Those Coralskippers would be controlled from a distance by Anakin and Saesee Tiin. The two best pilots on hand, and two of the five best starfighters pilots in the Order would use the Force and their own skill to control the drones at a distance. The distance would make that impossible for non-Force users, but the two of them had done this in the Second Battle of Wayland, and had worked out the kinks since.

The manned fighters, would be retained until the mines and single-shot satellites were used up, waiting to jump forward at need be. Beyond that, the Kuat Remnants and Jedi ships waited, seemingly only slowly moving into formation. But that very slowness was deceptive, as it gave no clue as to how the capital ships would act.

These capital ships included thirteen more Katana-class heavy cruisers, and, a pleasant shock, another Mandator-class star dreadnaught. It had been apparently assigned to escort one of the Ten to Tepasi and had joined the Remnant fleet here after dropping off said dignitary with the rest of the Remnant.

With Master Saa on the planet, Shaak Ti found herself in command in space. Seniority should have given Master Tiin, but the Iktotchi flatly refused, as he had all along while they had been planning the defenses. “I know my limitations. I need to concentrate on controlling the Coralskippers with Skywalker and Fisto. And I am not a tactician by any means. You have proven yourself already on that level, Ti.”

Grimacing slightly, Shaak nodded, then looked back at Ahsoka. “Get Scout up here. I may need another pair of eyes.”

By the time the *Wild Blade* left Wayland’s orbit, the order of command was fixed, and a moment later, all the disparate captains and commodores were on the line. This included both the Kuat Remnant commanders, and the Jedi in command of the Katana class ships, Anakin, Kit, and Tiin. “Remember ladies and gentlemen, this is not about vengeance. This is not about getting justice for our dead. This is about retaining command of Wayland. Bleed them, make them pay for each league of space they come through. Remember that your people are on this planet, and they have nowhere else to go.”

Shaak held each gaze one after another. The Kuati commanders tried to hold her gaze, each of them wanting to pay the Confederacy back for what had happened to their world, their people. But none of them could do so for long. All of them knew that several hundred thousand of their people were already on the surface of Wayland, trying to create a new home for their people. If the Confederacy bombarded the planet, they would not survive, despite the local defenses the Kuati had set up.

A moment later most of the faces disappeared, and leaving behind Marshal Yurrick, Saa, and the other Jedi. "Are you prepared Yurrick?" Ranma asked, crossing his arms as he looked at the Nova Guard commander.

That worthy simply nodded. "We've rebuilt and expanded our defense in depth, although the forest itself took a lot of punishment in the last battle. Still, that just means that there are a lot of downed trees and debris to play with. It is not as good as an urban environment would be, but we can make them bleed."

"Derogatory observation: Droids don't bleed. Remember that general, or else they might simply overwhelm you," HK warned. As usual he was stationed at the quad laser's controls. Ahsoka would be in charge of the Dovin basal anti-missile weapon, while Scout helped Shaak keep an eye on the overall battle. The young padawan was noticeably nervous but seemed to be taking heart in the workmanlike confidence Ranma and Shaak were showing.

The Marshal snickered, a very odd sound coming through the Nova Guard moment. "That's what they think. Do not worry about the land-based portion of this conflict. We will hold. To the last man, to the last blaster, we will prove our strength of mind and soul."

Obi-Wan and Quinlan, both of whom were also on the ground, nodded in agreement. While Obi-Wan apparently was a pretty good commander, he wasn't a very good pilot, and had become the second in command of the Nova Guard on the ground. Similarly, Quinlan was waiting with fourteen other Jedi, who would aid in the battle on the ground. And Kit and another twenty Jedi were waiting elsewhere, with a certain surprise.

Moments later, the *Wild Blade* passed through the outermost mine field where the Coralskippers had been waiting, their biological engines powering up as the enemy came in. Those Coralskippers were quickly placed under control of various Jedi, with Tiin in overall command of Anakin and another fifty Jedi who had been gathered for this purpose, a true sign of the Jedi Order's knowledge of how important Wayland was.

Each Jedi controlled a full wing of Coralskippers as they raced forward. six thousand two hundred and forty Coralskippers facing off against how many Vultures?" he asked quietly.

"You don't want to know, Master," Tune replied. His voice now was that of a middle-aged man, serious, almost grim to go with the moment. "You **really** don't want to know. This isn't going to be the largest battle of this war so far, but it's going to be in the top three for certain."

"Then it's a good thing we have reserves," Shaak murmured. The *Ardent Defender* had basically been doing nothing but churning out Coralskippers since the Second Battle of Wayland ended. This wave was but the first of five similarly sized groups. But even with the Force, there was a limit to how many the Jedi could coordinate at a time.

The crew became silent at that point, as the Wild Blade took position at the head of a growing pyramid shaped starfighter strike. Ahead of him, the vast swarm of Vultures zoomed forward to meet them. The Vultures outnumbered them so much they spread in every direction, looking to envelop the incoming Coralskippers and pockets battleship.

That was fine by Ranma. Doing so meant that they didn't have any depth to their formation, if you could actually call it that. Which meant the Wild Blade could punch through and close with the Munificent-class, who had moved forward ahead of the Lucrehulks for now. The enemy might hope to wipe out the defender's starfighters, but they were going to be disappointed.

"Are you going to roll out our starfighters?" Janice asked from the hatch leading into the cockpit.

"No, not yet. Remember, this is just an initial strike. Think of it like it dagger thrown at the enemy commander's head. It really isn't meant to kill, it's to make them react, get them chasing us. Make them think we are panicking."

"Exactly. The enemy has made a mistake going with its normal combat doctrine of sending in their Vultures unsupported. They are the most likely units to spot the mines and single-shot satellites," Shaak explained. "They are also coming at us as a single hammer straight towards the planet from one direction. They should have spread out, to better use their numbers to in turn force us to defend from multiple angles, as they did in Kuat against Master Rancisis."

"As it is, they've got so much firepower concentrated that they think they're going to wipe out any one comes towards them. But taking the capital ships isn't quite our objective yet," Ranma continued on, then looked at his wife, seeing the torque on her lek, smiling faintly at the sight. "I'm gonna be the pilot, you watch our energy consumption and main weapons. Unless you think the Force would let you react faster than me?"

Shaak chuckled dryly shaking her head. "Not a bit of it, Ranma. This is way to target rich an environment for me to think that. Indeed, I don't envy my Jedi brethren their task in all this." With that she looked into the pickup. "Master Tiin, call the time."

Tiin nodded, his eyes closed as he and the others concentrated on controlling the Coralskippers from a distance. The Force thrumming through him, the Devaronian waited until right before the Vultures could lock on and fire their concussion missiles, and then announced, "Now."

Behind the Wild Blade the Coralskipper pyramid exploded as the Wild Blade juked downwards suddenly. Concussion missiles flashed out, but most missed, and the wings of Coralskippers zoomed out in every direction before stabbing into the clouds of Vultures.

The Coralskippers were not built for taking on enemy starships, nor were they built with decent straight-ahead speed. But they had had agility and reaction speed in abundance, and their plasma projectors could punch through any starfighter-sized shield easily. This was their kind of battlefield even though none of the Coralskippers currently engaged had living pilots inside them.

A massive dogfight began, Vultures and Coralskippers alike dying in droves while the Wild Blade slowed its forward momentum, twisting around, moving through the dogfight like a shark through a school of fish, firing all the while. Its heavier weapons, the magma cannons and the ion cannon facing forward, were very much overkill against Vultures, but at the moment, that didn't matter at all. The task was to winnow the Vultures down, and then see how the enemy reacted.

Ahsoka and HK worked as a well-drilled team, HK's reaction time on clear display as he shouted, "Ecstatic Joy: Die you mass-produced heaps of junk! Die!"

"Master, I've been meaning to ask. Has this droid been to the... I don't know, the equivalent of a droid psychologist?" Scout asked.

"Is there such a thing?"

"Every time HK opens his mouth I become more certain there should be," Scout snarked, eyes glued to the tactical screen.

All around the Wild Blade the Vulture cloud began to contract, targeting the pocket battleship repeatedly. But Ranma was so fast, and the ship itself so agile that Vultures simply couldn't lock on fast enough to fire their concussion missile. And without that, their lasers could not do enough damage to really punish the ship. Meanwhile, the Coralskippers used their far greater agility to their advantage, killing three Vultures for every one that went down.

Still, more of thousand skippers died within the first fifteen minutes, including two of the fifteen Jedi who had come forward with this wave and Shaak sighed faintly, shaking her head as she felt their deaths through the Force. "Again and again, it has been proven in this war. Jedi are not soldiers, not in the real sense of the term."

Soon the Wild Blade began to take some real hits. Concussion missiles flashed around them. Although they very rarely struck directly, the droids installed into the Vultures had apparently figured out a way to set the concussion missiles off via fuses. Explosions did propagate very well in space, but they still rattled the Wild Blade a few times, causing its shields to start to degrade very, very slowly. But still, this early in the battle that was a sign.

"Master, the Kuat Remnant cruisers are moving forward," Scout warned.

Shaak took a moment to glance at the tactical screen, then nodded slowly. "Master Tiin, start to pull the Coralskippers back into the cruisers' defensive envelope."

Kuat Remnant cruiser halted on the outer side of the minefields having cut through them deliberately, as if the mines weren't actually there. At long range they began to fire into the swarm of Vulture. Dozens, then hundreds of Vultures broke off dogfight attack these new opponents, only to be destroyed by the interlocked data-net of the cruisers.

"I am activating the second wave of Coralskippers and the Vultures," Tiin announced, and a moment later another twenty wings of Coralskippers flashed forward. The Coralskippers made good the losses to this point, while the three thousand plus Vultures captured aboard the six prize Lucrehulks from the previous battle zoomed forward.

The allied Vultures launched their concussion missiles at their fellows, and then closed to dogfighting range and Scout announced, "Masters, the enemy fleet is changing its configuration. Er... the Lucrehulks are moving forward slowly, spreading out. The Munificent are splitting, with sixty of them moving forward with around a hundred Hardcells. Weird. They aren't just hammering at us, maybe they think those ships could zoom past us?"

"They have learned by this point that the Wild Blade can be very tricky, as are all Jedi," Shaak answered with bleak pride.

"Yeah. Problem is, they're watching us, when they should be watching everything at once. Think of it like... ooh, I know, like a magic trick," Ranma announced.

"Magic trick?" Scout asked, while at the Dovin Basal station Ahsoka rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. Most magic tricks are about sleight of hand, you know? The wizard makes you watch one hand, while the other is stacking the deck or moving the rock or whatever," Ranma explained. "They're watching the Wild Blade and the defenders they can see. They ain't watching the 'debris'."

"... That explanation needs work Master, but I think I get it," Scout said dryly.

Soon, the Munificent-class ships had were taking the cruisers under long-range fire, which was the range at which the Munificent-class was most dangerous. Its spinal mounted turbolasers made for a dangerous long-range punch. Already two of the Kuat remnant cruisers were reporting their shields were failing. The two of them peeled off, as defending starfighters retreated.

At the same time, more of the Kuat Remnant cruisers had come forward, while the two Mandator-class star dreadnoughts linked up with the Ardent Defender and the Jedi Katana fleet heavy cruisers. But they did so in orbit, not coming forward just yet, as if the defenders were

uncertain if coming out was worth the punishment they would take away from the firepower of the planet.

“We’re within sprint range,” Shaak announced suddenly, glancing at the tactical screen.

“Nice.” With that, the Wild Blade shifted, turning on its tail and blasting back outward towards the incoming Munificent-class. The sudden shift took the enemy Vultures surprise, and the Vultures couldn’t quite reform fast enough before suddenly, the Wild Blade was behind most of the enemy starfighters, racing to close with the Munificent who had moved ahead of the Lucrehulks.

“Ahsoka, switch with me, take over the main weapons. Scout, do you know enough about the Dovin Basal to use it?” Shaak asked.

“Yes Master!” came from two young female voices and Shaak stood up, letting Ahsoka take her place, Shaak sliding into the fourth chair and staring at the tactical plot. At the same time, for the first time in this fight, Ranma reached behind him and pulled the cognition hood down over his head, consciously letting the needles penetrate the back of his neck.

Ahsoka did the same as Ranma took the ship down and then up above one Munificent-class. The somewhat longer ship quickly tried to flip on its axis to bring its spinal-mounted gun to bear, but it couldn’t do so fast enough. Ahsoka fired the instant she could and the magma cannons blasted out, while the proton torpedoes locked on, a full fusillade crashing into the same position.

Once more, the ‘power to a point’ concept the Wild Blade was designed around proved to be deadly. The enemy ship’s shields failed in that area, the ion cannons blasted out, and whole segments of the Confederacy ship’s weapons and shielding died.

Ranma twisted them around, unable to stay put as several of the other Munificent-class had been able to respond quickly, bringing their spinal mounted turbolasers to bear. One shot hit them, doing more damage to the Wild Blade’s shields than the entirety of the previous dogfight, knocking the shields down into the bottom of the green zone even as Ranma twisted around and fired back at that ship in turn.

But behind them, Anakin directed his Coralskipper squadron into an attack on the battered enemy ship. Four died to the close-range defenses, but the rest fired their magma cannons into the battered ship’s unprotected side, cracking the ship’s outer hull and turning it into floating debris.

Twelve more Munificent-class ships died before the Wild Blade’s shielding turned yellow. They took nearly a wing of Coralskippers with them, but that was fine by the defenders. Yet in that time, the Munificent-class had turned three of the Kuat Remnant cruisers into

debris, battered another two into retreating, and were in the process of adding four more to that tally.

“Kuat Remnant, pull back. Master Tiin, pull your Coralskippers back,” Shaak barked. “The enemy fleet is finally moving forward.”

At her command the Kuat Remnant retreated. The Coralskippers also retreated for the moment, as the rest of the Confederacy fleet moved up to join. The Hardcell frigate and troop transport ships spread out, with only twenty of them remaining behind the bulk of the Confederacy fleet. Ten of the Lucrehulks remained behind with these Hardcell units, along with fifty Munificent-class, a dangerously sized reserve, in Shaak’s opinion.

Regardless, it seemed as if the probing and dogfighting was done. The enemy admiral no doubt felt he had the measure of his enemy. Now the entire enemy fleet came forward like a large, crescent-shaped towards the planet. It wasn’t as thick top or bottom as Shaak felt it should be but that was fine.

“I could wish more of them were right across from us,” Ranma grumbled.

But Shaak shook her head. “Don’t. If they did that, they might well be able to punch through here despite our best efforts. We don’t have much depth to our scattered satellites and mines because we had to cover a globe rather than a distinct zone. This way, they are playing into our hands.”

For a given value, anyway. There are still far too many of the Enemy. And what are they doing with the Hardcells?

“Master Tiin, activate the second and third Coralskipper groups on this side of Wayland,” Shaak ordered.

Two more hordes of Coralskippers powered up, racing forward. With Anakin and Tiin in overall command, they flashed forward, hitting the enemy fleet as it incorporated the scattered, mauled remnants of its own fighter wing and the Munificents sent forward previously.

As Shaak and Ranma watched, the enemy capital ships began to engage these new Coralskipper groups, which fought and died where they stood. Which was what they were supposed to do. On Shaak’s orders, the survivors of the first group were sent forward, along with the *Wild Blade*. And behind them, the *Ardent Defender* was now moving forward to assist, leaving behind the rest of the capital ships, who were only slowly moving out of orbit over the planet.

Perhaps that should’ve been a clue that something was going on, but the attacking admiral did not realize anything was wrong, and Shaak waited, watching as the Coralskippers

gave ground. The Ardent Defender reached the battlefield, long range turbolaser fire striking at the enemy capital ships, while the Wild Blade flashed around the enemy formation.

Trusting Ranma and her padawan (or rather, their padawans) to fight the ship, Shaak kept her eyes on the overall battle. She watched as the enemy crescent pressed forward, ordering the Kuat Remnant ships forward, as if they were coming forward on their own, unwilling to wait near the planet, pulling the Jedi units with them. The Mandator class ships, the Scalawaq and Moneymaker, stayed together, moving towards the center of the enemy formation, seemingly waiting for the enemy to come to them.

Dazzled by the sight of the Ardent Defender, the damage the Wild Blade was doing and the losses to the defending starfighters, the enemy didn't notice the mines at all. Not until it was too late.

"Yurrick, send the activation code on my mark..." Shaak murmured, watching the overall battle, feeling another Jedi die, followed by two more in quick succession. *A Master and padawan pair, undoubtedly. How many of our brethren will die in this war?*

The signal she was talking about was for the single-shot satellites. Unlike the mines, they were not designed to go unnoticed, so the defenders had set it up that they could be activated by a signal from Wayland. Further, the mines were also deactivated at present. All the better to come online when the enemy was fully within the mine field, instead of hitting its outer edge.

"Wait for it..." She whispered, and just as she did, one of the Lucrehulks engaged against the Ardent Defender broke off, causing a cascade effect within the enemy fleet. Seeing this as a sign the game was up, Shaak shouted, "NOW!"

Powering up, the simple IFF programs within the mines found enemies nearby and instantly began to attack, launching themselves at them with single-minded purpose. The one-shot satellites came online slower, but they too found a target rich environment and fired their single shots.

Space around the Confederacy fleet exploded in a kaleidoscope of colors. Ion cannons blasted out, planetary grade turbolasers targeting the Enemy capital ships. Quad laser satellites thundered in furious retort, demolishing Vulture after Vulture as their motherships reeled.

Dozens of Munificent-class below, disintegrated or blown out of space like they were nothing. Their armor just was not good enough to survive once their shields went down. In contrast, while the Hardcells too took a ferocious pounding, more than fifty of them disappearing from the scanners, Shaak was surprised at how many mines or satellite-strikes it took to kill them.

Most importantly, Lucrehulks reeled as well. Seven were horribly mangled and began to retreat, while six others stayed put, their shields down, but the rest of their systems still

working as they fired at the satellites around them. Four more simply disintegrated, coming apart at the seams after being targeted by hundreds of mines and dozens of satellites.

As Shaak watched, the remaining Hardcell ships moved into an outer wedge around the rest of the enemy fleet, their weapons stabbing out return, destroying many of the remaining satellites. The mines were hard to hit even now they were powered up, but they could be spotted when they started to move to attack the target. And now the obviously expendable Hardcell ships soaked them up, dying while the rest of the fleet began to clear the mine field around them.

Yet regardless of the quick thinking of the enemy Admiral the odds had just shifted. Not in the favor of the defendants, there were still far too many enemy ships out there. But it had become a far more even fight.

As the remaining satellites fired and were destroyed in turn, the Wild Blade and Ardent Defender continued to strike at the enemy fleet. The Wild Blade used its speed and maneuverability to dance among the wounded enemy ships, killing off the few Hardcell units that could engage it or ignoring them to engage the larger mangled ships among the enemy.

The Ardent Defender almost ignored the wounded ships. Instead, it moved forward, drawing the fire of the remaining Lucrehulks down on it still further.

"Kuat Remnant, my fellow Jedi, move above and below the main enemy fleet and engage the reserves," Shaak ordered. "Scalawag, Moneymaker," she paused as Ranma snickered before rolling her eyes and going on, "Move forward to aid the Ardent Defender. Master Tiin, commit the manned starfighters."

"Janice, Cro, I'm rolling out the fighters, go get some!" Ranma shouted into the intercom, as he twisted the ship around a Munificent-class. That ship wasn't the target presently, and Ahsoka fired the main weapons into the damaged shields of a Lucrehulk. Ion canons first, then magma cannons, before proton torpedoes smashed into undefended hull.

At her command, the Mandator class ships moved forward quickly. They too targeted the unwounded Lucrehulks, banks of turbolasers exchanging fire. The rest of the allied fleet broke into two groups, going above and below the ravaged enemy fleet coming down to engage the reserves.

Yet while the momentum of the battle was on the defender's side, the enemy still had them badly outnumbered. The battle continued, as the enemy fleet continued to try and expand, becoming a glow around the defenders. And now, the surviving Hardcell units, accompanied by three Lucrehulk, and a dozen scattered Munificent-class ships got past them, racing towards the planet.

Wayland took them under fire quickly. The mountains defenses coming online, their guns blasting out with just as much power as one shot satellites before them. At the same time, shields flashed into existence over the mountain and its defenses, while other shields appeared over the Kuat Remnant settlements. Those settlements however did not fire at the enemy capital ships. What few active defenses they had were made to engage enemy starfighters and landing craft.

Ships reeled out of formation, but the Hardcell units were designed to take this kind of punishment band several of them smashed into the atmosphere, heading down towards the mountain fortress.

OOOOOOO

Inside the mountain, Master Saa nodded to a group of six Jedi led by Obi-Wan and K’Kruhk. Quinlan had already headed to the front. “Join the battle line, please. The Nova Guard are going to come under attack soon.”

Obi-Wan nodded, and exited the control room, reflecting that it was just like his old friend to be so anxious to for the battle to begin. *Yet, I can still tell something is bothering him. I hope he does not take any foolish risks.*

Outside in the hangar, Obi-Wan nodded to the group of Nova Guard he would be working with today. This time he was going to be taking the position of a brigade commander, and he hoped fervently that this battle would go in, largely anyway, the same way the other had: with the defenders able to give up ground instead of lives. “Let us be off, gentlemen.”

He did not notice K’Kruhk pausing, the Force whispering to him as he frowned pensively. K’Kruhk too had not thought anything of Quinlan’s eagerness for the fray. Indeed, he had joked with his old friend about Quinlan having trouble with the ‘no passion’ part of the oath.

Something had flashed through Quinlan’s eyes at that. At the time, K’Kruhk had put it down to Quinlan’s retort about their disparate races seeing passion very differently. Yet while that had not been the first time K’Kruhk had talked to Quinlan since he had arrived on Wayland, K’Kruhk felt his own balance in the Force was somewhat in abeyance, a feeling that had been growing in him every time he and his old friend crossed paths. *Quinlan... something about my old friend is off, something that has been niggling me all the harder every time I have seen him.*

High above, mortars began to fire, while tanks and Vultures were unloaded from the Hardcells in their hundreds. Entire battalions of infantry started forward. All of them, every droid on the battlefield, began to move towards the mountain even as their landing zones came under fire.

The Third Battle of Wayland had entered its third stage, and K’Kruhk knew he should be out there. But something, some barely discernable hint from the Force, was warning him, telling K’Kruhk that he should stay within the mountain.

I have been putting my growing concern for my friend down to feeling the kernel of the Dark Side he has fought against for much of his life. But now, now I am wondering if perhaps I have been blinded by what I wanted to see. Perhaps as many others have...

With that, the Whipid turned away, pulling Force Stealth around himself as he disappeared into the shadows of the mountain. *I can only hope I am wrong, but I fear that I am not, and we might have brought a viper into our midst.*

OOOOOOO

Twisting the controls of the Wild Blade around to dodge a series of torpedoes, Ranma grimaced as they were hit instead by several turbolaser blasts. A second later, Scout shouted a warning. “Master, our shields are down to the red!”

“Okay, Scout, now we’re going to put even more pressure on you,” Ranma said slowly, flinging the Wild Blade sideways. Ahsoka fired, and then they were past the enemy Lucrehulk, its shields still intact, but battered, letting a group of Sprites and one of the Mandator class to knock them down.

Ranma whirled the Wild Blade around attacking the same ship from a different angle as he continued. “The shields need to have some time to restore themselves before they burn out. Take them offline in segments. Always segments away from the main weapons systems. We can afford to lose the quad lasers more than the main batteries.”

“Dour groan: Master, that would remove all my fun,” HK droned, his voice overriding Scouts yelp.

“WHA, but Master, there’s no way even a living ship’s armor...” Scout began.

Ahsoka though interrupted, with Ranma busy dodging around incoming fire. “Don’t worry Scout. There’s this weird Force trick called ki reinforcement. Think of it like the toughness training but for ships.”

Scout’s mouth formed an o-shape, and then she was obeying quickly. The ship rocked instantly under hits from behind and below, but continued moving, and a second later the targeted Lucrehulk’s shields failed. Dozens of Sprites and Coralskippers pounced, many dying thanks to the interlinked fire of the Lucrehulk’s division-mates, but the Moneymaker’s fire crashed over the ship, and a second later, the starfighters finished the job.

“One less Lucrehulk,” Ranma breathed.

As the rest of her crew worked, Shaak continued to direct the battle. The Ardent Defender slowly fell back, with the two Mandator class shielding it, and taking more fire in turn. She ordered in more of the Coralskippers from around the planet, fully committing their starfighter reserves to the battle. *There are still too many enemy capital ships, drat it! Thankfully we seem to have fully blunted their Vultures.*

Elsewhere, the Kuat Remnants had lost ten more cruisers, although eight of them were able to jump to hyperspace, along with four of the Katana class cruisers. That was the other reason why Shaak had ordered them to deal with the enemy reserves: they were far enough out-system still that they were beyond the nominal hyperspace limit of the star. Out there, there was nothing to stop wounded ships from jumping for deep space.

But three other katana-class had died with all hands. Thanks to the ten Lucrehulks out there, despite the number of ships being even and the defenders sending several wings of starfighters with them, the Confederacy had the advantage in firepower. While many of their smaller ships had been knocked out of the fight or destroyed, only one of the Lucrehulks had been similarly damaged.

“Shaak, I think it’s time to retreat,” Ranma grumbled. “We might be okay, but the rest of the fleet’s getting poundeSHIIIT!!”

As Ranma watched, Janice’s Flashfist disappeared from the scanners. It had just been struck by a capital grade proton torpedo heading towards the Scalawaq. There was nothing left but atoms.

“DAMN IT!” Ranma howled, the Wild Blade dodging around incoming fire and turning to engage the ship that had just killed one of Ranma’s oldest companions.

“NO!” Ahsoka cried out, looking away from her own task for a moment, her eyes wide as once more, the reality of war bore down on her.

Turning the co-pilot’s chair around, Shaak reached over, gripping her padawan’s shoulder as she closed her eyes, also saddened for the loss of her friend. But when she spoke, her voice remained clear and controlled. “All forces, retreat to orbit. Repeat, pull back. Jedi Coralskipper commanders, leave your assigned Coralskippers where they are, and make for orbit. Captains Morgan, Erasmus, and Leclrek, link your system to mine.”

The captains of the Mandator-class and the Ardent Defender obeyed, and Shaak kept her eyes closed as she whispered, “Tune, turn over astrogation to me.” Linked to the other nearby Jedi, Shaak concentrated, preparing a hyperjump.

A minute passed as the Wild Blade and the three larger ships continued to take hits. As they did, the last of the Kuat Remnant’s horribly battered cruisers jumped to hyperspace and out of the system.

Say what you would about the odd name of the original class of ship, the katana fleet heavy cruisers had better shielding than most other vessels of a similar size and only three of them had died up to this point. The remaining nine rest had been hammered, but were still fighting, with much of their systems still working. Including, for the majority, their hyperspace engines.

Seconds later, they too, along with the time all of the defending capital ships jumped into hyperspace. By that point the majority of the manned starfighters, those that hadn't been destroyed, had already retreated. They left behind a single one of their number, who died in seconds to the combined might of the enemy's reserve echelon.

Instead of jumping out of the system, the Jedi and their allies jumped inward, appearing in orbit over the planet of Wayland, having threaded the needle of the star's gravity well to hit the outer edge of the planet's gravity well instead.

There, they wiped out the few remaining enemy ships in orbit almost without thinking. Wayland had nearly demolished them by that point, but the damage was done. Several corps worth of droids had reached the ground.

Meanwhile, the enemy reserve came forward, joining with the rest of the enemy fleet. Even now, the enemy had a massive fleet. Forty-one Lucrehulks although many of them were damaged in one degree or another. Eighty Munificent-class, all of whom had taken some damage, and thirteen Hardcells rounded out the remaining fleet. The Lucrehulks had proven once more they were horribly hard to kill.

Now the enemy Hardcells moved forward ahead of the rest, spreading out while a reserve force of Vultures launched from the Lucrehulks. They moved forward, making certain there were no surviving mines or satellite-based traps.

Without the ship taking further damage, the Mon-Calamari designed shields of the *Ardent Defender* and *Wild Blade* began to regenerate, while the other ships waited stoically, their own shields far slower to recharge.

As they did, Ranma sighed, leaning back and breathing deeply. This battle wasn't very hard on his reflexes or anything like that, but the loss of Janice stung something fierce. So much so he only noticed now that two of the Nova Guard replacements had also died, and both Fabian and Keala, who were piloting borrowed Aethersprites, had pulled back, heading down to land on the far side of the planet. But they were at least alive, unlike Janice.

Janice, the Night Owl who Ranma and Shaak had first met on the moon of Yavin. Janice, the snarky, tough, fun-loving Mando who had been with them ever since they met back on Mandalore. Janice, Ranma's friend.

Behind him, Scout got out of her chair and unabashedly wrapped Ahsoka in a hug, the young Togrutan obviously distraught despite her Jedi training and Scout wanting to give what comfort she could despite her own. Even HK was silent, somewhat. Ranma could hear him muttering under his breath about making the enemy "Pay for offing one of the few meatbags I have met worth the blood in their fleshy bodies."

"Yeah, well, let's go and get that payback right now HK," Ranma growled. He stood up, looking down at Ahsoka, and gently patted her head. "I, I ain't gonna say it's gonna be alright kid, and I know I ain't the best at this kind of thing. But I would say she wouldn't want us ta feel sad. Just keep on kicking ass. Maybe use her name as a battlecry or something in our next orbital drop."

Ahsoka snorted but turned to look at the older Togrutan as she became aware of her touch on Ahsoka's arm, caught between grief and shame at showing it, knowing that was not what a Jedi should do. But Shaak merely smiled. While Shaak also felt the loss of their friend, she was a Jedi. Grief and anger at Janice's passing could not be allowed to color her connection to the Force and so she compartmentalized those feelings aside for now.

"Do not feel guilty for feeling attachment or grief, Ahsoka," Shaak murmured, before reciting a portion of the Old Oath. "There is emotion, yet peace. Acknowledge your emotions, but do not let your grief cloud your judgement, to let it make you angry or hateful. Passion, yet serenity. Simply feeling pain at the passing of a friend is no weakness. Remember the good times with her, and then release the sadness at her passing into the Force."

For a moment, Ahsoka just looked back at her master, then she reached up to pat Scout's arm where it was around her shoulders. She took the other girl's hand, squeezed, and then breathed in and out a few times before nodding., her eyes clear of anger, but still showing grief at her older friend's passing. "Yes, Master."

"Good." With Ahsoka seen to, and now once more centered in the force to a degree Shaak could feel, Shaak looked over at Ranma. "You're going then? I admit it's a good tactic, but you and HK are still going to be in a lot of danger. After all you've never practiced reaching out to the Force in this manner."

Ranma nodded grimly, then leaned down, kissing Shaak gently. "I'll be fine love," he whispered, then pulled back, heading out of the cockpit. "Come on HK, let's get killing."

Ahsoka slid into the vacated pilot's chair, leaving the other one for her master to take while vacated the spot, nodding at her master, while HK followed his master, a disturbing monotone of "Ecstatic joy, oh goody-goody, Master you know precisely what to say to me, oh goody-goody," coming from them.

Shaak frowned as she looked after them but moments later, the two of them were moving though transport tubes onto the same kind of boarding shuttles they had used in the

Second Battle of Wayland. But these had one big difference: the cloaking device they had found working examples of within the mountain. The examples had been copied by Anakin and a few other technologically inclined Jedi, then placed on the boarding shuttles. As soon as the shuttle pulled away, that cloaking device activated, hiding the small shuttles from the eyes of friend and foe alike.

Now, these devices were not perfect. Signals could not detect a ship with the cloaking device on it, but neither could any sensors go out. Yet for Jedi, this was not really an insurmountable issue, since they could use the Force to sense the world beyond the shuttle. Ranma would be forced to do the same.

Still, my love is nothing if not adaptable. He will be fine. As for the rest of the battle... should we play our final card? It was either use them now, or when the enemy got within firing range of the planet once more. They had been lucky when the Confederacy broke off and sent a battle group around the main battle to attack the planet as the limited orbitals, the bare-bones gantries over the six captured Lucrehulks and a few other small stations, were over the equator. The mountain that was the enemy's real target was not, and too few ships had made orbit to spare any attention in that direction.

Using them now will let our remaining capital ships and starfighters keep the battle from reaching orbit once more for a little while longer but waiting could make the shock more complete. For the first time in the battle, Shaak was uncertain which way to go, and closed her eyes, reaching out to the Force once more.

However, as she did, Shaak shuddered, a feeling like someone had dumped freezing water over her head coming to her. Something was wrong, something was very, very wrong. And it was centered on Wayland. In the mountain. The space battle no longer mattered if whatever was going on down there was not stopped.

Yet at the same time, Shaak could also feel that K'Kruhk and Saa were aware of the same thing. *Can I trust them to handle whatever it is?* For a moment, Shaak felt uncertain, felt the future and her own ability to impact it balancing on a knife's edge.

Checking the screen, Ranma and HK were gone. She could sense her lover but using the cover of the moving starfighters and colliers to block their disappearance, the shuttles had already gone under their cloaking devices, which meant no signal could get through, so Shaak could not contact him. It was really up to her which way to jump.

Finally, she decided to remain where she was. Saa was one of the most learned and powerful Masters in the Order. And K'Kruhk had survived everything being part of the Wild Blade's crew could throw at him ever since Ranma and Shaak had met him on Dac. *I must trust in my allies, and in their strength in the Force.*

With that, she looked over at Ahsoka. “Take the weapons, my young padawan. Scout, keep one eye on the Dovin Basal and the other on the tactical screen. If you see anything unusual, tell me. For now, Ahsoka make sure the collier finishes loading our proton torpedo magazines, and keep our shields powered down to let them recharge faster.”

As both girls replied in the affirmative, Shaak also looked at the tactical screen, wincing a bit. The Confederacy fleet was now moving forward, with the remaining Lucrehulks forming a large hammer, expanding out in every direction, with the rest of the fleet forming the handle of the hammer, ready to move in and engage. Seeing that, she made a split-second decision.

Opening the communication gear, she sent out a message. “Commodore Fastil, you are free to engage. The time for traps has passed, and we need all hands-on deck from now on.”

At her words the six captured Lucrehulks from the Second Battle of Wayland began to move, their makeshift repair stations coming apart all around them. Their shields came online, as did their weapons systems. Indeed, everything on them was fully operational. The Kuat Remnant had lost none of their efficiency with the destruction of their homeworld.

The six ships moved forward to join the other defenders, and Shaak reached out for the Force once more, then out to the rest of the Jedi in space. As she did, Shaak pushed through the confusion and disquiet of a moment ago, knowing that her course was set.

Ahsoka and Scout both gasped, feeling the tendrils of her thoughts as she wove a gestalt among them all, then as she spoke on a broadband communication, smiled. “Jedi, allies, friends. We stand with our backs against the wall. Our enemy is numerous, our resources fully committed. Let us show them that together the determination of sentients and the Force can defeat arrogance and brute numbers.”

There was a cheer across the coms and the battered, beleaguered defenders moved forward once more to engage the incoming tide.

OOOOOO

The land portion of the invasion was frenetic and bloody from the get go. Due to the number of Hardcells that tried to make landfall, more of them were able to do so. Where before there had been less than ten drop zones, now there were two dozen, the droids within the Hardcells spreading out and attacking the mountain from every angle they could. And once more the sheer number of droids such ships could carry was **appalling**. Despite the defense of the mountain doing a good job of nearly flattening several landings zones, the droid armies moved forward over the ruined blasted landscape, closing with the dug in Nova Guard.

Within the first twenty minutes, Obi-Wan and more than a dozen other Jedi had moved forward to join the defense in the front lines. There they headhunted droid commanders, organized reinforcements, or turned aside particularly hard assaults spearheaded by companies

of the formidable B2 Super Battle Droids. As in the last battle, the heavily wooded and hilly nature of the terrain meant tanks were not useful on the front lines. Even the Hailfire missile platform could not traverse this kind of terrain with impunity.

Even better for the Jedi, this army hadn't been given any Magna Guards. So, if they were able to close, the droids lacked a natural counter against the lightsabers of the Jedi.

The Nova Guard repeated the same kind of tactics they had used previously: they held each defense line as best they could, but retreated instead of taking casualties. They were helped in this by the amount of work the Nova Guard had done to further expand their defensive zone, the number of heavy weapons they had brought in, and two regiments of Kuat Remnant volunteers. Not frontline troops, they freed up more Nova Guard from rear echelon duties and brought along small portable shield generators that could be used and then moved around in this terrain better than the version the droids were using.

The enemy forces speed and greater number of landing zones however, meant the Nova Guard's defense was far harder than previously, and they started to lose people regardless quickly. The Hailfire type's attacks, the number of rockets they fired, were a severe danger, not so much to the Nova Guard, but to their organization. The rockets couldn't damage the defenses much but mixed in with the explosive variety was a type of rocket that created the equivalent of electronic chaff in the air above the battlefield. This occasionally cut units off from communication, and resulted in two full companies being lost, cut off and unable to call for reinforcements, within thirty minutes of the land battle beginning.

But they were still slowing the enemy army's advance to a crawl. Unless the enemy was reinforced two or three times over, there was no way the droid army was going to break through the mountain's outer defenses. Not without days of unrelenting combat.

However, the droid army's assault was not the only assault the defenders had to face. And given the now disjointed nature of communication around the battlefield, no one thought it strange when Quinlan Vos stopped responding...

With the mountain's shields up, the hanger doors were wide open, men coming and going, Kuat remnant volunteers driving tanks out to take part in a counter-strike or back in to be rearmed, wounded coming in, hover-bikes carrying blaster cells and other material forward.

To one side of this frenetic activity sat the tramp freighter Quinlan had arrived in, completely forgotten. He hadn't returned to it except to sleep since he arrived, and none of the other Jedi had been aboard. Perhaps that too should have been a red flag, but given how rarely Quinlan was even around his ship, no one, not even Master Saa, had felt any curiosity about the ship.

As the battle raged outside to an ever higher tempo, a series of small panels along the belly of the ship slowly, silently irised open. The silence was not necessary given the bustle

around them, and even the *tink*, *TINK*, *tink* sound of small metal balls falling out and bouncing around the floor below the ship went unheard. These small balls spread out, tiny repulsors moving them around the hanger.

Two volunteers, a man and woman were the first to notice these odd ball things. They were carrying a stretcher away from a hover -bike, two more wounded being loaded on stretchers behind them, when the man stopped, staring. "What in the world are those things?"

"They look like toys, or maybe really small examples of those floating target balls the Nova Guard use to practice?" the woman muttered, before gasping as the ball she was staring at exploded, sending smoke everywhere.

The balls had not spread very widely before being spotted, but the smoke they now emitted covered still more dropping from the Starborne. More smoke spread quickly through the hanger, billowing out of the hanger doors. This was accompanied by a few that emitted loud, screeching noises, designed to send most sentients running or clapping hands over ears. And a third type emitted an EMP pulse that knocked out the security cameras and any radios within the hanger.

This caused mass confusion throughout the hanger, with volunteers scrambling to get away however they could, hunker down or, in some cases, guard the wounded they were seeing to. The few Nova Guard combat capable grabbed up blasters and tried to figure out what was going on, trying to report in, only to fail.

Into this chaos the Starborne's ramp came down and several dozen droids appeared there. Their chassis looked much the same as the B-1, but their snouts were much shorter, they were colored matte black and their weapons were special DXR-4 disruptor rifles. There was a second gun at their side which did not look like a normal blaster, heavier with wider barrels. Vibro-knives were also clamped to their sides, back or forearm, and one wore a vibro-sword.

These were the BX commando droids, special operations units of the Confederacy. This was a kind of droid that had not been seen very often, but which had proven deadly the few times they had been. Faster, better armed, and smarter, they were expensive but for missions like this they were perfect.

On silent feet they raced forward, aiming to head deeper into the mountain. Most were able to bypass the confusion around them, but twice the droids almost bumped into people. One was a bumbling groups of volunteers, which gaped at the sudden appearance of four strange droids. The five volunteers died without even a chance to scream. The other time, unfortunately, was with a group of Nova Guard who had formed up together.

Moving through the hanger towards the entrance leaded further into the mountain, the reinforced, if-makeshift Nova Guard fireteam wished to put up a line of defense there. As

several of the droids loomed out of the smoke around them, the warriors did not hesitate. **"FIRE! We've got intruders boys!"**

Both sides fired, the blasters of the Nova Guard warriors and the disruptor-style beams of the specially designed droids crossing one another at the equivalent of knife-range for blasters. Three droids went down to two Nova Guard, as the Nova Guard retreated, ducking behind crates or falling to their bellies to fire back. But all around them more droids closed in, and the courageous defenders fell quickly.

Behind them the smoke was boiling out of the hanger. While this was causing a lot of consternation from the Nova Guard tanks outside, a company of Yurrick's reserve had already responded.

They found Knight Vos also there. The Jedi nodded at them, then activated his lightsaber. "Follow me, we'll make for the entrance, set up a perimeter there and get in touch with Yurrick and Master Saa. We might need to clear the mountain from top to bottom."

"Sir!" the captain answered, and they followed the Jedi into the smoke. Unfortunately, despite the HUD of their helmet visors, seeing through this thick smoke was hard, and they soon lost sight of him. *Strange, given his lightsaber's light, blast it, he must have raced ahead. Too few Jedi are used to working with military forces.*

A second later, the enemy saw them, and out of the smoke disruptor bolt flashed, killing or crippling. But the Nova Guard captain twisted around in shock, hearing a loud grinding noise behind them. "Kriff! They're closing the hanger doors!"

Ordering his men to push forward hard, the captain hoped to find the controls and undo that, while also completing his first plan. But soon his command were surrounded, and from behind, a green lightsaber shown. Right before its owner lashed out with some kind of lightning attack that sent more than a dozen of his men to the ground dead.

Attacked from all sides and sometimes with their fire lanes disrupted by survivors of the people who had initially been in the hanger, the Nova Guard company fought hard. Even when he got among them, Quinlan found his lightsaber matched by an expanding staff several of the Nova Guard carried. Luckily for him, the staffs were not made of a metal that could withstand a lightsaber strike, and he eventually killed the last of them, scowling in anger and fingering his thigh, where the bastard had landed a blow from his staff end. *Thankfully they weren't plasma-based weapons or else I would have been having an even worse time of it.*

"Losses and objectives?" he asked, looking over at the nearest droid.

"Seventeen units have been destroyed. We have thirty-two remaining. Outer hanger doors are closed, the controls have been destroyed. We have command of the hallway leading into the hanger up to the elevator. All local defenders have been silenced," the droid reported,

while someone screamed in the background, the noise cut off with all the suddenness of a dagger through the heart. Each infiltration droid had a hardened com uplink inside them, letting them communicate easily even while using EMP or other chaff-makers themselves.

“Good. Move forward. Split half off to try and shut down the shield generators, their discretion as to how. The other half is to move up the mountain to the target areas I uploaded to you last night. I will follow along. Do not get bogged down in combat unless you have to.” Quinlan, Agent Invictus of the Sith Order, commanded. And with that, the diminished infiltration team moved off.

OOOOOOO

Despite the tricks of the attackers, the defenders became aware of them almost instantly. While Yurrick dealt with this calmly, ordering some troops stationed within the mountain – units mauled during the Second Battle of Wayland, mainly, to assume defensive positions in strategically important areas, Master Saa frowned, leaning back in her chair.

Before this, she had been directing the anti-battery fire and medical personnel to and from the mountain, taking away some of Yurrick’s workload. Now however, she was wondering if she should have been more liberally using the Force. *All I was able to sense was a sudden upswell of Dark Side energies and now this. Nothing that could point me towards...*

The Neti master paused, her long fingers twitching for a moment as she did. *No. Stop that. You have allowed past association and the desire to not jump to conclusions blind you to the reality. Of all the Jedi still on Wayland only Quinlan Vos has ever been known to have skirted the Dark Side. And he worked with Master Bulq before he left the Order as few others present have.*

You should have seen this, you of all people should have, T’ra Saa. And you did not because you let yourself become convinced that Quinlan had not changed from that young, somewhat bitter youth Tholme taught so long ago... But I cannot deny it any longer. Quinlan, my love’s former padawan, has turned to the Dark Side. But just because he has fallen, does not mean that he cannot come back... not yet. And if he is acting at all, there is only one true target he must be going for.

With that, Saa stood up, nodding to the Marshal. “Marshal do not let this assault turn your attention from the battle outside. I will help deal with these saboteurs.” She scowled slightly. “As for the door to the hanger, you have my permission to destroy it if you need to. Alert the slicers on duty. They must expect trouble to come knocking. Nothing matters more than the data within the mountain’s computers, nothing.”

The Nova Guard Marshal nodded, cocking his head to one side as he watched the Neti woman leave the room. *I am not the best at reading Jedi body language, but she seemed... resolute, perhaps? Or sad?* Shaking that thought off, Yurrick gave out the orders needed, adding

another message on top of that one to make of the units within the mountain to report to the command center. With that done, and trusting his people to know what to do, Yurrick turned back to his own work as above them, the battle in space entered the third phase, with the husbanded Lucrehulks moving forward to join the rest of the defenders.

OOOOOOO

Invictus directed his sabotage team with ease always heading upwards, using the layout he had downloaded to the droids over the past few days to bypass what defenses they could, destroying whatever they could. Occasionally the Nova Guard defenders would surprise the droids and vice versa, and five more droids died, killing twice that number of Nova Guard. Disruptors could punch through Nova Guard armor, and none of the units inside the mountain were equipped with their riot shields at present.

More than once they also ran into Jedi. Invictus let the droids deal with them, which they did. Once, Invictus even watched them do it, hidden under Force Stealth at the end of the hall.

Two human Jedi, Clark Exxa and his padawan Ivan Lefay her lightsabers in hand. They had gotten the call from master Saa, and knew that the mountain had been invaded, and had come up here from where they had been helping the wounded. Both Consulars, they had not been sent to the front line, but were capable lightsaber duelist.

The droids started the small engagement by tossing smoke bombs forward. The Jedi responded by using the Force to waft it away and then the droids were around the curve in the hall, firing. Two of them were firing their disruptors, which the two Jedi deflected into the walls around them, but other two had pulled the odd, double-barreled weapons from their sides.

Clark batted aside the blaster bolt, turning it straight back towards the droid who fired in a perfect example of Shien, turning its head to slag. But then he gasped as something molten hot, hit his shoulder, burning through. This caused his next deflection to nearly fail, and even though the bolt was successfully redirected, the solid-state slug that had been fired to strike directly behind the bolt was deflected back into Clark right above the groin. He went down crying out in agony. "GAAAhhhh!"

"Master!" Ivan screamed, turned twisting around and bringing his lightsaber around to deflect another bolt meant for Clark, missing one meant for himself. The disruptor shot took him in the side, searing through and sending him to the ground. Neither Jedi had been put through the toughness training to the point stop a disrupter bolt, or a bit of molten steel striking them.

The three surviving droids rushed forward, vibro-knives stabbing. This took a bit, but soon the two Jedi were dead, and the droids continued on their way, only to run into yet another defensive zone set up by the Nova Guard. This time there was a full squad dug in

behind durasteel walls where the hallway split, heading in two different directions. With them were two heavy repeating blasters, and a short-range grenade launcher.

The droids tried to use their smoke grenades from around the corner, but the Nova Guard fired their grenade launcher, bouncing their own grenade around the corner. Only Quinlan quickly grabbing it and halting it in place with the Force before dodging backward saved his life and two more of his droids were blasted into pieces.

Four more droids tried to rush forward under cover fire to close and lob grenades over the bollards but died from the Nova Guard's fire before Quinlan reached out with the Force. Using it in this manner, without seeing the objects he was trying to control, was somewhat difficult, but he still did so, grabbing up his troop's grenades and finishing the job, sending them over the bollards into the center of the Nova Guard position.

Several muffled explosions later, he waved the surviving droids forward. "Move, blast it, we are taking too much time."

Two more similarly well-defended positions – although these were automatic weapons stations rather than Nova Guard, Quinlan sensed people moving toward them and scowled. He looked around, realizing that he was down to only fifteen droids with him. "Hold position. We have incoming. Contact the others, check how the other infiltration team is doing."

One of the nearby droids paused, one foot in the air as he communicated via their coms with the others. Punching through the solid stone of the mountain between levels was difficult without using the local landed lines, but they were able to do so enough to get an idea of what was happening. "Not well, Agent. They have lost two thirds of their number. The Nova Guard are well dug in and are now sweeping up behind them as well."

Nodding, Invictus, gestured around them. "Six of you remain with me. The rest peel off and slow our pursuers down." The nature of the mountain fortress meant they couldn't try and lose their followers by doubling back and taking a different route or cutting through the walls and making their own. *We could to it slightly but it would place us too close to the command center and the elevators more routinely used rather than the stairs we have been using.*

Invictus ruefully admitted that he should probably have thought about getting some droidekas to help out. Their shields and greater firepower would have been better in the enclosed spaces of the mountain. But he hadn't had time before being ordered onto this mission, and he understood why. The secret of the Sith's true Lord had to be kept.

Reaching out with the Force Invictus could sense who was behind him as well, leading the team of Nova Guard forward. Master Saa, one of the few Jedi here I am uncertain I can match. Blast it. Still, even she can be slowed down if my droids do their job. "Do not attempt to hold one hard point. Slow them down anyway you can, up to and including destroying the passage," he finished.

“Roger, roger,” the droids responded, moving off quickly.

As the band separated, Invictus gestured to the two droids who remained with him. “You two, stay behind me out of sight. Come forward when I use the word ‘ignite.’ Otherwise I will try to bluff my way forward. Understood?”

The droids nodded, how else, robotically, and Invictus sped forward, the clanging of the droids’ feet behind him following quickly. This method allowed him to kill two more Jedi, who were completely unsuspecting of their brother Jedi. They let him pass, and then barely had a second for the Force to warn them before Invictus had pulled out two daggers and stabbed them through their backs. Both fell crying out in pain and shock before his lightsaber flicked on and Invictus finished them with a single strike.

Unfortunately for the traitor, he found one of the three Jedi he had least hoped to meet waiting for him. K’Kruhk stood in the hallway, his hands in the sleeves of his Jedi robe, watching the end of the hallway. And behind him stood several Jedi Knights, all of them with their lightsabers turned off currently, but waiting tensely. These were the Knights assigned to work with the slicers in the main computer room. Consulars to a man, they were not the threat K’Kruhk was, their names and faces barely registering.

Invictus paused as he came out of the stairwell, staring at this tableau. *Hmmpf, I should have expected K’Kruhk to have seen straight to the heart of the matter. Does that mean he suspects me? If so, that is somewhat annoying, but it doesn’t change anything at present.* With that thought, Invictus slowly moved forward, using both Force Cloak and Force Stealth, hoping that he could close, but without much hope this would succeed.

It didn’t. K’Kruhk pulled out his lightsaber, moving forward, his eyes locked on the traitor as the green blade activated with a *snap-hiss*. “I can sense you, old friend. And now that the Force has removed the blinders from my eyes, I can sense the darkness within you. I can feel the lives of the Jedi you have slain on you. It clings to you like blood stains on your clothing, their cries of betrayal a horror in the Force. Tell me, Quinlan, when did you fall to the Dark Side? Was it Master Bulq’s influence, or something else? The kernel of darkness within you have fought as long as I have known you?”

Invictus allowed his Force Cloak to fade, glaring out from under his dark hood at the five Jedi as the foursome behind K’Kruhk activated lightsabers, all blue to K’Kruhk’s green. But that was fine by Invictus. *Indeed, four Consulars will simply force my old friend to defend four more targets.*

“Always so sanctimonious K’Kruhk, always so quick to point fingers, although you are right in a way, this power has always been within me. When Darth Tyrannus was assigned to help me re-center myself after my aggressive outburst towards the Council,” he hissed the words, as if they left a foul taste in his mouth, which they did. “He instead opened my eye to the truth! Tyrannus showed me how to use my anger, how to achieve my true strength!”

“It is amazing to think of using your desires, your anger and fear as weapons against those that cause such emotions. But in the end, all you are left with is ash. The Dark Side cannot build without first destroying, cannot give without taking far more. I look at you, and all I see is but a pale shadow of the Jedi Knight I once knew, who started Knight Secura on the road to being the magnificent example of a Jedi she has become.”

“Do not mention her name!” Invictus snarled, his lightsaber hissing on as he stalked forward from the stairwell. His lightsaber was the normal green like his opponent’s, but it was quickly joined by a second, a shoto style blade whose small hilt had been hidden at the small of his back. When that blade hissed on, it was red in color as he bared his teeth at K’Kruhk. “You are not worthy of saying it! The Order took her away, wouldn’t let me go to her! The pain, the agony she felt, it is all The Order’s fault, the Order you follow so blindly K’Kruhk. I could have saved her, could have loved her, but no! Because of their fears we were separated!”

As he ranted, Invictus let his Force Cloak, which had been hiding most of his presence in the Force since he arrived on Wayland, falter. The Dark Side roiled out, thick, heady, fueled with hate and fury, impacting the Jedi in front of him, many of whom stumbled.

K’Kruhk didn’t. Indeed, he barely moved, simply shaking his massive head as he raised his lightsaber. “Is that why you fell? Unrequited desires for your padawan? That is disgusting Quinlan. And makes me wonder if I knew you at all. Truly, passion can lead to the Dark Side if you cannot control it.”

“Not just that moment,” Invictus snarled. “Not just that fact. But it was the start and will be the end. Aayla will be my prize when the Sith are ascendant!”

Snorting, K’Kruhk moved forward, waving the other Jedi to remain where they were. “And what would Knight Secura think of this? Of being a prize, of being a possession? After the trials she has gone through, I rather think that Knight Secura would not like that at all. Come back to the Force, Quinlan. There is still time to turn away from the Dark Side and it’s lies.”

“Hahahah! And even now, you try to convert me? Foolish, K’Kruhk. That holier-than-thou nonsense will be the death of you.” With that, Invictus charged forwards, while behind him, the six espionage droids still following him came up hiding in the shadows of the stairwell and letting their rifles rest on the lip of the stairwell.

Hearing the faint clang, Invictus snarled, “IGNITE! Target the Jedi behind the Whipid!”

The two droids raised their weapons from where they were laying down on the stairs, firing from the ground up towards the Jedi about eighty feet away, their weapons firing as fast as they could. Seeing this, K’Kruhk, who had been moving to meet his old friend’s charge, paused, his lightsaber flicking out in different directions. Behind him, the four Consulars also readied themselves, and between them, most of the disruptor bolts were blocked well enough for the slugs to also be redirected. But one got through, and a Duros Consular cried out as one

of the superheated slugs took him in the leg. Another stumbled back, having barely deflected the slug past his head.

As the droids stopped firing to plug another gas magazine into their disruptors Invictus charged forward, using both lightsabers in a modified Jar’Kai assault. *K’Kruhk has trouble with fast opponents in close quarters, I need to push him hard!*

At the same time, his presence in the Force continued to warp the Force around them, messing with the Force Precognition of the five Jedi in front of him. K’Kruhk dealt with it easily battering aside Invictus’ assaults and responding with his own, the blow so strong that Invictus grunted as the Sith agent was forced to block it. His attempt at a Force grab was similarly blocked, and Invictus flipped backwards and away before bouncing up onto the roof where he bounced back down behind K’Kruhk.

The Whiphid couldn’t turn fast enough and Invictus’ green lightsaber flicked around one of his opponent’s strikes bypassing his defense and cutting off his arm. The Jedi, a birdlike alien, cried out in shock, and the droids, now reloaded, switched their fire to him quickly, their disrupter beams flashing forward. Saa blocked them, but even she could not deflect the follow-on slugs enough for them to miss. One slammed into a leg, the other his chest and the Jedi went down.

“GRA!” K’Kruhk’s free hand grabbed Invictus neck, and before the Sith could do anything he found himself tossed back down the hall. This forced the droids to stop firing, and K’Kruhk bellowed, “Back! Back into the other room. Leave him to me!”

The remaining three Consulars did not obey, and a moment later, Invictus leaped to meet them. When he tried to get past K’Kruhk by leaping over him however, K’Kruhk used the Force to hold him in place, stabbing upwards. “Forgive me old friend!”

“Invictus barely got his lightsaber up in time to block the thrust, directing it to one side and breaking the other Jedi’s grip on him, falling downward. A Force Push of his own and a command to the droids had them targeting K’Kruhk, as Invictus landed and rolled. So busy was K’Kruhk with blocking the disruptor bolts and solid slugs from his face that Invictus was able to get behind him. One blade thrust backwards into the Whiphid’s side but skittered along it as if his skin was thick stone or metal, while Invictus’ red blade blocked and riposted, slicing the legs off a second Consular, a young Muun.

Then Invictus found himself slammed into the wall as K’Kruhk body-checked him. Invictus groaned at the impact, but he dropped a small flashbang from his belt. The grenade went off, and K’Kruhk cried out as he released his grip, the ingrained response of the blinded overcoming him for a moment as his free hand rose to his face.

Kicking up off the floor and wall, Invictus whirled in midair, his lightsaber crashing down, but K’Kruhk felt the strike coming through the Force and raised his blade to block. Still in midair

Invictus used his shoto to stab downward. The stab hit, and there was a sizzling noise, but much like the Sith, K’Kruhk had been put through the toughness training, and as a Whiphid, K’Kruhk was originally very durable anyway. This meant that while the blow stung something fierce, it didn’t penetrate much, only leaving a nasty burn.

His other hand flashed up, lightning quick, grabbing at Quinlan’s other hand. A second later Invictus cried out as his wrist was nearly broken, the Whiphid’s strength, after training with Ranma, enough to overcome the Sith agent’s toughness. He was then flung through the air, crashing into the first two droids as they ascended up the stairs, looking to close in, their slug-throwers out of ammunition. All three went down, but Invictus was on his feet even as one of the droids was cut in two.

Yet this was a mistake. K’Kruhk had moved too far forward, and with a quick Force Grab and a series of strikes, Invictus repositioned the tow of them, then as the droids fired and K’Kruhk grunted under the impacts, Invictus disengaged, leaping towards the sole other Jedi remaining on her feet, a middle-aged Bothan with russet fur. But before he could engage her, the door behind the Bothan opened up and the Nova Guards lasers poked their rifles out. While slicers, the Nova Guard were still soldiers, and even behind friendly lines, no soldier would be without his rifle.

Invictus grunted as the blaster bolts struck him but was able to deflect those coming towards his face, before blocking a strike from the Bothan Jedi, turning back and lashing out with Sith Lightning in both directions. The Bothan blocked the lightning coming towards her. but the Nova Guard all screamed and spasmed, their blasters going off or falling from spasming fingers.

The next second, a blow that would have been aimed at his arm diverted just slightly, cutting over his palm, destroying the top of his green lightsaber. The weapon fell useless from his hand and Invictus backpedaled, having trouble using the shorter shoto against the Bothan’s sudden attack.

Finished with destroying the last droids, K’Kruhk turned back to face his old friend battering the short red blade aside, his back a welter of bruises and burns, but none life-threatening. “Surrender Quinlan. For the last time, for our friendship, I give you this chance to surrender. it is not too late to come back to the Force, to turn away from the Dark Side.”

“Even now you are so certain you are in the right, so proud of being the one able to turn the other cheek, to set aside your emotions. It disgusts me!!” Invictus snarled, before grabbing at his belt. Pulling a small disc free, he tossed the tiny proton detonator at K’Kruhk’s face. It exploded quickly, sending him stumbling, blinded for the moment but with little real damage done.

Once more thanks to the toughness training this didn't hurt K'Kruhk much, although he was blinded once more. Still, K'Kruhk's Force Precognition was still working and he knew he wasn't going to be Quinlan's next target. "T'olma watch out he's going to come for you!"

"Obviously so!" the Bothan woman grunted as she blocked Quinlan's assault. Her mastery of Soresu had stood her in good stead up to this point but the pressure of Quinlan's Dark Side presence against her Precognition faltered now that she was facing him alone. She blocked one blow but didn't feel him reaching out to the Force/ A second later, one of the discarded lightsabers flew up, slicing into her leg from behind, bisecting it near the thigh.

"GAAAH!" T'olma cried out, falling to the ground only for her arm to be grabbed by Quinlan. A second later the Bothan was in the air a Force Push hurling her towards master Saa.

Master Saa used a Force Grab to catch the horribly wounded Jedi, setting her aside, but Quinlan lashed out once more towards her, with Sith Lightning and then a blast of Force Push of tremendous power crashing into her. The first she was able to deflect, the second however picked Saa and T'olma both up into the air. T'olma found herself flung into the stairwell, while Saa crashed into the doors leading into the elevator to one side of the stairwell.

With Saa out of the way, and T'olma in no position to fight, Quinlan raced to the room containing the mountain's main memory core. *The Lord's identity must be kept secret!*

However, Invictus's Force Precognition blared a warning as he stepped by one of the Nova Guard he had previously struck down with Sith Lightning. That worthy twitched, rolling over and revealing several proton detonators, all of them beeping. "You can always take one with you..." the man rasped.

Howling in fury, Invictus leaped backward as the explosion went off, shattering much of the roof floor and side of the hallway, with several jagged bits of rock crashing down from one high. When the smoke cleared, Invictus saw that the doorway into the main computer room was thoroughly blocked, and the rest of the hallway was no better. The unknown soldier's last gasp of revenge had turned his body and those of his fellows into charred wrecks or gobbets of flesh tossed everywhere, intermingled with bits of rubble and debris from the walls.

"Dark Side damn you!" Invictus howled before twisting quickly, battering aside an attack from K'Kruhk. Grabbing his massive throat in a Force Choke he slammed the Whiphid's head to the side of the wall before stabbing hard with his red-bladed shoto, only for his blow to be blocked and his Choke broken before K'Kruhk reached forward once more, forcing Invictus back out of grabbing range. "You will not stop my mission!"

But then, the elevator door irised open and Master Saa stepped through. Her lightsaber was activated in her hand, and she wasted no time launching herself forward. Invictus disengaged from K'Kruhk desperately, flipping backwards and pulling another lightsaber toward him.

He stood then, the debris behind him as Saa stepped forward to K'Kruhk's side. "Tell me Quinlan, is the Dark Side worth it? The former brethren you have slain today, dishonoring your Master's memory?"

Invictus interrupted her, laughing loudly, a slasher smile on his face. "HAH! Master Tyranus showed me that people will always loathe those that are different or have something they do not. He showed me the truth as to how my parents died, the pettiness that occurred then and which led to my being separated from Aayla. Tyranus showed me how to take my anger and hone it into a weapon. But it was I who decided to pick up that weapon, T'ra Saa."

"Did he?" Saa sighed sadly, holding up a hand as K'Kruhk moved forward "Or did Bulq tell you things you wanted to hear, things that made the Dark Side seem attractive? That is how it always starts, Quinlan Vos, as you should know, for Master Tholme would have seen it growing in you. Did Master Tholme try to help you, try to reach out to you? Is that why Tyranus killed him? Because he did not want Tholme to bring you back to the Force?"

Invictus smiled. He knew the secret Saa and Tholme had shared, and knew that he had just one chance to "Tyranus did not kill Tholme, Master Saa. I did. I told you, woman. I was the one who picked up the weapon, no one else."

Master Saa's eyes widened at that, and then Invictus hurled himself forwards lashing out toward both of them. K'Kruhk blocked the blow coming his way easily, but Saa barely blocked the blow coming towards her head. Her Force Precognition falters as her concentration did, and she barely flinched away as Invictus used a Force Grab to pull out another flashbang, tossing it up to head height.

Blinded, Saa stumbled as did K'Kruhk, and a second later a Force Choke grabbed the Neti's neck. She gasped as she was lifted off the ground, before shattering it with her own Force power. Blocking another blow from Quinlan she returned one, which he danced around, flinging his lightsaber at K'Kruhk like a spear, forcing him to dodge away. A second later, Invictus' free hand came up thrusting into Saa's face. Saa screamed as the Sith Lightning struck, burning out her eyes and sending her to the ground, screaming in pain, but not dead. She too had been subjected to the Order's version of the toughness training, and though her nerves were now screaming in agony and her eyes were blinded, she had not taken any further internal injuries as she would have normally.

But this cost Invictus. His outstretched hand was struck by K'Kruhk's lightsaber, and the Whiphid grunted with effort as his blade a dozen strikes hammered the same area, spreading heat throughout Quinlan's arm, before a final strike got through the now heat-weakened arm, slicing it off at the wrist.

Invictus reeled, stunned at the pain of that blow, but he was a Sith. And the Sith had long believed in using pain as a learning tool. Twisting away, Invictus used the pain he was feeling to power his connection to the Dark Side and as K'Kruhk charged forward, battered

aside several more blows before ducking underneath one, his shoto cutting at the Whiphid's stomach, the blade stopped again by the alien's skin as if Invictus had just hitting cortosis armor. An instant later Invictus found himself smashed aside by a blow that hurled him into the rubble behind him.

With a roar, Quinlan lashed out with a point black strike of Sith Lightning, the last vestiges of his endurance and strength going into the strike. "FALL!!!!!"

"Not to you," K'Kruhk answered coldly, his lightsaber up and interposed as he went to one knee grimacing at the impact of the lightning on his blade and the bits of sparks that caught at his fur.

The plasma blade did its work, turning the Lightning back towards Invictus. He couldn't cancel the technique in time and the lightning crashed into Invictus, causing him to scream out in turn. The technique cut out, and he slumped to his knees, blind, his eyes having literally popped in his head, just as Master Saa's had done moments before.

"I will remember you as you were Quinlan Vos, not the twisted creature I see before me. Farewell, old friend." Invictus didn't even see K'Kruhk thrust the lightsaber through one of those gaping holes into his brain.

Sighing heavily, K'Kruhk moved over to Master Saa, getting down on his knees beside her face, trembling fingers checked for a pulse, and then K'Kruhk sighed, leaned back, and place both hands on either side of the whimpering Neti's face, concentrating on the Force, beginning to use Force Healing.

Inside the mountain, the battle was over. The battle in space was another story.

OOOOOOO

Ranma stared at the sensors of the ship he had captured, while around him several scattered bodies lay, remnants of the bridge crew members who hadn't taken the fucking hint and surrendered. Normally Ranma might have felt introspective about having had to kill a few of them to make an example, but right now, he was just too freaking furious to care.

The defenders had fought and died hard, but the enemy had just kept coming. Ranma had seen backlogs showing that two of the captured large hulks on the defender's had been destroyed with all hands lost. Heck, one of them had even rammed one of their fellows, such was the ferocity of this battle. The droids and their minders refused to give mercy, and the locals had no quarter left to give.

The enemy still had twenty combat-effective Lucrehulks, although 'effective' didn't quite mean pristine. Scattered behind them were a trail of damaged ships, ranging from dead in

space to still combat operational but without engines. Now half of those and the few surviving Munificent-class moved forwards towards the planet.

Waiting for them were the last four captured Lucrehulk, all of them battered, with large swaths of their hull without shielding or weapons. One of the Mandators, the sensors couldn't tell him which, also survived, though the other had been turned into a silent, signal-less wreck. About a hundred manned fighters, including, Ranma was semi-relieved to see, Anakin and Tiin, also had survived, and colliers were racing up to them from the mountain fortress. They, the mauled Wild Blade and the equally wounded Ardent Defender were in orbit of the planet once more, like soldiers putting their backs to a wall as they waited death.

As for the rest, they had turned aside for a specific reason, and Ranma watched from the captured bridge as three other Lucrehulk surrounded the ship. Their intent was clear. There were going to stand off slag the captured ships.

Kit had captured one, possibly on his own. The other gathered Jedi and Nova Guard assigned to this portion of the battle had captured eight more. It wasn't enough. "HK, any luck getting those weapons back online?"

"Annoyed drawl: just as forty point nine eight seconds ago when you asked, no, Master. The whole combat system of this ship is compromised by some kind of virus. I cannot disconnect the guns from local control, and the IFF system is complete hash. If we had a copy of it, then perhaps we could replace the existing version and the guns would fire, if only as single weapons. But we don't. Morose conclusion: unless we can get the shuttle out of the hole we made and back under cloak master, we are fecal matter."

Ranma grunted and continued to watch the plot as the blows began to hammer in, only to stop suddenly. A second later, the ships around them began to peel off, as more ships appeared in orbit over the planet, much like Shaak and the other Jedi had done earlier in the battle, running the hyperspace needle into orbit. What appeared there, was eighteen more katana class dreadnoughts, forty-two Republic cruisers, a hundred and forty gunboats of an unknown type, and hundreds of starfighters, which instantly began to go on the attack.

At their lead was a ship only slightly smaller than the Wild Blade but radiating pretty much the same kind of energy signature, and Ranma whooped in delight. "Holy hell! We just got our asses saved, HK!"

The enemy forces quickly diverted their course, having no desire to fight it out with this new enemy. The ships around Ranma moved away from the planet generally back in the same direction they had moved since arriving in the system, joined by many of the other wounded ships they had left behind. The remainder, the force moving to finish the fight also reversed course, although they would have to do with fighter strikes at least. The newcomers didn't seem to be in a hurry to force the issue, though.

for the first time since the Confederacy fleet had jumped into the Wayland system, Ranma breathed a sigh of relief before pointing over to one of the bridge crew who hadn't tried to put up a fight and therefore wasn't nursing broken bones. "You, figure out how to use your communications device to get in touch with that ship," he ordered, using the tactical hologram in front of him and circling the ship he wanted.

It took a few moments, but eventually, Master Plo Koon appeared on the screen.

"Plo!" Ranma shook his head. "You are a sight for sore eyes."

"I believe there are tinctures for that kind of thing, aren't there?" the Kel Dor asked, cocking his head to one side, before going on as Ranma spluttered and Ranma could tell the other man was smiling under his mask. "But in all seriousness, so are you and yours. You and the others held them, Ranma. You held them long enough for our strategy to come to fruition."

"Strategy?" Ranma asked, frowning and cocking an eyebrow.

"Oh yes. Wayland is now somewhat interdicted in hyperspace terms. We sent fleets of cargo vessels into deep space around Wayland to set up hyperspace traps and mines. Those ships that jump out will not be able to go very far before they run into issues. Further, the rest of the sector has been liberated from the Confederacy," Plo explained.

Ranma wondered about the term 'liberated,' considering that most of the planets within the Confederacy had joined it willingly. But he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth at the moment as he understood the implications of what the older man meant. "They diverted too much of their strength here. They weakened themselves elsewhere?"

"Demonstratively," Plo nodded. Balmorra broke the blockade on them, and we worked with them to free several of their neighbors' interstellar neighbors. They must have gotten some kind of radio signal out, as your enemies were already retreating before we came out of hyperspace, but I rather doubt that they were aware of the full implications."

"Well, whatever the case, you are welcome to Wayland," Ranma sighed, the pain of Janice's death coming back to him now that the last of the adrenaline was leaving his system. "I hope this will all be worth it soon." *And I can find mister Over-Sith and use his head as a football. Until I break it, anyway.*

"As do we all, my friend. As do we all."

OOOOOO

The aftermath of the Third Battle for Wayland was just as bad as the battle for Corellia. The Kuat Remnant fleet was reduced to four mangled cruisers and one equally mangled Mandator class, although its sister ship might be recoverable. Not so much the others, including

many who had tried to return to the battle after jumping out when they had already taken too much damage. Two of the original captured Lucrehulks were gone, the four remaining heavily damaged, but there at least the eight new captured vessels made up for the loss. And the Kuat Remnant's limited orbitals were still intact, such as they were.

No one knew how many Coralskippers drones had been destroyed, but beyond Janice and the two new Nova Guard crewmembers, the losses among the Jedi were staggering. Considering the number of Jedi who had trickled in since the Wild Blade had returned, a little over a hundred had been here to take part in the battle. Seventy-one of them were now dead, with many others being seen to in the medical wing. Forty-seven had died in space, piloting Aethersprites or aboard the katana-class cruisers. Thirteen more had died in the battle against the droid army, and Quinlan's betrayal had cost them eleven more, and it was only thanks to K'Kruhk that it hadn't cost them Master Saa and the memory core.

Saa had been hurt quite badly, her eyes blinded and her nerves shot to hell, with only K'Kruhk's help keeping her alive long enough for help to arrive. But bacta would at least heal her nerves. But not her eyes. The Neti master was now blind.

That night, Ranma, Kit and Shaak spoke deep into the night with Obi-Wan. The bearded Jedi blamed himself for missing how Quinlan had fallen to the Dark Side. Eventually they had convinced him, but by that time, all of them were too tired to return to orbit and just bedded down right there. Ahsoka and Talli had already done so, curled up around one another on the ground in a sprawl of sleeping bags in a rather cute display.

Meanwhile, Master Tiin and the other Jedi sat vigil for their departed brethren on the outside of the mountain. So too were Dralshy'a and Kad Solus, Fabian, Keala, Cro and the Nova Guard for their own losses.

Indeed, only a dozen people were not mourning, seeing to the wounded, talking about the battle or sleeping within the mountain fortress. They were the slicers, whose round the clock work was not allowed to stop at this point and Anakin.

Unlike the other Jedi, Anakin might be tired physically, but his mind was way too awake to sleep. Instead, he had joined the slicers. And four hours later, Anakin's sleeplessness was rewarded.

"We did it! We've broken some of the codes protecting the transmission records!"

The shout had Anakin moving to one of the slicers before he could even register, he had stood up. "Talk to me!"

"We broke it, we broke the encryption on the message sent to Wayland and archived in the computers here. We even know where... well a few of them were sent, drat it," the Slicer muttered, skimming through a screen of faster than Anakin could read a newspaper article.

“Crap, each destination has a different code, a different program guarding it. Because of course why not?”

“Can you play some of these messages?” Anakin asked.

The slicer shrugged, and with a brief flick of his fingers, fingers lined with electrical wires, a hologram set in one corner came online. An individual appeared there, the body covered in static. Even the images have a separate encryption. Sorry, but we broke the code on the audio portion. Here.”

“Your training will continue, Maul. Prove yourself my apprentice,” the voice said, and Anakin’s blood began to pound in his ears. The tone wasn’t anything he’d ever heard before, but there was something about the dictation, how the man rolled his words that was very familiar to him. “That almost sounds like someone from Naboo.”

The others all looked at him in surprise, and he shrugged. “All planets have you know their own distinct accents, and that guy sounds like he’s from Naboo. Senator Amidala rolls her r’s like that and accents the n’s.” *This is a really good thing, a great breakthrough. So... so why do I feel such a sense of foreboding? What is the Force trying to prepare me for?*

The slicers all looked at one another shrugged, and then turned back to their business, one of them muttering, “Okay, so if some of the code is Nabooian, then...”

Four hours later, Anakin’s foreboding proved all too accurate.

“We broke it, we broke the encryption on this one wide open!” one of the slicers cheered, exchanging a firm nod and a hand clasp with one of his fellows.

A moment later, the image popped up on the hologram, but this time there was no censorship going on. Instead, was shown a human man in a full cowl most of his face obscured in the shadow of his hood, although the top of his chest and neck made it clear this was a man. All that could be seen above that was the jaw and the lower portion of the mouth.

A jaw that Anakin felt he recognized. “Play the message,” he said, his voice like lead to his own ears, as Anakin leaned forward, praying he would be wrong. But when the image began to speak, it was with the same Nabooian accent. But even though some of the words were garbled, and the tone killed off to a certain degree, there was no doubt in Anakin’s mind who he was seeing, who was talking quietly to the Dark Side users on the planet Wayland about their recent experiments.

“You will need to find a means of speeding up the toughness training that voice was saying. It goes too slowly as it is. We need to come up with a way of putting my apprentices through it faster and getting them back out into the field equally quickly. Things are coming to a

head, and I need my blades in position to act upon my orders. And see if you can create an even deadlier Blood Bombs or Fear Mongers. They might be useful..."

The words after that barely registered to Anakin, instead, it was the knowledge of what he was seeing that filled his head. A betrayal not only of the Republic, not only of the Order, but of Anakin himself. *The Sith made me, created me in my mother. One of their experiments, using the Force to create life. And, and Palpatine... the chancellor, a, a man I thought of as a friend, as an ally... he's one of them. One of the Sith have, has tried to manipulate me. I don't, I don't know what his goal was. But I...*

Anger, disgust and a dozen other emotions swirled around Anakin's head, and he looked over at the Nova Guard and other slicers in the room. None of them seemed to have noticed his sudden anxiousness, and he tried to play it off, yawning theatrically. "Well guys, you all seem to be working pretty damn well. I'll leave a message with whoever is in the command center now, but I think my mind's finally tired enough to let me sleep. But I'll make sure someone sends up a round of stims for you all."

The slicers all cheered woodenly, or just waved, not looking away from their screens, and soon, Anakin was out of the room, trying to control his whirling anxiety, trying not to let his master since his rising anger, fear, confusion and just general distress. T, there must be some kind of some kind of explanation. If he's a Sith, maybe he, maybe he was tricked into becoming one? Or, or, or maybe our friendship is just that, something that I, I could maybe reach him with?"

A part of Anakin knew that he was grasping at straws, but in his present mind, that was all he could do really. Except for one thing, an idea that his battered mind grabbed onto like a drowning man would a life preserver. *I, I have to be the one to confront them. I have to know! Know why he was trying to befriend me, why he became a Sith, what his goal is! If the Sith are all evil, then...*

With barely a veneer of self-control left, Anakin's emotions flowed out into the Force, clouding his connection to it and everything around him.

Down in the medical center Kit woke up, the feelings of his apprentice pulling him out of sleep. He rolled out of the small chair, and raced out the door, heading towards where he sensed his apprentice who was currently moving to the hangar.

"Was, whas," Obi-Wan muttered exhausted emotionally and physically from the day's trials to an extent Jedi rarely were. "Where's zat green streak going?"

Unfortunately, the geometry of the mountain fortress worked against Kit, and as fast as he moved, he couldn't cut across Anakin's course down to the hanger thanks to some of the damage done by the infiltration droids. He arrived just in time to see Anakin's Aethersprite exiting the hangar bay and climbing rapidly.

Cursing, Kit reached down to his belt and, pulled out a communicator, speaking into it quickly. "Command center, this is Kit Fisto. Did Padawan Skywalker inform you of his flight path?"

"Padawan Skywalker said he wanted to clear his head a bit master Jedi, said he was going to fly around out in space for a bit. Is there a problem? Should we have not allowed him to take off..." the voice trailed off, and came back, a frown visible in his tone. "Master Fisto, he just jumped to hyperspace. Well within the gravity well too."

"Yes," Kit said sighing faintly "I feared something of the sort. Could you please inform me as to where he was previously?"

Padawan Skywalker was helping the slicers. He stopped in told us about some progress and asked for a tray of stims to be sent up to them," said the operator, and Kit sighed even more deeply.

Of course he was. And they have discovered something, something that Anakin felt he needed to act on immediately and on his own. But this was not rational decision, nor one reached through the Force. No, he was far too emotional for that.... "If you could rouse Ranma and Obi-Wan, I believe that we need to discover what set my apprentice off."

45 minutes later Ranma, Shaak, Cro, Yurrick, Kit, and Obi-Wan all stood in the command center, watching several of the recordings that the slicers had unencrypted. "Okay, so these obviously told Anakin a lot more than they tell me. Anything you all can tell me?" Ranma asked, looking at the hooded figure. "I mean, he damn sure's got the whole Dread Lord thing going, but that's all I can say."

The chief slicer shrugged his shoulders and reported on what Anakin said, causing Shaak to start, her eyes wide widening in wild and dreadful surmise. "I need a communications link to the *Wild Blade*." A moment later she was speaking to Tune. "Tune, you routinely record public news channels, correct?"

"Yes Mistress. Do you wish to listen to some of the latest news about the war?"

"Send us a copy of the Chancellor's latest public speech," she said slowly. "And if one of you gentlemen could set it beside this image..."

All of the other Jedi looked at her in utter shock and disbelief as Kit hissed under his breath. "You, you can't be serious!" Obi-Wan exclaimed. "That isn't possible! No Sith could have hidden themselves so well from the entire council as that!"

Ranma didn't try to argue, simply crossing his arms, watching intently.

A moment later, the speech was presented to one side of the pre-existing image, and Obi-Wan subsided, instantly seeing the resemblance in the lower jaw. A moment later, the words of the speech rolled over them. "And we must not give into panic, nor allow the fear the enemy or his own villainy to control our actions! We must stand as one, and only embrace the arithmetic of war as far as we must and no further."

Wordlessly, a few of the slicers work on the two audio files until the same words were spoken one after another. Although the tone of voice was utterly different in the encrypted transmissions, the movement of the mouth was exactly this name. There was no doubt any longer.

"Well, this is just a fucking worst case scenario," Ranma muttered, crossing his arms and staring at the image angrily. "The hidden Sith is the Chancellor!?"

"It's worse than that," Kit muttered, shaking his head. "The Chancellor has long been acquainted with Anakin, they're almost friends, or perhaps the Chancellor is a second role model to the young man? Regardless, Anakin must have realized it almost instantly and has haired off to the city to confront the man. Who knows how a Sith Lord, especially one who holds such a position of power, will respond to that?"

"Well... Shit," Ranma muttered, looking over at Shaak. "I guess we know where we're going now, don't we?"

End Chapter

{Author Notes}