

Howdy, all. Been a while. I know that you all didn't see much from me in December, but as many of my longtime readers know, I usually set that month aside for my patrons. They got several new chapters that month (two on the same story and then another chapter for it this month LOL, did not see that coming), but ***Magic of the Force*** was supposed to come out on here that month too, but I ran into writer's block type issues with it. Still that should be out now too.

And here is the next chapter of ***Horse for the Force*** too. It won this month's small story poll... which I neglected to put up here. I won't be putting up a small story poll for February too. I am pushing to have ***Fate Touched*** updated for the Super Bowl, and ***ATP*** as well. I hope Observanc3 will have the last chapter for fanfic up here.

But this fic is getting closer and closer. Consider this the segue chapter to the next, and very last, arc, folks! This has been edited by me with Grammarly and by ***Hiryō*** for Ranma knowhow and names.

Chapter 30: Life Goes On... For Better or Worse

Tyranus was still riding something of a Dark Side high, as his flagship came out of hyperspace over the planet of Yabol Opa, a CIS member homeworld. A university world, the planet had decided to join the CIS despite being deep in Republic space, due to, unironically, dozens of classes and debates coming to a consensus that the Republic was moribund and had to be replaced. At the time, Tyranus had been amused by the level of ivory tower mentality this showed, but he had very cheerfully put defenses into place over the world, creating a logistics base there even as the Republic attempted to both interdict and convince a planet full of college brats and intellectuals to see reality.

His current state of mind was not to be confused with the emotion-high that the Dark Side user Sev'rance had felt and become nearly addicted to. Rather, his entire body was filled with the power of the Dark Side, which amplified his powers and his darker feelings rather than pouring new emotions into him.

This showed physically, much to the chagrin of the droids sent to find him once Tyranus had retreated to his stateroom. None of those droids survived the experience, but if they had, they would have spoken of red veins pulsing underneath Tyranus' grey skin, how his eyes had turned flat yellow, then back to normal as Tyranus tried to fight the Dark Side energies within for control.

Only the fact that he had released so much of that energy, while in orbit over Coruscant allowed him to remain sane. Moreover, by the time his flagship was in orbit over Yabol Opa, Tyranus was somewhat in control of himself and the Dark Side again.

However, there were significant changes to Tyranus' body as he strode into his private communication room and reached out to the galaxy once more. His skin was no longer the normal Weequay gray. Rather, it had turned almost stark white and was interspersed with red veins on his hands, disappearing under his shirt but obviously running up his chest, becoming visible once more along his neck.

Because of this, he had to take the time to create a hologram of his former face, to sit over his real one, lest he frighten and further demoralize the Confederacy rulers he was about to speak with. Thankfully, his eyes had returned to their normal black color, which was good, as the program would've had a much harder time with them.

After spending about a half hour putting off the meeting to allow the program to get a better idea of the movements of his mouth and so forth, Tyranus was ready to speak with the military and political leaders of the Confederacy once more. He chose to reach out to the military side of things first, knowing that would be the most important on many levels. *What is that old phrase?* Tyranus thought almost whimsically, although it was a whimsy full of anger and rage. *So long as you have bullets, you can get beans?*

The moment the conference opened showed that Tyranus had chosen correctly both to hide his ravaged appearance and to reach out to the leaders of the military first. Admiral Trench, the Harch, got the ball rolling without any preamble or even letting Tyranus speak. "Master Bulq, there is a lot of information going around the Hypernet about events on Coruscant. Information that states outright that the Chancellor of all people was working with you? Was trying to play this war from both sides?"

"Trench is understating it! There's a video coming out from the Senate itself showing him being ousted as a Sith, fighting the one called Ranma right there in the Senate Hall!" another admiral, one in command of the Forces around Mustafar, growled out. "I believe I'm speaking for all of us when I say we demand some answers!"

Once more, the self-control that Tyranus had learned at Sidious's hands came in handy, for it was the only thing that stopped him from reaching through the Force to choke the creature in front of him. Even with the Veil coming apart, Tyranus would still be strong enough thanks to the Dark Side energies he had taken in to do that so long as he had the image of the sentient in question in front of him, as he did now.

But he didn't. Instead, Tyranus simply nodded. "It is an ingenious scheme, isn't it?"

"... You're not denying it?" Trench asked, the Harch completely wrong-footed, and from the faces of the other holograms in the image, Tyranus' answer had caught all of them off guard. Tyranus was a master lightsaber duelist who knew footwork was just as important to a battle as speed. Throwing them off balance like that allowed Tyranus to reclaim control of the meeting. *Now to feed them just enough truth to get them to remain onboard. After enough time passes, they will find they no longer have any recourse left but to stay the course.*

“The initial scheme of the Sith was, to create two opposing forces in a civil war and control both sides. To grind the Jedi between two forces. But since it became clear that the Jedi had seen this coming, Sidious, the original Sith involved in planning this war out, began to flounder. I had honestly been looking for a way to break off entirely from him, to go for a full-on military victory. It was why I allowed Grievous his head. And, while we all may bemoan the loss of life and the destruction of the planet, the assault on Kuat weakened the Republic. As did, to a lesser extent, the battle in Corellia.”

“True,” said Admiral Sarah Vintonene. A Sullustan, she was one of only two females of any rank within the military of the Confederacy. Like her counterpart, the human Mylene, she normally remained silent in meetings like this, not being as strategically, or tactically innovative as Trench, or as bloody-minded as Grievous and understanding their limitations better than many others. “While I am still horrified by the bombardment of the planet, the destruction of the shipyards in orbit was a massive strategic victory for us.”

“Exactly. Sidious did not see it like that, he was quite wroth with me, but as I said, by that point, I believe he was losing the plot entirely. And now, that the Republic will no longer be hamstrung by Sidious working against them to slay Jedi, they will fight all the harder. So it is a good thing that they will not be able to rely on the shipbuilding of Kuat, yes?”

“You are assuming that the Confederacy will still fight now that it is shown and by your very words proven that the entire Separatist movement was contrived by Sidious! By the individual on the other side with the most to gain who clearly expected us to lose,” Trench shot back, having recovered his equilibrium. “I can even see it now. The war continues, grinding on, killing Jedi and removing many of his other opponents and powers within the Republic as he uses emergency powers acts to gather more power for himself. Am I correct?”

“Exactly so. That is exactly why much of the war was run at the start as it was. Instead of looking for the knockout blow, the Sith plan was to create a grinding war of attrition. At the time, it made sense, considering how much of our military is based around droids. We had far less in terms of people to lose. But then came the clones. On the other hand came a few victories on the Republic side. Now? Despite our initial numerical advantage, we are only a tiny bit closer to winning the war and that was with me choosing to let Grievous go.”

Of the other admirals butted it in then. “I note Grievous isn’t taking part in this discussion. Is he under communications blackout for some reason, or did something happen to him?”

“I do not know. If you will recall, I was also under a communications blackout before the raid on Coruscant,” Tyranus answered, allowing his voice to become angry for a moment, as the Weequay felt a shiver of misgiving go through him. Grievous had been sent to assault the system that Sidious’s spies had discovered was the source of the dangerous bioships that the Jedi were using more often as time went on. If he had been unable to take or destroy the planet, or worse, had died in the attempt that was a massive setback in the long-term. In the

short-term, losing a single fleet didn't matter as much as losing Grievous, one of his most capable officers.

But I do have others and I still have my own apprentice. "And I understand your point, Admiral Trench. However, do not mistake the forest for the trees."

About to launch a verbal attack, Trench paused, thrown off both by Tyranus willingly returning to the past topic and the analogy, and Tyranus nodded, allowing a bit of self-deprecating humor to enter his voice. "It is not the best analogy, I know. However, this is a trying time. My point is that the grievances that many of our people had with the Republic are still there. Can any of you look me in the eye and say that those injustices would be addressed if we laid down our arms now?"

Several of the admirals looked as if they might argue that point. But the majority shook their heads firmly, and as Tyranus went on, the admirals who might've been on the fence began to nod along with the others. "That isn't even mentioning that as the losing side, we would no doubt be forced to pay reparations. Reparations that would probably bankrupt our people for generations, even if the Republic was willing to be kind. And after all that has happened, can any of us believe they would be? The Jedi might admittedly try to become the mediator if only to save face," Tyranus said, spitting the words. "But we know who they serve."

This earned a round of dark laughter from many of the admirals. Most of these people came from planets or worlds that had just as many issues with the Jedi as with the greater Republic.

Tyranus let the knowledge, the understanding that he was with them, that they were all in this together, build from his words for a moment, and then he leaned forward, eyeing each Admirals' hologram one after another. "So, ladies and gentlemen, if we are all set to hang regardless, does it really matter now what the initial plan was? I have come to realize all of us, including myself, would have been sacrificed on the altar of Sidious's ambition. But there is one flaw in his plan that we can still exploit. The fact that this war can be won militarily."

Now everyone there was nodding, and Tyranus knew he had them. While he had never been a great orator in his time in the Jedi Order, he had become far better at it during his time as leader of the Confederacy, and he had met with each of these people individually, testing their mettle, understanding what made them tick. And now, he had laid out simple facts they could not deny. One or two, perhaps, the human Mylene, for instance, might balk at continuing the war regardless of what he said here. However, it would not become a cascade effect, as all of these individuals would fear what would happen to them personally and their planets, which they would share with their living officer corps.

Patriotism and self-interest. The same things that pushed them into the Confederacy camp in the first place.

“So that is what I propose to do, ladies and gentlemen. As a human would say, cry havoc, and let loose the dogs of war. Admiral Trench, until Grievous is back in communications or we learn what has happened to him, you are in overall command of the Confederacy military. Hit the Republic where it hurts as often and as hard as possible. Go after the targets I had stopped you from going after before this. If it will not join us, smash Rendili Shipyards into pieces. We discovered the hidden shipyards used to build up the majority of the naval forces for the Republic before this war. Hammer them under. If you think it possible, assault Brentaal or other industrially important planets.”

“Yes...” the Muun Admiral Xarco hissed out. Several other admirals also nodded. “Pay the price in droids and ships to win **now!**”

“Exactly. Use our numerical superiority the way it should have been from the onset. Once we have hammered the Republic’s ability to make war in space, we will go after Kamino, and without a source for their army, the Republic will crumble. The common Republic citizens lack the willpower to fight for themselves. Show them we do not.”

With the Dark Side and their hatred of the Republic, and their anger at the idea that they had been used by Sidious, as well as the idea that Tyranus was fully on their own side, shoulders straightened or the equivalent and heads began nodding. Admiral Trench agreed to his new position, as did all the other admirals, not one of them arguing with it. Trench had proven one of the best amongst them before this. No one was going to argue with his appointment now as they might have done so with Grievous, given the mistakes the cyborg had made.

“That leaves me with one question only, Master Bulq. Exactly how far should we go with this?”

“...” Here, Tyranus had to fight against his Dark Side instincts. Those instincts told him to destroy, to kill and keep on killing until the remainder were too cowed to rise again. But the problem here was the same that had plagued the Sith for much of their history. That had caused Darth Bane to come up with the Rule of Two and to believe that hiding in the shadows was a better plan going forward. The Republic was just too huge for that to work. The Republic could be cowed and lose the means of making war, but its population could not truly be frightened into obedience by an exterior foe. It was simply too large. *And without Sidious, the internal means of keeping that fear going are gone.*

So fighting those Dark Side instincts again, Tyranus frowned pensively. “No more orbital bombardments or wholesale slaughter of civilians. That serves no purpose. Military targets only, I think. Well, military, industrial and Republic governmental offices. Show the universe that our problems are still with the Senate and the Republic. Not with the civilians of the planets, the duped remaining with them. I realize that is a very thin line to walk, ladies and gentlemen, and I will have to leave the decision of what to do in each instance with those commanders at the front. But whatever they do, I will back them.”

Trench nodded and turned many of his eyes away, several hands moving out of the pickup's range as he began to work on something elsewhere.

One of the other admirals had another question to ask. "How much of the original plot was known by our political leaders, and what are we going to do about them now? Most will probably think they can make a deal even if it's patently impossible."

"Hah, Tomroc is right, I've rarely met a politician with a spine or common sense," a Neimoidian admiral agreed, aware of the irony of his sentiment even as he said it. After all, at least half of his complaint was one routinely leveled on his species as a whole.

"Let them to me," Tyranus said grimly, and with the Dark Side helping them along, none of the admirals argued. The war would continue, and indeed the Republic would soon be reeling if the admirals had anything to say about it.

The conference call with the politicians was much harder, even if fewer individuals were involved. The parliament of the Confederacy truly only had the amount of power that the Executive Council allowed them to. Few in the parliament understood that, but the true reins of government and power rested within the Executive Council. This comprised the heads of the Banking Clan, the Trade Federation the Commerce Guild, the Techno Union, six representatives of various powerful planets, and the heads of other powerful corporations or mercantile groups.

All of these individuals had known of the great secret before this, and many knew who Sidious had been. There had been promises made that several of these individuals believed would be kept after the war. Now, that assurance or perhaps insurance would be the proper term, was out the door. And Tyranus' opinion that the war must be won by military means was seen as less than optimal to people who understood far more about the Republic's size and the war's logistics than even the admirals did.

"Even if we win, we would face insurrections and decades of suppression actions! It would be a logistical and monetary nightmare," Shu Mai, the Gossam head of the commerce Guild argued, her voice shrill at the idea of wasting all that money for so little return.

"Many planets are already pulling out. They are recalling their fleets, closing their borders to Republic and Confederacy alike. None of them are reaching out to the Republic as far as I know..."

Nute Gunray looked around at his fellows, and one of them, the planetary governor of the Ando Star System, Po Nudo, who was also the head of the internal espionage services, nodded in agreement. "No one has yet decided that attempting to rejoin the fold of the Republic is a good idea, but several planets have opened referendums to vote on seceding from the Confederacy. Many planets still remember the bad times of the New Sith Wars, even now."

“They are letting emotions guide their actions just as much as they did when joining the Confederacy in the first place. It will eventually occur to planets such as Onderon and others that her moral high ground is nonexistent. Once that happens, we will see further turncoats,” Passel Argente, head of the Corporate Alliance, warned, looking very worried. “We... we may need to get ahead of the wave. If we stay together, sue for peace as a united entity, which still has more war-making capacity than the Republic, then...”

Here, rather than relying on military understanding and fact, Tyranus was forced to rely more on emotion and the self-serving nature of the individuals involved. Eventually, however, he forced the Executive Council to agree to a few things through the dual use of the Dark Side to reach out and influence their emotions and his own words. First, the war would continue, and they wouldn't interfere with the running of it by their admirals. Second, they would meet in person with his representative and then with the entire parliament.

All of them begrudgingly agreed to this, and finally, Tyranus was able to cut the communications. He looked up at a clock on the wall and was not surprised to see that his discussion with the politicians and business magnates had taken the better part of the day.

For several seconds Tyranus simply sat there, slowly releasing his anger into the Force as a whole, his hands clenching and unclenching on the armrests of his chair. Then, he reached out to his apprentice. Their apprentice bond was still there, despite Tyranus declaring her a Darth.

Moments later, Tyranus was looking at the woman through another communication hologram. The program he had been using for his previous meetings was now turned off, and Tyranus let the woman stare at his changed image for a few seconds before speaking. “Sidious, my so-called Master is dead. I have arisen stronger and more powerful than ever. The Dark Side energies that he was willing to simply use to try to manipulate events are mine to control now. Would you like to partake of some of it?”

Darth Diabolus stared through the pickup at her Master, licking her lips, somehow sensing the power in her Master even from many, many light years away. Moreover, if there was one thing she had always desired above everything else, it was power over herself and the universe around her. The Dark Side had allowed that and showed Ventress how to use the anger and hate she had been trained in before becoming a Jedi apprentice to Ky Narec even better than before. Now seeing the next stage in that evolution almost, the former Dathomiri Witch could only nod her head. “Yes, Master! I am with you. Give me enough power and knowledge, and together we can still see the Sith victorious!”

Much like Sidious had been able to do with Tyranus himself and before him Maul, Tyranus now reached out and imbued Ventress with further energies from the Dark Side. He watched as her skin almost began to glow with a dark inner energy, once more astonished at the amount of power Sidious had contained. *Yes, between the two of us, I believe we will be strong enough to weather this storm and continue the war against the Jedi and the Republic.*

But, a whisper came to his mind then, a third head would be better than just two. A power not so great as you are now but greater than Diabolus could ever become. The image of that planet surrounded by a protective sphere, Tyranus had at the height of the Dark Side quake, appeared in his mind once more, the Dark Side speaking to him. The third would need to be freed first to try to correct how badly the future had gone against the Dark Side. Without it, any long-term victory was impossible. *The Dark Side must have a third head. It must be freed...*

The words truly didn't make sense, but they were compelling, and only when he heard Diabolus gasp in pain did Tyranus return to himself. He quickly cut off their connection and waited while Diabolus gathered herself.

When she opened her eyes again, Diabolus' eyes were as clear as Tyranus own after a few seconds. But her skin had noticeably changed color, becoming even whiter than previously. And although her eyes were clear, they were now very deep set in her skull, the marks around her mouth somehow becoming more prominent. "What is your bidding Master?"

"You need to go to Raxus Secundus. I want you in place there before the Executive Council arrives and before the parliament is set to meet. If it looks as if the parliament is unwilling to go along with the Executive Council, I expect you to do what needs to be done. I trust I am understood?"

Diabolus smiled, and it was not a nice expression. "I will head there instantly, Master, the better to prepare for either eventuality."

"Good. Once you are done there, whatever the outcome, we will meet in person once more. I will send you the coordinates where we can do so. I will be searching for a weapon..." Tyranus said, his words coming out slowly near the end for just a moment as he thought of what to tell her. "When the Dark Side energies of my former Master flowed into me, they shared with me a vision, a vision of a planet. A planet where a weapon of the Dark Side could be found, which could be used to wipe out the Jedi or perhaps turn the tide of the war entirely in our favor. The visions were unclear on that score and I will need to meditate on them."

"Yes, Master!" Diabolus said instantly, and after a few moments of asking about her current mission and the overall war, Tyranus cut the connection, pleased.

As the ship's day turned into evening, events set in motion began elsewhere, while Tyranus spent the evening and well into the night meditating on the Dark Side, solidifying his control of it. Then, as people elsewhere on the ship began to line up for breakfast, he reached out to the Force, using a method somewhat like triangulation.

Tyranus had gotten in the image of the direction from Coruscant to where this strange planet encased entirely in a shield of some kind had been concerning Coruscant. Now, from over Yabol Opa, he reached out again, trying to find the planet contained in crystal. This allowed him to somewhat triangulate the area of the galaxy where it could be found. This didn't

work as well as he had hoped, and he ordered the fleet to make ready to leave. They would head to Togoria, another CIS planet. The fleet there would make good reinforcements for his fleet. The wider angle would allow him a better chance of triangulating his goal.

OOOOOO

As Ranma was recovering from his showdown with Palpatine, celebrities, if they could be called that among the Jedi Order, arrived one after the other. Perhaps legends would be a better term. For that, they certainly were.

Master Fay and Master Ood Bnar, the ancient Neti Jedi Master that Ranma and the crew of the *Wild Blade* had found on Ossus, arrived separately, one after another. Master Bnar had only recently been brought back into the greater Jedi Order, but he and an archivist sent by Jocasta Nu arrived in their own vessel. The Neti instantly gathered a team of other Jedi, pulling them from other duties around the area and leading the team of Jedi back down into the Sith temple. He had once been lauded as an expert on Sith history, and he was an expert at studying such without falling into the Dark Side energies that many Sith artifacts gave off.

In contrast, Master Fay barely spent more than ten minutes in the temple. Instead, she spent those ten minutes in quiet conference with Master Rancisis and Master Yoda before requesting a meeting of the Senate. Not demanding, not simply signaling she needed to speak to them as the Jedi had been doing up to that point.

It was a humble stance in a time of intense confusion and turmoil and it did the trick. Many of the Senators had somehow convinced themselves Sidious had been some kind of Jedi plot or trick. Others had buried their heads in the sand and ignored events. But this simple request from a Jedi made famous even in recent times by her diplomatic skills, called them all forth, with the Senator for Thyferra being among the first to arrive.

With the Senate Hall having been damaged so badly, this was the first time since the battle against Sidious that the Senate was called together there. Many committees, investigation groups, and research parties had formed to discuss the goings on or try to deal with events out in the wider Republic but none had met here.

Nor was the place repaired for various reasons. Only one of which was security: given how many bugs and bombs had been discovered in recent construction or renovations, this seemed prudent. Another aspect was that several hundred Senators wanted to leave the destruction Sidious had caused intact, at least in part. It would serve, they argued, as a warning against hubris and the need to always examine themselves just as much as they were wary about problems outside the Senate.

In addition, as much as the idea of listening to Master Fay speak had drawn out the vast majority of Senators, it wasn't the entire Senate. More than three hundred of its members had

been implicated by Pestage or other evidence that the Jedi Order and the few loyal, incorruptible members of the Senate Security Forces were still discovering.

Regardless, most were still there, and all of them stared at Master Fay as she entered the ravaged Senate Hall.

The elven Jedi Master did not enter via the Chancellor's entrance, nor did she stand on the ruins of the central platform that the Chancellor had used, if only to use the communications apparatus there as Master Yoda and a few of the other Jedi who had addressed them previously to this point had. Evidently, this meeting would not need the aid of any visuals to go with it.

Instead, Fay entered through a maintenance shaft on the hall's floor. She scaled up the wreckage of the hover seats that had remained there. Master Fay walked without her hood up, her Jedi robes flicking around her legs, moving like a woman closer to Master Shaak's age than the hundreds of years that Master Fay truly was.

And as she moved, Fay's presence began to settle over the entire Senate. It wasn't oppressive. Rather, that feeling affected the Senators as if someone had wrapped each of them in a warm blanket.

Eventually, Fay stood at the top of the mound of ruined hover chairs, turning slowly in a circle, and later, many Senators reflected it must have been a Force Trick of some kind. Because at that moment, it felt as if Master Fay was looking each sentient in the eye, one after another, regardless of there being several thousand people within the hall even now and that several species didn't have ocular sensors at all. And when she spoke, her voice, like Master Yoda's or the other Jedi's before her, reached the far end of the hall without seeming to shout or any electronic aid.

"The galaxy is in crisis," Fay began without preamble. "There is a war on. As much as we all could have hoped otherwise, the Confederacy has not stopped its assault on Republic space. If anything, they have become even worse since this conspiracy was brought to light. A conspiracy that came from the very top of this august body. The Republic Senate has been betrayed by its own, by a Sith who had moved among you for more than a decade, building on a plot centuries in the making. And many of your fellow Senators were with him, be it for greed, through arrogance or simply through blindness. All of us were being manipulated by someone playing the game of politics on an entirely different level, for an entirely different goal than any could imagine."

She paused then, slowly shaking her head from side to side. "Now, more than at any time in its history, the Republic must stand united. We must band together to heal the wounds, to remove the poison that has been coiling at the heart of the Republic for so long, even as we defend ourselves from the Confederacy. This is a daunting task ladies and gentlemen. But we, the Jedi Order, are here to stand with you in these times. We have already begun to remove the

poison, and we have already begun to better defend ourselves against the Confederacy. But we **cannot** speak for the people. That is up to you, to all of you in this hall.”

Once more, Fay paused, feeling out the emotions of the Senate as she had so many others throughout her centuries. “I can feel your fear. I can feel your concern. Many of you worry about whether or not you are up to the task of remaining within the Senate, having been blinded for so long to Sidious and his true nature. Others are falling into depression, looking upon the future and despairing, believing you are not up to helping the Republic through these trying times. Still, more of you look around and wonder how many more of your fellows will soon be discovered as being influenced by the Dark Side or by Sidious in more general terms.”

There was a vast murmuring of noise then, a wordless sub-verbal flinch almost as many gasped, and others shifted in their seats or slunk down into them in some fashion as if wanting to hide from the truth. Others made protests of innocence but low ones that hardly carried.

But Master Fay was not here just to speak truth to power. Instead, she was here to uplift. “Look around you!” she suddenly ordered, bringing her hands out from her Jedi robes and pointing around her. “Look around you. At your fellow senators, at your fellow sentients. I am Master Fay, and I tell you this, with the Veil removed from our eyes, the Jedi Order sees clearly again. And I can tell you, not a single sentient within this hall any longer is tainted by the Dark Side.”

The susurrations of sound fell silent then, and she went on. “I cannot tell you who among you will still be interdicted by the corruption that the Sith used so well to control aspects of the Senate. That is beyond me and on the conscience of such beings among you. If you believe yourself to have been manipulated, that the Chancellor or one of his puppets or anyone was holding anything over your head step forward now. The Jedi Order will help you. And it is far better to be damned by your own actions than be damned by the actions of another.”

So soothing, so understanding was Master Fay’s voice that after a few seconds, nearly a hundred senators slowly recessed themselves. They moved their hover balls to the entryways, exiting, turning themselves in to the nearest Jedi. Master Fay hadn’t had much of anything to do with that. These men and women had been on tenterhooks since Sidious had been found out. She had simply given them a way out that allowed them to save at least a bit of face.

Back in the Senate Hall, Master Fay continued, calling for a panel to look at every law passed by Sidious, every act, every emergency directive. And then, she demanded that the Senate stand up, lead its people and be honest with the entire Republic. “The time for committees has passed. The time of closed, secret meetings to decide policy for the Republic Senate cannot continue. You must show the Republic as a whole that you are not tainted by the Sith, that you are not part of the group that began this bloody, violent war in which trillions have already died, and that you are willing to change to combat the problems that this war is built on. You must do this! We, the Jedi Order, will help you, but we cannot do this alone.”

There were still protests despite Master Fay being, well, Master Fay and having the weight of their sin so easily shown before the entire Senate. Some of them still argued against the assumption of guilt, that some would still be implicated through simple corruption or by direct connection to the Sith. But Master Fay had the vast majority of the Senate behind her by this point, and various acts were passed within the next few hours.

The first was a referendum on who should be elected Chancellor Pro Tem for the remainder of this emergency. To the surprise of many, Senator Dovisken pushed for this. The mid-twenties Senator for the Alsakan System was a staunch Legistaturist, much like Palpatine had been, but also believed in demilitarization. He had not been an active member of any debate in the senate or any sub-committee that had involved the war since it began in an effort to distanced himself from the war, instead starting up several galaxy-wide orphans and widows funds.

“Fellow sentient, while I would be the last to say that the democratic method of government is not the best method so far known, at this time, more than ever, we need to have a single voice leading us. I vote that we decide who that leader should be before we continue. Who can act as a final voice? Who can decide which of our goals has priority over the others?” The young man waited, then dropped a bombshell. “I believe an outside voice, one unconnected to the Senate’s mistakes, its power structure and that of the military, would be best for this role. One with a proven record of wading into the most vituperative debates, the most violently acrimonious situations, and bringing both sides to the negotiating table. I vote that Master Fay be named Chancellor!”

This created a furor that reverberated from one side of the Senate to the other, but surprisingly, it wasn’t nearly as violently anti-Jedi as Fay had feared. At least for now, that sentiment might have been drained out of the Senate. Fay knew it would eventually come back, perhaps mutate into an anti-Force user movement. But Fay could work with what she could get as several other names were nominated, and the voting began. *Is this why I was called here? To lead instead of advise?*

The Force had led her here, practically singing to her senses as she arrived at the center of the massive Force storm that had exploded into being as Ranma fought Sidious. This would be a grand task, the greatest challenge she would ever face, the greatest legacy she would ever leave behind when she eventually, as all things had to, faded into the Force. Yet the idea of leading on this scale, of leading at all, was beyond what Fay had always envisioned as her role. She was the advisor, the diplomat, the investigator. Not an outright leader.

As the debate continued, she reached out to it, giving herself to the Force in the unique way that only Master Fay could. Like a swimmer floating on the waves, slowly sinking into them until they enveloped her completely in their warmth. *Is this truly my task? Instead of simply galvanizing the Senate, am I truly here to lead these people?*

The answer came in hundreds of thousands of brief flashes of images of the future and the warmth creeping up her body. Those images were of the future if different people tried to take the reins of power. For good or for ill, good intentions or self-interest, the reason didn't matter. All of them meant the troubles gripping the galaxy worsened. Not always in the same manner, not always quickly, but regardless, the galaxy would be far worse off if Fay did not accept this burden.

That was enough for her. Opening her eyes, Fay looked around them at all of the beings around her. Many, perhaps most of whom would probably have been disdainful of the Jedi leading them or holding any official position like this. After all, that was what the Treaty of Ruusan had been designed to stop. But now those sentients simply gazed at her with various approving faces. Feelings of desperation, feelings of hope, grim determination and understanding. A need for someone to lead, a wish for it to be Fay.

“So long as we agree that this is only for the true duration of the emergency. Once the Republic has reformed, once we have finished plumbing the depths of the darkness that the Sith have created, and once the Confederacy is no longer a threat, I will step aside. This is a burden I do not want. I will perform to the best of my abilities. I will see the Senate and the Republic as a whole through the storm. But only for the duration of the storm.”

This won her some acknowledging cheers from several hundred and a few jaundiced looks from many more. Many of those faces obviously felt that once she tasted the power she could wield as Chancellor, even a Jedi would not be willing to step away. But right now, they needed Fay's known skills in calming the waters.

“How little they know me,” Fay murmured. “Very well,” she said, raising her voice without needing any electronic aid, silencing those cheers or jeers of her assumption of authority. “In that case ladies and gentlemen. It is time to get to work. Our first order of business is to separate my position and that of the Senate from any military decisions. This body holds the purse ladies and gentlemen. None of us have the training necessary to know how to wield the sword.”

She smiled, then. “Not even me. I'd be as likely to kill myself as others if I tried to pick up a lightsaber.” That wasn't quite true, of course, but it was known that Fay had set aside her lightsaber upon becoming a Knight several hundred years ago.

“Once the high command is free to fight this war as it should, and the reins of power are further defined, we will speak about specific issues here on Coruscant. Then, we will reach out to sectors we have not heard of since the news that Sidious and his dark plans became viral. Look forward to several hundred very long days of hard work ladies and gentlemen. These problems are in no way simple, but they can be solved with enough effort and will. I am looking to all of you to contribute to that effort.”

By the end of the day, several plans were in place and acts had been passed. They did indeed tackle the issue of who could command the military forces. The High Command was specifically made separate from the Chancellor's office. The Senate as a whole could command the Senate Security Forces. The Chancellor could advise but not directly command them, nor could the Chancellor do more than advise the Republic's military forces. This would stop anyone coming after Fay from assuming much of the powers that according to Pestage Sidious would have eventually assumed. That High Command was made up of far more members than previously, and involved several high-ranking Jedi but that was something the Order would need to see as a body. Fay would have nothing to do with running the war, only trying to end it.

Next, the rather amusingly called the 'Clearing the Air' act was passed. Every Senator that remained would be investigated by the Jedi, regardless of previous affiliation, known probity, or anything else. Once they were cleared of wrongdoing, the Jedi would announce that to the public and the Senate. This would play well with the public and further demonstrate that the Senate of Reformation was different from the Senate that came before. That this would pull still further Jedi from the front was a good thing in Fay's mind, knowing how badly her fellow Consulars were dealing with the war as a whole.

At the same time, each sector would create a new organization. These organizations would be independent of the Senate and the Republic, answering to their local constituents. Groups of Jedi would help them get set up, but these small-scale intelligence services would give the reports to the Senate as distinct entities, looking for Sith corruption of any other kind out there. That such entities would grow into anti-corruption watchdog services was not lost on Fay or the most intelligent of the Senators. But even Orn Fre Taa and other senators who were semi-openly involved in technically illegal activities welcomed it, for now.

Master Windu and Master Rancisis would handle that and the ongoing war effort. Master Windu took over assigning Jedi to sectors still locked in combat or not wholly loyal to the Republic, assigning Jedi to them that could not only investigate, but fight, along with portions of the Republic military forces. Because, while the higher-ups of the Republic forces were still being looked at by Admiral Yularen, the forces that had been working with the Jedi up to this point were free of such implications. Those sectors that were entirely loyal to the Republic and had yet to see combat were handled by Master Rancisis and the teams he combined together. The two would also be the official Jedi members of the High Command.

At the end of the day, Master Fay appeared on a broadcast throughout the Republic. She played a portion of Ranma's confrontation with Sidious and several clips of the battle between him and the former Chancellor caught on security cameras, pointing out the difference between the Sith and the Jedi all the while. Fay then laid out what had been done since then, every aspect of it bar naming Pestage and the Senators that had already been implicated and removed from power. Those aspects were part of ongoing investigations, and she admitted that there was more to be said but she could not hamper those investigations. She ended by saying simply, "The Sith have harmed us all. They have hidden and poisoned the Republic from within. Excising a disease like this is a painful and slow process. But it must be

done to create a healthy body Republic. I hope we, the Jedi Order and the Senate of Reformation, can look to our civilians, powerful or not, on the streets, or in space stations, farming, or fighting, for their help in this trying time. Thank you, and may the Force be with us all.”

OOOOOOO

With Master Windu and Master Rancisis dealing with the day-to-day running of the Jedi Order and its interaction with the ongoing war, and Fay and Ood Bnar heading the other local issues, this left Master Yoda free to deal with Anakin and Master Fisto. This he did later the same day Ranma woke up. After deliberating, it was decided, against Master Rancisis’ judgment, that Kit would continue to train Anakin. This was not an easy decision for Yoda to make. But there was something to be said that Kit was most decidedly in Ranma’s orbit, and Ranma or Shaak could be trusted to influence or control Anakin if need be.

Just as importantly, Kit was a good match in temperament with Anakin. He’d helped Anakin through the loss of his previous Master, an incredibly trying time in any padawan’s training. Nor could he be faulted in not anticipating Anakin’s mad dash towards Coruscant. Having Anakin be there to hear the first recording of Palpatine’s voice must have been a moment driven by the Dark Side itself in its timing.

It wasn’t perfect, and Yoda still had reservations, of course. In his words, delivered with a poke of his gimer stick, he felt Anakin, “Need more discipline you do! More emotional control you need! Disaster you almost caused by running off to confront the Chancellor.”

He softened his stance then, looking down at where Anakin had already been fitted with a new mechanical leg. He’d spent the past few days, while Ranma was recovering being fitted and working out with it but he still couldn’t move anywhere near as well as he had previously.

That leg was a sign of something that made both Yoda and the other members of the High Council currently on Coruscant believe that Anakin could still become one of the greatest Jedi of his generation. And it was events that happened during that confrontation with Sidious. “And yet faced with the Dark Side you were, not only in body but in mind. Your tale told us you did of Palpatine’s attempts to bring you to the dark. Overcame it, you did. Stood as a Jedi Knight you did, the best of us who were for a moment.”

Indeed, Anakin had not only overcome the pull of the Dark Side at that moment, but he had also gone on to fight Sidious one-on-one. During what equated to a Force Storm, which had blinded the Force Precognition of practically every Jedi in the galaxy, Anakin hadn’t been blinded. He’d been able to somehow fight the Dark Lord of the Sith for several minutes, buying Ranma time to catch up with him.

Anakin had been staring down at the ground with a thoughtful expression on his face as he heard all of his faults in front of them. It wasn’t for the first time. As he had been

recuperating from losing his leg, Kit had informed him in no uncertain terms how much of an idiot he had been and how close he had come to falling to the Dark Side. "As much as I hate to admit it, it was your meeting Padme so randomly as you did that truly saved the day," Kit had finished before wagging an admonishing finger in front of Anakin's face. "And if you try to say something foolish about true love saving the day, I'm going to have the doctors turn over fitting you for your robotic leg to HK!"

It was that kind of humor and understanding that made Master Fisto just as good a Master for Anakin as Master Giiett had been. And it made Anakin feel worse at how badly he had let Kit down through his actions.

"I, I understand, Master Yoda. And I'm not exactly proud about that fight. It shouldn't have even happened. If I had been with Master Fisto and Ranma from the start, we could possibly have planned out even better, and caught Sidious then and there in the Senate Hall, rather than need Ranma to chase after him like he did. And in my direct confrontation with him..." Anakin fell silent, not knowing what to say.

Yoda looked at his tough old head for a moment thoughtfully, then asked abruptly, "Which pain, worse it was, losing the leg or staring into the Dark Side?"

Anakin looked up at that and knew almost instantly that Yoda somehow understood how close he had come, not just during his confrontation with Sidious but at other times in his life, to giving into the anger within him. To use it to fuel his Force powers. "A little bit of both, Master Yoda. The pain of losing my leg was momentary. Getting used to my new one is extremely difficult. But... Looking back on it, I can see..." Anakin fell silent again, biting his lip.

Numerous times throughout his thousand years of service to the Jedi Order, Yoda had seen Jedi battle with the Dark Side. A few had fallen, others had not, coming away from those inner battlefields with a greater understanding of the Force. He could sense that Anakin was close to realizing something about the Dark Side. He just needed a few more pushes. For a moment, Yoda hesitated and then decided to push forward. "Yet still, feel the pull of the Dark Side you do. Idea of controlling your anger, using that simple emotion, to fuel your powers? Tantalizing it is."

"... Yes, Master. Even knowing how the Chancellor was grooming me with some of the things he's said to me over the years, about how easy emotions like anger and hate could be used to fuel my connection to the Force, they still resonate with me. I have, I had so much anger in me bottled up inside when I was younger. Every time Watto threatened to use the collar around my neck, every time my mother was treated like dirt, her life threatened. I had to hide those emotions inside. And this undercurrent of anger didn't go away when I joined the Jedi Order. I just kept on getting better at ignoring it. Moreover, occasionally in the field, with Master Giiett, I let it out. And then I fought Sidious."

Anakin leaned forward, trying to make Master Yoda understand, not noticing the shadows around them darkening, a feeling of almost oppressive weight settling onto his shoulders. "I fought Sidious. A Sith, a Master of the Dark Side, when the Force was going so crazy! And he was using it so easily, so powerfully. I cannot and will not praise anything about that kriffer, except for his power and control. But if you could keep control of yourself, if a person could keep his eyes on the goal, a good goal, then couldn't you turn the Dark Side and do something good? Regardless of the methods, isn't it the outcome that matters?"

This was the last temptation of the Dark Side, and despite most of his mind being taken up by setting up a bit of theater for Anakin, Yoda was almost amused that it was one of the ones that his last padawan, Dooku, had long battled with. Indeed, Yoda knew that it was only his meeting with Ranma that had turned Dooku from the Dark Side and from leaving the Order in search of more information on the Dark Side. At the time, Dooku had thought that the Jedi needed the Dark Side, needed the Sith out there to force the Order to grow. Only by meeting Ranma did he come to understand that there were other paths to growth.

"Control of the Dark Side, illusion it is. Sidious, controlled by his anger and hate, he was, as surely as he thought he was not. Look at his choices, you must. Two methods forward there always are. Dark Side users, always choose a path of destruction they do," Yoda answered.

"But..."

"Think you I know not the Dark Side?" Yoda almost growled. Suddenly, Anakin became aware of the pressure building around him, the shadows growing all around them in Yoda's meditation room.

He looked around quickly, and when he looked back at Master Yoda, he shivered. No longer did Master Yoda look the wizened, benevolent, yet stern ancient Jedi Master. Instead, he seemed more like a wizened monster out of some ancient tale, his eyes catching Anakin's and not letting them go.

"Think you, I know not the Dark Side?" Yoda repeated. "Ancient I am. Many times, fought the Dark Side temptation I have. Seeing others do the same numerous times I have. Truth there always is to be seen."

Anakin licked suddenly dry lips, more scared now than he had been against Sidious for some reason. A part of that he knew was the fact he didn't have his lightsaber to hand, not that he would ever think of raising it against Master Yoda. But the other aspect realized what kind of horror Yoda could have been if he had embraced the Dark Side. "Truth?" He almost stammered.

"Truth. Think you, the Dark Side can do anything the Force can?" Yoda asked.

When Anakin nodded hesitantly, Yoda turned away from him. This broke some of the spell his gaze had on Anakin, allowing him to come back to himself for a moment, and to

Anakin's shame, the first emotion he felt as the shock faded was anger. How dare Master Yoda treat him so, especially after he'd just been saying how well Anakin had performed against Sidious!?

Before those emotions could stir further, Yoda had turned back to him, holding a small pot in one hand and setting it down in front of Anakin. "Use the Dark Side you will, to make me a rose."

Anakin's thoughts stuttered to a halt, even his emotions receding in confusion and he stared at Master Yoda. "What?"

"Hard of hearing have you become?" Yoda huffed, once more staring into Anakin's eyes. "A seed there is within. Make it grow. Create a rose, you will!"

Anakin stared between Yoda and the pot, then asked incredulously, "The Dark Side could do so much, we could do so much good with it and you're just, just asking me to grow a rose?"

"Yes. Old I am, foibles I do have," Yoda answered calmly. Then his voice became sharp as he prodded Anakin's chest once more with his gimer stick. "Sorrow you feel, rage still you do at Sidious's betrayal. Use that, you should, reach out to the Force. Sense the bud within you must. A skill with growing things you have shown occasionally. Use the Dark Side in conjunction you must. A simple rose you should create."

Reminded of Sidious again and how he had attempted since entering the Order to manipulate Anakin caused his already frayed control to quiver again, and he almost did it. He almost reached out to the Dark Side, reached out to his own anger to fuel his actions. But as he did, he could feel his control waning. If he did, he wouldn't just try to make the rose grow. He'd attack Yoda. He controlled himself with difficulty, taking all his anger and annoyance at this line of questioning and glaring down at the potted plant.

He tried to imagine the bud within growing, becoming a red rose, the kind he had occasionally seen in the high Council chamber or in classes with Master Yoda, when he was but a youngling on Kashyyyk. But when he tried to create the image of a simple rose, it didn't come to him. It was incredibly difficult to imagine the bud becoming anything. Indeed, it was difficult to even find it in the first place through the haze of anger.

And meanwhile, Yoda simply stood there, poking him occasionally, growling out, "Where is my rose!?"

Every time he did, the rose in Anakin's mind disappeared. The beautiful image of a rose bush shifted, changing until all he could feel was anger at his inability and Master Yoda for telling him to do something impossible. And the rose had become a monstrous veiny thing with far more thorns than flower.

And then, Anakin was hit by another epiphany. Just like he had been when Sidious tried to tempt him to the Dark Side, Anakin realized something else about the Dark Side itself. And with that revelation, all of his anger and hate began to wane as he stared at the wizened ancient Grand Master. "I can't," he said it without any anger in his tone, simply surprise and shock.

Yoda nodded, and the darkness around them receded and when he reached forward with his stick again, this time it was with a far gentler prod at Anakin's knee. "Yes. The Dark Side manipulate life it can, twist and bend life some Sith have been able to. Know this well, you do." Yoda had been briefed about what they'd found about Anakin's origins on Wayland. "Create life, it cannot. Create beauty, it cannot."

"And if I try to create something, the Dark Side will twist it into an abomination," Anakin breathed. "It really is like some kind of twisted virus or disease..."

"Yes." Yoda smiled, happy at Anakin had overcome this last hurdle in his understanding of the Dark Side. He had long been disturbed by the youth. He disapproved of how old Skywalker was when he was brought into the Order and the undercurrent of anger, the arrogance that Yoda had felt numerous times over the years. Master Giiett, Ranma and Kit had completely crushed his arrogance, making it into a simpler, more tested confidence and belief in self that wasn't nearly as blind to his own faults. Giiett, Kit and Yoda had hopefully dealt with the last of his anger issues.

And in so doing, Yoda reflected that he had already passed his trial of Spirit, one of the many tests a padawan would face when trying to take his knighthood trials. He had stared into the darkness and had returned to the light. "Understand now you do the final trick of the Dark Side. A simple tool, it is not. Turn against its wielder, it will. A malady it is, poisoning those who use it. Two ways there are to a solution, Dark Side users, always choose the crueler option, they will."

"Yes, Master. I..." Anakin paused then his voice became firmer as he went on. "When I discovered how my mother had been impregnated, and then my being manipulated in the womb, I promised never to serve the Sith ends. Now I know that was too small. I will not return to the Dark Side, Master Yoda. You have my oath on it."

Yoda harrumphed, shaking his head. "Keep the oath to the Order, you must. Other oaths, slow you should be to give them."

Anakin chuckled at that and found that he felt better for some reason. More emotionally centered than he had been ever since that party on Corellia. "I'll try to remember that, Master Yoda."

“Know my name, I do. Repeat it so often you do not have to,” Yoda harrumphed again before waving Anakin off. “Find your Master, you should. Meditations you have to do, but first, exhaust yourself you should. Sitting here for quite some time, you have.”

Anakin tried to hop to his feet, but his robotic leg failed him, not responding to his commands as well as it should have, and the fact that his other leg had gone to sleep did not help matters. He fell back on his rear, and it was only with a lot of grunting and grumbling that he could get to his feet again, massaging his still living leg as he realized the truth of Yoda’s words. The fact that Yoda was laughing at him all the while did not help matters, but when he was finally standing, Anakin laughed too, shaking his head at his own actions and, with a final smile, left Master Yoda there.

Yoda looked after the youth for some time, then smiled and closed his eyes, giving himself to the Force. It came to him with an ease that had disappeared almost entirely from his experience over the past hundred years. But with the Veil of the Dark Side completely gone now, the Force easily received his thoughts and will. Master Yoda’s sense of his body receded as he began to search through the galaxy, feeling out the Force to the widest extent he could, his last conscious thought as Yoda gave himself into his meditation being, *Anakin, all right he will be. If survive Ranma’s punishment, he does...*

OOOOOOO

After another day in bed, Ranma recovered to the point where he could help the still-comatose Shaak. Holding her hand, Ranma, who had just had an extremely full meal, began to push his ki into her, slowly rebuilding her own reserves. As he went, his ki repaired the damage done to her body as best it could. But this wasn’t as complete a process as Ranma would have liked. It was obvious after only an hour that a lot of the cosmetic changes caused by Shaak’s battle with the Thought Bomb would remain.

Although if there’s a rhyme or reason behind those changes, I can’t see it, Ranma thought, shaking his head as he looked down at his wife. Still, I don’t flipping care about the changes so much as I care about stopping this from having a long-lasting impact on Shaak’s health.

Those changes were odd, to say the least. The large white circles around Shaak’s eyes had become pale pink for some reason. Meanwhile, the white scar marks - the circles around her eyes were not scars but birthmarks - were now so white they nearly shown in comparison to her red skin. Skin that had, thankfully, regained much of its normal vibrant color.

Several hours passed as Ranma slowly transferred his ki into Shaak. By the time he was satisfied, Ranma was exhausted once more. But Shaak was breathing much more easily. She was even smiling in her sleep, although she showed no sign of waking up. *But how much of that has to do with her mental strain rather than her physical strain, I don’t know.*

Looking at her chest rising and falling, Ranma was suddenly struck by a reminder of the body underneath that cover and had to fight himself for a second to not try to wake her up in a naughty kind of way. *After all, a part of his mind wheedled, we've only experimented a time or two with using ki in the bedroom. What better way to celebrate the death of Darth Shiftface than trying out something new during fun time?*

But Ranma refrained. While he'd had his libido woken up and then fed quite nicely in his relationship with Shaak, that didn't mean he would think with his dick. *She wouldn't thank me for it on many levels. We're here in the Jedi Temple, and to say the local societal mores are against it would not be good. We've gone out of our way to not rub our relationship status in people's faces. And she'd probably be too damn exhausted to enjoy it, regardless.*

Sighing, Ranma stood up, swaying on his feet for a moment, his ki use getting to him for a second as his stomach roared. "Hush you. You're no longer the boss around here," he muttered before leaning over the bed to kiss Shaak's forehead gently, noting absentmindedly that someone had moved her Akul tooth headpiece. *Huh, I'll need to look around for it. "I'll be here when you wake up, Shaak. But right now, I think I need to check in with the others...after getting something to eat."*

For some reason, he thought Shaak's smile was a little wider at that. But for the sake of his ego, Ranma put it down to her feeling the kiss on her forehead rather than his jokes or the background noise of his still-grumbling stomach.

After Ranma had eaten, he asked around and found that the Mandalorians and the Nova Guard were being housed in the temple. As their cultures dictated, those who survived were taking events in stride. They couldn't care less about the turmoil their actions and those within the Senate hall had caused. Not for them was thinking about the galactic-scale picture.

Most of the crew were now monopolizing some of the training grounds within the temple, much to the chagrin of a few more of the hidebound Jedi that were currently around the place. The temple was still mostly empty, though, so they weren't getting in anyone's way.

Talli was with them, although Ahsoka wasn't. Ranma's Padawan was training against the others as Sergeant Cro shouted out tactical scenarios to the group, giving points to the one who had the best answer.

And after a second of looking around, Ranma began to panic a little. "Okay, people!" he shouted, getting everyone's attention. Not even the two padawans had been aware of his entry, so busy were they with the training. "Since we're in the Jedi temple, I assume that Ahsoka can look after herself, but please tell me we haven't misplaced my giant murder hobo of a robot?"

"What's a murder hobo?" Kad asked in confusion.

“Not important! Where’s HK!? If he’s happened to anyone, I’m going to blame you two,” Shaak growled, pointing at Cro. “You know he shouldn’t be left unsupervised.”

“Don’t blame this one on me!” Cro insisted, shaking his head rapidly. “I had nothing to do with that bit of madness. That is all on your Jedi friends.”

“Er, HK’s working in the Senate District with several Jedi Masters and Knights, Master. HK and I thought, and Master Windu and Master Rancisis both agreed that having him around to intimidate people might keep anyone from trying to, er, downplay events. He also has an extremely advanced bomb detection program, and since none of the security droids and most of the security personnel can’t be trusted to do the job...” Talli shrugged.

“Okay, that’s good. If anything happens, Windu and Rancisis can deal with it. And we’re still thinking that the Sith might have left little traps behind, then?” Ranma muttered, calming down a bit.

“Yes, Master. Or at least, Master Windu is. He took over security for the Senate district for a bit until another Master with more experience in Coruscant’s underbelly arrived. Master Dilly still wants to have HK around sniffing out bombs and things, though. He’s found a few, all small but placed in the thoroughfares, all installed along with the most recent renovations. HK’s also found a lot of different listening devices. I work with him in the mornings, and he’s left with Kit in the afternoon,” Talli answered, reflecting on the past few days from her own perspective since Darth Sidious had been slain.

Above and beyond her continued work with HK in the mornings, moving back into the temple after having been relegated to the Agri-Corps had been something of an anticlimax for her. Talli had thought to come home triumphant, not to rub it into people’s faces, but to stand in front of her former clan members with the understanding that she had proven a lot of the people who thought she didn’t have enough power in the Force to ever be chosen as a padawan wrong.

Instead, while she’d gotten a few looks from the few other padawans her age around that knew her, she got in just as many congratulations. Talli had also thought to see scorn or even disdain that she was apprenticed to Ranma, who wasn’t really a Jedi. But her peers didn’t seem to care much. They were simply pleased for her. Two of them were among those who teased or taunted her for trying to learn unarmed combat so much because she could never be as good with a lightsaber or the Force as them. But even those two were simply happy for her.

The older Jedi she met perhaps disapproved of Ranma taking on a padawan. But they fully understood who they had to thank for not only outing Sidious in the first place but also defeating him in battle. A lot of the battle had been caught by various security cameras, and the Sith Lord was an extremely formidable opponent. Perhaps only Master Yoda and Master Windu might have been able to fight him on an even footing.

"If Kit is working with HK and the rest, what's happening with Anakin? And where's Ahsoka?" Ranma asked a bit, ruffling Talli's hair.

Talli smiled at the touch, not smacking his hand away as Ahsoka might. "Anakin's under, well, Jedi don't have house arrest, but he's restricted to the meditation cells and his assigned room, Master."

"Anakin's also working up with his new robotic leg. I think they are down to the final fittings and making certain the nerve endings line up," Dralshy'a interjected, a pout in her tone as the Arkanian Mando spoke up. Ranma could tell she was pouting despite not seeing her face. While the Mandos could have removed their helmets, unlike the Nova Guard, who couldn't breathe a human-normal atmosphere, Ranma knew none of them would. The Mando'ade demanded they be ready for battle at all times outside of secure places, and the Jedi Temple was, despite the Reborn and Jedi building bridges, still the heart of what had been enemy territory for thousands of years. "Skywalker won't let me work on it, though. Says he has some ideas he wants to try. Amateur."

"What, why not just attach his original?" Ranma asked, blinking as he looked down at his Padawan. "Note I'm asking you and not Ms. Mad scientist over there,"

"Lightsaber wounds like that can't be treated like that, not by normal people, Master. Not even normal Jedi," Talli said, shaking her head with a snort as Dralshy'a made no effort to try to combat the label. "The wound was cauterized, destroying the nerve endings on both the limb and the stump. Besides, his leg was crushed under debris when you fought the Chancellor."

Grunting at that, Ranma gestured her back to the others. "Huh. Well, don't let me keep ya. We'll stay here until Shaak is back on her feet. That's going to take a few more days. And... how are you dealing with K'Kruhk's passing?" The Nova Guard and Mandos had their warrior cultures to fall back on. Jedi Training wasn't nearly as good at dealing with sudden loss, at least not at the padawan level.

"I... I'm coping, Master. Ahsoka wasn't handling it very well when she woke up, but I only had a few weeks to get to know Master K'Kruhk. His loss hurt, but I didn't know him as a person, and I know he was doing what he wanted, so." Talli shrugged philosophically.

"Did Yoda or any of the other Masters talk to her?" Ranma asked, grateful that Talli had spoken in the past tense when mentioning Ahsoka's reaction to K'Kruhk's death.

"No, Master Fisto spoke to me. Master Yoda said that it would probably be better to handle it in-house, er, by people associated with you and Master Ti." Talli looked a little pensive, her shoulders drooping. "He said that Master K'Kruhk is but the latest in a long line of Jedi he has lost and that it never gets any easier, but that he didn't know the Whiphid as well as

Ahsoka, so he couldn't help Ahsoka as much as someone who knew either her or Master K'Kruhk could."

Ranma grunted again, knowing that Yoda was probably underselling it. *How many thousands of Jedi has he seen die in the line of duty over a thousand years? How much of that time has he been the Grand Master of the Order?* "I'll still check in on Ahsoka now. But where is everyone? I thought the temple was empty when we arrived, but it's even worse now."

"Everyone's busy helping with the fallout of your confrontation with Darth Asshole, Master." Talli grinned as she used Ranma's nickname for the dead Sith, and Ranma smirked back at her. "Master Rancisis and Master Windu are busy with the war, and there are dozens of Jedi working on the things that Sate Pestage, the man guy that Master Fisto captured, is telling us. He is... What's that phrase you guys used?" she requested, looking over at the rest of the Wild Blade's crew.

"Singing like a mynock high on spice!" Sergeant Cro said from nearby during a pause in the ongoing training around him. "Obi-Wan is sitting on him, and the rest of the Jedi are busy across the planet and elsewhere rushing down links to the Sith."

Keala added a bit more information. "Even the Republic Intelligence Director was implicated, although he killed himself with a poison pill before he could be captured. All Republic Intelligence must be audited, and everything else going on."

"Killing Sidious might have cut the head off the snake, but its poison is still being removed from the body of the Republic." Fabian nodded sagely, getting a shove from his companion at his act

"Well, at least the Jedi are on top of things now. More power to them," Ranma announced, getting agreement from everyone there.

Talli went on, "As for Ahsoka, she prefers to be up in the botanical gardens, Master. And since some of the training I'm getting put through now by the Mandalorians and Nova Guard is stuff she's already done, Sergeant Cro decided she could stay there for a while today even though we knew you were going to be up and about."

"Makes sense. Shaak was the same way when we met." Nodding, Ranma ruffled Talli's hair again. "Well, I'm going to go see Ahsoka then. Why don't you get showered? Then you and I can find Master Yoda to see if he has plans for us. If not, then we'll be back to training."

He turned to Sergeant Cro, asking if he and the Mandalorians had been allowed to go out, and purchase anything they wanted and if they would be ready to go once Shaak was back on her feet. Since the Wild Blade had been transported to Coruscant, Ranma figured they would be leaving as soon as Shaak was able to track down Darth Asshole number two. "And I'm

saying that with feeling. We've taken the boss out. Now all that is left is the crap he's left behind."

He found Ahsoka just as he had been told he would, meditating inside one of the hydroponics gardens along with several other Jedi. She seemed calm enough, and around her, a few leaves were twirling in the air around Ahsoka, showing she was concentrating on a Force exercise.

While he was grateful to see this, that didn't mean Ranma wouldn't make fun of her. Their relationship was built around teasing and taunting one another, and Ranma would be darned if he didn't continue it. "Should I be worried that you're plotting something? Seeing you sitting so still must be a sign of the end times."

Ahsoka looked up, having felt Ranma's arrival with ease. The guy literally radiated to her senses with his Living Force reserves. And she'd gotten used to his presence over the past year and a bit. *How long has it actually been since I joined them permanently? Huh... it's certainly been packed, no matter how long it's been.* "I hate to tell you this, Ranma, but you're not nearly as funny as you think you are."

"Oh, like I haven't heard that before. Funnily enough, it seems to be mostly Jedi who say it, people who aren't supposed to have a sense of humor at all," Ranma quipped, kicking her lightly in the side, laughing as Ahsoka mimed rolling with it but then coming up with her lightsaber in her hand, while remaining sitting down. "Seriously, how are you doing?"

"I am coping, Master. I don't think I will be over Master K'Kruhk's death for a while. He was a dear friend, and I looked up to him a lot. But talking with Master Aayla at least cured me of thinking it was my fault." The teenage Togrutan's lips quirked for a moment. "And I have to admit, I don't think she cured me of that the way you would have."

Flashback:

Several hours after the battle in orbit had ended and Jedi had begun to get a handle on everything occurring on the surface, Aayla walked into one of the training centers within the temple, and just as she had been told she would, she found young Ahsoka Tano here. Several dozen of the training droids used to train Jedi against blaster fire zipped around her, firing out low-powered bolts of electricity in place of plasma bolts.

After everything Ahsoka had been through under Master Shaak's tutelage, even fifty such training balls shouldn't have been an issue for her. However, to Aayla's sadness, the younger girl was marked with several electric burns scattered across her body.

Still, Ahsoka turned at the noise of the door opening and pulled off the helmet covering her montrals and eyes, forcing her to rely entirely on the Force. This revealed Ahsoka's face, which was grief-stricken, her eyes sunken, her cheeks sallow, showing the strain from having to

fight the Thought Bomb had yet to be reversed, that she had not rested or slept yet. "Master Aayla, can I do something for..."

Aayla didn't respond, flicking the droids' central control system off and stepping forward. Before Aayla could do anything, the older woman's arms were around her, pulling her into a hug.

Despite having grown a lot since joining the *Wild Blade*, Ahsoka still came up to the bottom of Shaak's breasts. But Aayla was much shorter than Shaak, and this hug pulled Ahsoka's face right into Aayla's chest. Normally, this would have been enough to fluster the younger girl. Like many female Jedi, she had faced trials in her self-worth issues, and beauty was a part of that. Comparing herself to such beauties as Master Ti, Master Unduli, and Master Secura did no one any good, and to have her face rubbed into Aayla's chest, even covered with a cloak as it was at the moment, would've bothered her a lot.

But the affection of the gesture, the understanding she heard in Aayla's voice as she said, "It is all right to grieve, you know," completely disarmed Ahsoka. She had no chance to get her guard up or try to compose herself, and the barriers she had set to keep her grief and guilt at bay collapsed instantly. There were no tears, but as she clung to the older woman, Ahsoka heaved, great wracking cries.

Aayla let it happen, stroking the other girl's montrals and smiling down at her. Eventually, as the initial reaction began to leave Ahsoka, Aayla asked, "I never knew Master K'Kruhk very well. He and his Master preferred to deal with politics and direct conflict, while my Master, who I... understand finally lost the battle to the Dark Side within him, preferred to stay in the shadows and deal with the criminals out there rather than the corrupt politicians. Tell me about him."

Ahsoka pulled back and opened her mouth to speak, but even as the hug ended, Aayla bopped her on the nose lightly. "And I don't mean the staid, normal stuff you would tell someone like Master Windu or Master Rancisis. I'm not cut from the same mold as those oldsters. Tell me about K'Kruhk, the man, rather than just the Jedi."

At that, Ahsoka paused for a moment, then began. She told Aayla about the Whiphid Jedi's personality, sense of humor, and how calm he always was in the face of danger. How he had dealt with being wounded so often in a wry manner, simply calling each wound a learning experience, something he had in common with Ranma, who he dealt with similarly. Ahsoka spoke about how his insight had often helped her and how K'Kruhk had become a role model and friend.

When Aayla's comment came, it sliced through Ahsoka like a lightsaber. "He sounds like a magnificent man and a good Jedi too. So tell me, is he someone who would think twice about sacrificing himself or another? Is he someone who would want you to feel guilty about how K'Kruhk passed while doing his duty?"

Ahsoka gasped, almost falling as the weight of that question hit her and her real reason for feeling so much grief at his passing was laid bare. But Aayla went on unhurriedly, reaching out with a gentle hand and taking Ahsoka by the shoulder. "It is not your fault, my young friend. Indeed, I daresay you performed better than any other padawan would have in a similar circumstance. But given the power of that Thought Bomb, given the fact that the Sith had spent so much time imbuing it with Dark Side energies, someone was going to die. And I think I speak for both your Master and K'Kruhk that they would prefer it was one of them rather than a young one like yourself who had so much more to learn and to grow into."

"... Just like with Master Yaddle?" Ahsoka asked, shaking her head. "Will I ever be old enough that other people don't think they need to sacrifice themselves for me?"

"You learn, and you grow at your own pace, and do not think we did it lightly. That is foolishness. Whatever society you speak of, it is always the duty of those who are older and stronger to protect those who cannot. You are **strong**, Ahsoka. Do not let this event blind you to it. As I said, you performed better against the Thought Bomb than many a grown Jedi. But yes, in a way, it is much like Master Yaddle's passing. Take your memories of K'Kruhk forward with you, but leave the baggage of it being your fault behind, for it is simply not true."

She pulled Ahsoka into another hug, this one much more gentle, rather than nearly violent in its strength, as Ahsoka released the last of her guilt as if they were being washed away by the older woman's touch. "Do not let what if's consume you, for in doubt and grief, the Dark Side can reach out to you and fill you with fear of the future. And you are too strong an individual for that."

End Flashback

Ranma smiled at that, happy that Aayla had stepped up in such a way. After Master Yaddle's passing, it had been up to Ranma and Shaak to do the same thing, as none of the others had even noticed the problem that Ahsoka and Barriss had been feeling about how badly they'd done in the battle against Durge and the others. *I wonder if it was that experience or following Master Fay around that changed her perspective?* "That's good, at least. I'm glad Ahsoka was able to help you through that when Shaak and I were both out of it. I didn't want to come up here and find you moping around again over something you had no control over."

"Well, excuse me for having emotions like a regular teenager, you ass!" Ahsoka grumbled. "Not everyone can be as simple as you are, Ranma."

One of the other meditating Jedi nearby blinked at that, looking over at Ahsoka and shaking her head. She'd been able to overhear the conversation to that point, and while she had objected to the overly emotional way of dealing with the comrade's passing Ahsoka had described, she had held her peace. But now she had to speak up. "Is that any way to speak to your Master, Padawan?"

Both Ranma and Ahsoka gagged at that. "Oh God, no! Ranma isn't my master. My master is Master Ti! Ranma's just Ranma, her hanger-on. I'd sooner jump into a lake of lava than be taught by this cretin one-on-one!"

"Yeah, my padawan's Talli, and she's a way better match for me than this loudmouth little brat!" Ranma added, earning himself a shove from Ahsoka, who then squawked as Ranma grabbed her outstretched arm before she could pull it back, twisted and hurled her through the air like she was a missile to land in the nearby lake at the center of the garden zone.

"What was that for!?" Ahsoka shouted as she surfaced, grateful that she'd been able to drop her lightsaber before she flew over the water. Striding out of the pond, she called to it now, activating it as it hit her hand.

"Well, you said you'd be willing to jump into a lava lake. I figured this was a decent alternative. Because guess what time it is, kid?" Ranma's own lightsaber came out of his ki space, activating with a similar snap-hiss. "It's training time."

Ahsoka hissed like a wet cat and eagerly moved to attack Ranma as the other Jedi in the area quickly began to get out of the way.

OOOOOOO

With a low groan, Shaak slowly opened her eyes, her nose twitching at something smiling quite tasty nearby, her mind rousing itself with the slowness that was highly unusual for a Jedi. This time though, as her thoughts and memories returned, Shaak could easily understand why she was so exhausted. The memory of trying to contain the Thought Bomb with Ahsoka and K'Kruhk made her sigh faintly as she remembered her friend's death. "Still," Shaak croaked, speaking to herself, not up to reaching out to the Force just yet to know if anyone was around but needing to hear her own voice for some reason, "if I can wake, we succeeded. K'Kruhk...thank you for your sacrifice, my friend. You will be remembered."

"I'll say he will be," her husband's voice came from one side of Shaak, and she smiled, but she had barely been able to move her jaw. Turning her head was well beyond her present abilities. A moment later, Ranma's face appeared over her, a small smile on his lips as he looked into her eyes. "If not for him, I'd be down one wife. And since I've only got one of those that would be one hell of a wrench."

Despite the joking tone he spoke with, when Ranma touched Shaak's face, the touch, tender and gentle, showed his real feelings, and when he went on, his voice had lost its joking tone, becoming almost hoarse with emotion. "It was close, Shaak. You came way too damn close to dying down there in the dark. I thought that was part of the deal between us, how neither of us can die without the other?"

“I don’t think it quite works like that. But your emotions are appreciated, my love,” Shaak said, her voice tender before turning a bit ashamed as her stomach grumbled. “*Ahem* as is the food I can smell nearby.”

“Oh, I see how it is. Discard my worries, why don’t you?” Ranma said even as his face turned away and he moved to the side.

“As if there haven’t been times in our time together when you prioritized food over companionship,” Shaak retorted, her mouth moving into a smile. She felt Ranma’s hand going behind her back, and to Shaak’s embarrassment, she was reminded of far more private times when he touched her like that. Soon Shaak found herself sitting up a bit, two more pillows added behind her. This let Shaak see that she was in one of the beds in the hospital wing of the Jedi Temple on Coruscant.

Seeing she couldn’t move her arms, Ranma held up a spoonful of hearty stew to her mouth. Shaak obligingly opened her mouth, letting him feed her for a time as they gazed into one another’s eyes. Between bites, Shaak asked what had been happening since she collapsed. The news that Sidious had been dealt with by Ranma was no surprise but was a great relief regardless. Although she had not anticipated that, his death would release the Dark Side energies he had contained. Anakin’s injury caused her to sigh sadly, but it was a small price to pay to remove Sidious as they had. The news that the war was still ongoing did not surprise her, although it saddened Shaak.

The fact that they would be going after Tyranus as soon as possible caused her to smile faintly. “Yoda is joining us, though?”

“Yep. The frog’s pretty adamant about it. I’m assuming Yoda saw something in the Force or doesn’t think we’ll be able to track him without Yoda’s help.”

“Hmm... perhaps Tyranus is moving too quickly for us to discover his location as we had Sekot and Master Fay? Or perhaps he understands Tyranus’ overall goals and how to block them? Something he sensed when the Veil disappeared?” Shaak mused. “We have had some luck with using Force Meditation between us, but not on a moving target. And admittedly, that reincarnating fellow wanted to be found on Vjun. The Sith have hidden from us for so long, far longer than the Veil has existed, so he might be able to hide from my Force Sight. Regardless, I’m not about to doubt Master Yoda.”

Shaak smiled, trying to raise a hand to touch Ranma’s thigh as he sat next to her on the bed but failing to do so, her body felt so exhausted. Ranma caught the motion and reached down with one hand, squeezing her hand very gently, rubbing his thumb along the back of her hand, then her palm causing pleasant shivers to go through Shaak’s body. “I can feel it now, you know. The Force, the balance has been righted. It isn’t perfect, but perhaps balance can’t be perfect.”

“More like a seesaw, then? It can go one way or another but can’t be stable?” Ranma asked.

“Exactly, much like life, I suppose. One must take the good with the bad. The Dark Side will always be there, but the Jedi must also be there to ensure that the Sith cannot use its power to lord over others.”

Shaak was not naïve enough to believe that even if they killed Tyranus, the Sith would not in some way rise again. The Republic was so vast that even Jedi with all of their power could not police it adequately, and the galaxy was even larger. That was a lot of space to hide in, and even with the records on Wayland no doubt leading them to other Sith caches or followers, there could be even more such out there. But so long as they slew Tyranus and the war ended, that would be more than enough for Shaak Ti.

For a few moments, they fell silent as Shaak continued to eat what was a Ranma-sized meal and then some. She had badly depleted her reserves, and even with Ranma’s help the day before, Shaak was still barely at the stage where she should be awake, let alone anything else.

Ranma talked for a few moments, then fell silent as he simply sat beside his wife, occasionally touching her hand or face tenderly between feeding her the stew. It was evident to Shaak that Ranma was somewhat worried about the changes in her body wrought by the aftereffects of her exertions against the Thought Bomb. But Shaak didn’t feel like her body had atrophied or anything similar. She was just exhausted, that was all. Exhaustion could be dealt with.

Eventually, the food was gone, and they talked for some more moments, not about the war or their immediate plans to race after Tyranus. No, by mutual consent, their discussion dealt with the future. Where they would go, what they would do. Would they return to the Nova Guard and the Mandalorians? Ranma felt they wouldn’t. So long as the war eventually began to die down after Tyranus was dealt with, they wouldn’t need a full combat team any longer.

“And Cro, Dralshy’a and Kad are all at the point where they can toughen themselves up with ki. Retire to some wild planet for a few months, put them through their paces without actual combat interrupting, and I bet I could get them to the point where they’re consciously able to do that and manipulate their life energy in various ways.”

For a moment, Ranma’s jaw tightened as he remembered Janice and her death over Wayland. She’d been at the point where she could use her ki consciously, even if she couldn’t use ki attacks. And then she’d died. Blown up along with her starfighter.

It took him a second, but eventually, Ranma pushed his grief away and continued to speak. “After that, it’ll just be the kids.”

“The two young Mandalorians and our padawans, yes....” Shaak frowned for a moment, looking at Ranma with her eyes narrowing, despite a smile coming to her face. “That is going to become an issue in the future. I hope it doesn’t go the way your relationships in your old world did.”

“One guy, three girls, all of them knowing he’s handsome under his helmet? Two of them in puberty, and the next one hitting it shortly? No, nothing can go wrong with that scenario at all,” Ranma drawled, shaking his head.

“When you put it like that, oh my...” Shaak murmured smiling, as Ranma broke into a loud guffaw at her use of that line. Sometimes when she did so, it reminded Ranma of Kasumi, and memories of her were among the few he could recall without any mixed feelings from his past life.

“Seriously, as long as there aren’t any honor debts, family deals or anything like that muddying it further, I’ll be happy,” Ranma said between laughs. “That, and none of the girls pull an Akane... on any level whatsoever.”

“Well, when certain issues start to crop up, we’ll have to handle it as maturely as possible. Or perhaps I should say I will handle it as maturely as possible, while you stand to one side, trying not to make things worse,” Shaak went on, causing Ranma to laugh even harder. He leaned over at that and gave her a kiss, which, tired or not, Shaak returned eagerly for a few moments before Ranma pulled back, wary of going too far due to Shaak’s tiredness.

The conversation would probably have continued in a similar vein, but just then, a knock on the door caused them to remember where they were. Ranma pulled away, sitting in the chair he occupying before Shaak woke up, gathering the bowls and trays of her food as he called out, “Come in.”

One of the younger padawans present within the temple stuck his head in, blushing faintly for some reason Ranma couldn’t figure out as he looked between Ranma and Shaak. “Master Ranma,”

“No ‘Master’ kid!” Ranma interrupted, scowling and only half-jokingly. “I’m not your Master, and I’m not a Jedi. Heck, I don’t even go into that Master stuff with Talli. She just does it to annoy me.”

This caused the youngster to frown a bit, but he went on gamely. “Ranma, we’ve had a request from the Republic High Command. One of the admirals wants to meet with you.” He looked disturbed for a moment, which Ranma called him out on it, and the youngster went on. “Admiral Thrawn said, and I quote, ‘I wish to meet the center of the cyclone,’ sir.”

That caused Ranma to laugh. “I’m not nearly as calm as all that. But I suppose I can meet with this guy.”

"I believe Thrawn was the admiral that the Order was working with, the one Master Koon mentioned," Shaak mused. "Interesting."

"Yeah, maybe. If you're interested in the war on that scale, anyway," Ranma answered with a careless shrug. "I'm not." He gestured behind Shaak's head, and she nodded, and he helped her lay down again. "I'll be back soon, love."

The honorific caused the youngster to blush again, but for once, Shaak decided to not care about the impression they were leaving on her fellow Jedi. She simply smiled and closed her eyes. "I love you too, Ranma."

Ranma was still grinning as he made for the door, pushing the padawan out ahead of him and closing it gently. But by the time he had, Shaak was already asleep.

OOOOOOO

The trip to Republic High Command wasn't as easy as walking across the bridge connecting the Jedi Temple to the Senate District and racing along the roads from then to wherever it was. Mainly because of the number of security areas Ranma had to pass through than anything else. Even someone as memorable as Ranma couldn't simply walk into the massive spire that was the center of the Republic military. Eventually, however, after Ranma threatened to see how far he hurled one all too officious arrogant little so-and-so, and the so-and-so's boss had gotten on the horns with the high command, Ranma was finally recognized by the recording of what was being called the Senate Intervention and was allowed in.

Seriously, what is it with people in official roles losing their common sense and becoming assholes? Ranma grumbled, giving the bastard a final stink-eye before entering the massive, oddly cylindrical building.

An aide met him several minutes later, leading him to a command center. The command room was about a fifth the size of the Senate Hall but was well-lit, with three stories to it. One story, a balcony, was devoted entirely to communications consoles overlooking the rest.

There were dozens of people rushing around, people shouting, others making notes on datapads, and a map of the galaxy that was bigger and more detailed than anything he'd ever seen before hovering in the center of the room. There was so much information on it that Ranma didn't recognize that he paused for a second, trying to take it in, before becoming aware of the centers of calm scattered throughout the area.

Part of being a good officer was to be a rock of calm and good sense that other people could rally around. Regardless of your rank, that didn't really change. And in this room, several officers were doing that. One of them Ranma recognized as the naval representative in the Senate when he confronted Sidious. An elderly gentleman with a steel rod straight back, he barely glanced at Ranma as he walked past before giving out an order to one orderly and then

another to a communications officer. Both men leaped to obey, and he turned his attention back to the portion of the hologram he was studying.

Two of the other centers of calm were Master Rancisis and Master Windu. They were looking at the same area of the hologram at the moment, and they had one other Jedi with them who had a large headset, probably in direct communication with the temple.

The fourth was an individual Ranma hadn't met personally, although like Shaak, he had heard enough of the man from Plo Koon to recognize him on sight. Thrawn had been the one who had taken advantage of the Confederacy's concentration on Wayland to reclaim most of that sector and then sent Plo Koon to help Wayland itself when their defenses were being overcome at last. "The blue skin really is quite distinctive," Ranma murmured as he moved over to that worthy.

Somehow sensing his approach, Thrawn turned to lock gazes with Ranma, his red eyes probably enough to throw off many people. But Ranma wasn't most people, and he simply grinned at the older man, giving him a lazy salute calculated to annoy any true officer of any kind. "Yo, you sent a message saying you wanted to meet with me, blue guy?"

However, Thrawn did not rise to Ranma's provocations. Instead, he allowed a very faint smile to cross his face. "I have been warned that you like to goad and occasionally make fun of other people to get a reaction out of them. I regret to inform you that I grew up with several people just like that. If I survived to adulthood with such acquaintances, you're not going to bother me overmuch."

Shrugging, Ranma became a bit more serious. "All right, so why did you want to meet with me?"

"Who would not wish to meet the catalyst that has changed everything in the galaxy so much with his mere presence?" Thrawn answered, his eyes still locked on Ranma's face. "I have researched you since I began to work with the Jedi Order. Their own records and the public records I could find. As far as I can tell, your appearance in this galaxy changed events from the get-go. And you continued to change things, one after another after another."

"Eh, I'd say that was more the fact the Sith kept on trying to mess with me rather than anything else. Ain't my fault that it kriffed up for 'em," Ranma drawled.

"Ah, another method of making your opponent underestimate you. But the facts are clear." Thrawn gestured with a hand. "Without you, the Mandalorians would still be locked in their civil war, only coming to importance to the rest of the galaxy when one side or the other reached out to the Confederacy or Republic. Without you, as I understand it, the Jedi would not have their source of living starships, nor would they have been as proactive about preparing for the war secretly. Without your training spreading throughout the Jedi Order, many Jedi would

now be dead. And I personally would not be here because Master Fay would be dead. She would have died long before searching me out.”

Ranma hadn't ever had it laid out like that for him before, and hearing all of the stuff he'd done that didn't have anything to do with the fights he and Shaak had won caused him to pause, frowning for a moment. “I guess when you put it like that... But if you think I had some Great Plan or whatever...”

“Oh, no.” Thrawn smiled faintly, shaking his head. “No, there was no grand plan in what you were doing. You were simply surviving, but that in itself is fascinating as well. I've heard it said that you think your martial abilities are an art form. Is that the case?”

“Yeah.” Ranma stood back for a moment, and making certain there was no one close enough to be hit, quickly flashed through a kata coming to rest quickly, his hands pressed together in front of him. “The Art. It's one I've dedicated my entire life to.”

“... An art form that is by its very nature immutable, always changing and evolving. Which you adapt to every second of every battle.” Thrawn nodded slowly as Ranma looked at him in surprise, seeing an almost disturbed expression crossing Thrawn's face. “I began to understand why you could survive everything that has been flung at you. It is a very chaotic style, though...”

“Anything Goes Aerial Style is like that, yeah,” Ranma smiled cheerfully. “Maybe that's why I like it so much.”

“Quite probably. Though what that says about you as an individual, I would rather not say,” Thrawn drawled. “Is that your philosophy too? Adapt, improvise, and cause chaos?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Ranma shrugged. “In war, if you know yourself, know your enemy and can control the fight's tempo, then you will win every time.”

“That almost sounded scripted, or perhaps remembered?” Thrawn leaned forward a bit. “But if you do not know your enemy, or worse, assume you do, would you not be doomed to failure?”

“Eh, that's where individual skill comes into play. As for being scripted, a bit. From where I come from, a famous philosopher once stated something like that. He was famous, and I always liked the Art of War.”

“Truly? That sounds fascinating. I don't suppose you have a copy of the work, do you?” Thrawn inquired, intrigued.

“I do, but it's in Japanese. That's my native language, although the writer wasn't Japanese. I've run into a few other languages that are built similarly in terms of sentence

structure, but that is it. I'd have to do the translation myself, and that would take me weeks." *Since I still am not really good at reading Galactic Standard. Heh.*

"Pity. I would be very interested in a copy if you ever do take the time to do so. Regardless, I think you would be utter garbage at any kind of high level command," Thrawn mused aloud, partly as an observation, partly as a probe to see how Ranma would react. What glimpse he had gotten into Ranma's personality from his show of his Art had disturbed Thrawn a bit.

He was not surprised to note that Ranma simply laughed that idea off, saying he'd never even tried to become a commander. "Giving me any official command beyond a single squadron command would be completely stupid. And you'd probably have to assign someone to look over the logistics and shit for me. I know everyone on my crew handled that aspect themselves."

"So any idea of using you on a large scale would inherently fail, although I do not think we can overstate your importance as dates too much," Thrawn mused, and again he was half joking, half probing. "It is somewhat like what we did with Wayland, in a way. Although there, we were only taking advantage of the enemy's focus pre-existing focus."

Ranma's eyes darkened noticeably, and he shook his head. "I wouldn't like being hung out to dry like that. I'd probably have to find the idiot who thought up the idea and make him pay personally. Time and time again, while I've survived the fires of that kind of fight, others I've cared for haven't."

Master Giiett and Janice's deaths weighed on Ranma far more than the others who had followed him into that fire did. They had been friends and their deaths hurt Ranma badly.

Thrawn looked at him thoughtfully and saw perhaps more than Ranma would've liked. He saw the tiredness slowly creeping into Ranma, not tiredness of the body but of the soul. Ranma was a martial artist. He'd never been trained as a soldier. He'd never even been trained as a Jedi, able to push past the horror of battle and war. It weighed on him and had begun to weigh on him even before Corellia, let alone the battles over Wayland.

Thrawn could understand that, even though he had never let such things bother him much. Still, he understood Ranma's point and nodded his head.

"I had wished to talk philosophy with you, but as you can see, this is not a time or place for such things. Perhaps eventually, the two of us can meet again. I find myself fascinated by some of the things you have done and how you went about doing them. And frankly, how amazingly you were able to twist events around you. As I told the young Jedi I asked to convey my wish to meet you, you became the center of the storm occurring throughout the galaxy in a way I am both fascinated and appalled by."

Ranma's raised eyebrows caused Thrawn to shrug his shoulders minutely. "I cannot say I approve of chaos. Causing confusion and chaos among my enemies, yes. But chaos in an individual, causing it on such a scale as you have? I cannot bring myself to enjoy such, even though I am somewhat pleased by the outcome."

"What is life without a little chaos?" Ranma quipped.

He had intended it as just a little joke, but Thrawn shook his head firmly. "A life that is not directed is foolishly wasted. And if you believe that everything should be chaotic, no government can stand that kind of concept. Even the Jedi Order will be changed forever by your interactions with them, Ranma. As I said, you have had an impact far beyond that of a normal person."

"... I'm not blind to that, but it's not my responsibility either. I simply introduced my training and my own thoughts on the Force. The Jedi Order itself controlled how both of those spread." Ranma wasn't unaware of the waves he'd made within the Order since his first meeting with Master Dooku, but Yoda and the High Council had been able to control those changes. Still, he knew that wasn't the same as coming through them unscathed. Even the war itself, not just his actions but his ideas on how they should approach the conflict, had changed the Order. *A lot of the changes I gotta approve of, but some... who knows?*

Thrawn nodded at that. "Sometimes, the greatest philosophers have an impact well beyond their own lifetimes. Whether or not they wish to. I will be interested to see if your influence on the Jedi Order becomes something of that sort."

At that point, they were interrupted as one of the other Jedi in the room came over to speak to Thrawn in a low tone, gesturing to one aspect of the galactic map. Ranma blinked, seeing her, not having noticed earlier in the throng, but Aayla was not the kind of woman you ever forgot meeting. But something about the way the two interacted, the way Thrawn's eyes lingered for just a little too long as he gave Aayla a few suggestions and a command to pass on, which she did almost instantly, caused Ranma to grin a little.

Thrawn caught this, and his skin began to darken a bit.

"I think I now have an entirely new definition for the term 'blue on blue'," Ranma mused before Thrawn could stop them. *I wonder if the Order kn... right, silly of me. Fay knows for certain. And they are allowing it. Interesting, I suppose that could be Fay's influence, or maybe they know that Aayla's mentally and emotionally centered*

Aayla groaned a little, giving Ranma the finger, but was far too busy to do more than that, hurrying off to pass on Thrawn's orders.

In a desperate attempt to change the subject, an embarrassed Thrawn asked, "And what will you do now that Sidious has been dealt with? Will you attempt to retreat into obscurity? Or will you continue to take part in this war?"

"By your tone, you seem to already know," Ranma answered, letting the man off the hook. Although he was amused that the older, far more controlled man was embarrassed. "And you don't think that taking out Tyrannus will stop the war?"

"No. The war will continue from then on. The Confederacy may splinter. In fact, I am positive we will see that very shortly if my analysis of the Harch mindset is at all correct. Admiral Trench is an interesting one to analyze, to be sure, with quite a depth to his way of thinking. Removing Bulq is a good step but it will not stop the conflict. The Confederacy still has far too many ships and relies far too heavily on droids for peace to be achieved with such ease."

Ranma frowned at that, then he got it. "Oh, right. The troops don't need to be motivated, just ordered. And the controls for the droids are in the hands of the military and Sith."

"Exactly." Thrawn shrugged minutely. "The CIS will continue to fight because those at the top will not be willing to give up their power, and the troopers cannot rebel. That is not even mentioning how many of their constituent planets had legitimate grievances with the Republic. No, it will continue until we have broken the CIS military infrastructure."

"I know you're not asking me for my opinion on those, and that is a very wise thing to not do," Ranma answered, shaking his head. "My political skills end with 'I have a big stick, and I know how to use it'."

"Which would have made you fit right in with the Republic as it acted too many of the smaller planets on the outer rim," Thrawn answered tartly, making many of the Coruscanti natives nearby wince as they overheard that comment. "But you are going to follow Yoda's plan, then? You're going to attempt to remove Bulq as you did Palpatine?"

"That's the plan," Ranma answered with a nod.

Thrawn nodded thoughtfully. He had honestly thought to learn more from Ranma to see how he could be used better than simply as part of a hunter-killer team. But Ranma was right: he was utterly unsuited for higher command. *I shudder to think what he would do with a fleet. Beyond his need to be aggressive and deliberately unpredictable, I cannot read him at all.* That disturbed Thrawn greatly, as it was one of the few times he had run into an art Thrawn could not use to predict the individual who had created it. Frankly, that and the fact Ranma had noticed the... relationship between him and Aayla, was enough for Thrawn to no longer wish to talk to the youth for now. *The book he mentioned sounds interesting, but Ranma himself and I are just too different to understand one another well.*

“I’m done with my questions for now, Ranma. I simply wished to meet you and build my own opinion of you. Perhaps in the future, we can talk more about philosophy. Until then, I will only wish you good luck.” With that, Thrawn turned away, visibly concentrating once more on his work, giving out a command to one of the other communication specialists as he forward.

Still wondering what all that was about, Ranma shrugged and turned away. Heh, I suppose I can’t fault the guy for looking for a way to use me and Shaak, but he’s right, I’d be shit at any high level position. And the way the guy talks, eh, it could just be my throwing him off noticing his and Aayla’s connection, but he seemed really uncomfortable after I showed off my kata. Weird, but I’m not going to lose any sleep over it. Not with our hunt for Bulq coming up.

OOOOOOO

As Tyranus made his way through Confederate Space, Diabolus arrived on Raxus Secundus ahead of the delegates of the parliament and the Executive Council.

With her, Diabolus brought two companies of Magnaguards. These droids were designed to learn from one another in combat and battle Jedi with their vibrostaffs. They had proven extremely efficacious in this against the majority of the Jedi they had faced, although against Jedi Blade Masters, let alone the Chaotic Locus, they had fallen well short.

Meanwhile, she was in deep discussion with the CIS intelligence service, and another brand of droids, the BX-series droid commandoes. These droids were even rarer than the Magnaguard but could have an impact well beyond their numbers, given their abilities with infiltration and sabotage. Meanwhile, the delegates for the parliament began to arrive well before the council members did but that was within Diabolus’ predictions. When the leader of the Techno Union arrived, he was the first of the Executive Council to do so, and she met with him immediately.

The Skakoan alien greeted her but warily. Without any preamble, he gestured to a small hologram of a battle going on near his home world. “The Republic *Hiss* has begun to fight back, *Hiss* most intelligently. They are *Hiss* using the ordinance depots *Hiss* fleets to defend what planets they can, *Hiss* avoiding battles when they cannot *Hiss* and are targeting various aspects of our logistics *Hiss* complex. Not to take and hold, *Hiss* but to smash. The battles are extremely well planned *Hiss* and show an advanced understanding *Hiss* of the reality of our logistics.”

“We are still grinding them into pieces with every battle. They don’t know the most important things: where our hidden shipyards are, how much of our military-industrial capacity is in the dark,” Diabolus waved that off airily. “And politically, for every planet they hit like that, they simply push other planets to remain in our camp going forward.”

“Perhaps. The *Hiss* equation of morale on a *Hiss* intergalactic scale is one *Hiss* that I cannot calculate. However, *Hiss* this attack disrupted *Hiss* our dreadnought project. That is a setback.”

Diabolus frowned at that, bringing up the data quickly, and the two of them got down to the nuts and bolts. As they discussed things, she probed the Skakoan subtly with the Force and decided he would stay the course regardless. His ambitions, as well as his personal grasp of logic, would dictate that he would remain with the CIS, because he could not guarantee his own survival if he tried to jump ship or make a peace treaty with the Republic.

The same could not be said for the trade Federation’s Nute Gunray. The green-skinned Neimoidian was very much a personal coward, and when Diabolus met with him, it was all she could do to keep her lightsaber out from his gut at how much fear radiated off him. He would obviously sue for peace the moment he was personally threatened, regardless of what might happen afterward. But that was fine, Diabolus reflected. *Fear can be a magnificent motivator too.*

Of the others on the Council, several of those from planets that had been wronged by the Republic were still for the cause. Although they were noticeably reluctant to continue to take orders from Tyranus and Diabolus, given their now open Sith origins and knowing now how they had been set to be scapegoats in the Great Plan by Sidious and the Order of Two. Nevertheless, their own opinions on the Republic would keep them within the CIS.

Others, such as the leader of the Commerce Guild, took some more convincing. The Gossam Shu Mai was not nearly as cowardly as Gunray, and had a cold, calculating air about her, much like Wat Tambor. But unlike the Skakoan, Shu Mai was not nearly as certain that her personal fortunes were tied to the CIS. Shu Mai would leave if she could get away with it, literally leave, that is. Rather than try to make peace, her personality dictated that she would rather become a turncoat and then run with the money she earned in doing so. Shu Mai cared not at all for her people or position further than they could better her own living style.

Diabolus had two commandos assigned to watch her. With orders to gun her down, if she even tried to make contact with anyone not on the approved list.

Across the board, the Executive Council’s Guards were quickly and efficiently replaced by Magnaguards and B1s, whose loyalties and shutdown codes had been changed. Of course, that occurred throughout the CIS on a random basis just in case, but now, the entire CIS military would answer to Diabolus or her representatives, the remaining Sith Acolytes.

During these meetings with the Executive Council, the members of the parliament continued to arrive over time. Most of them had agreed to come to this meeting, and those who hadn’t would find the Confederate defenders of their world no longer taking orders from them. Across the Confederacy, the droids of the CIS were taking over various Hypercom networks, communications hubs and governmental buildings. Since most of those droids had

already been in place defending those installations, the takeover was swift and practically without incident.

Right up until the moment, it became clear that those dissident representatives who might wish to reach out to the Republic no longer had control of their own communications networks. At that point, members like Senator Ames of Desix were placed under house arrest. If they had any military officers that would answer to them or their planet over the CIS, those officers were also removed. The CIS intelligence service might not have been as large as the Republic Intelligence was slowly becoming as the war went on, but it had years to build up to the point where it knew everyone and everything within the movement.

Still, those senators had undoubtedly chosen the path of wisdom, given what Diabolus had planned for the rest of the parliament if they voted to make peace with the Republic. Something she knew, days into this mission, was almost a certainty.

While Diabolus had been meeting and soothing egos on the Executive Council, the parliament members had begun their own discussions. There was no unanimity for a time, but as more and more members arrived, the group that had been most furious at the idea of being manipulated by the Sith started to share the video of the confrontation between Ranma and Sidious in the Senate Hall with those who had not seen it that slowly began to change. This was helped by the fact that Pestage had begun to share the aspects of the Great Plan from his own perspective, along with his own files. Fay had recordings of those discussions shared with the public as well.

Old grievances with the Republic were proven to have originated at Sith instigation going back as far as six hundred years. Moments of open violence and harsh reprisal or crackdowns from the Republic for infractions were also shown to have come from the Sith. While many of the cracks that had caused the separatist movement in the first place were real problems with how the Republic ran itself, many had been harshly exacerbated by the Sith.

“Why should we keep fighting for them!”

“Why should we keep marching to our deaths?”

“Could we ever have won this war in the first place?”

“It is time for us to look at our consciences to decide where we stand. To look at our own mistakes and say that we have been manipulated, we can stop being tools! We can stand back from this abyss!”

Such sentiment and questions were powerful. As Diabolus' third day on Raxus Secundus began, Diabolus knew that such things were dangerous. By the fifth, most of the parliament members who were going to attend had arrived.

The building that the CIS had designated as the head of the legislative branch of the government had been designed for such a thing almost from the start. It could house all of the delegates within one room, although the room's acoustics were not the best. There was always an undercurrent of sound, particularly if all of them were moving around inside. Diabolus and the Executive Council waited on an upraised dais at the front of the room for all council members to enter. When they did, the doors closed behind them.

Diabolus was forced to listen for the next hour as the parliament and the Executive Council argued. The Executive Council was, as she had made certain of, on her side of things in this debate, while the parliament had time to actually create a referendum up for the cessation of hostilities and a demand for reparations from the Sith Order of all things.

Eventually, when it became clear that the Executive Council, for all of their strength, bluster and political acumen, would not prevail against the majority, Diabolus stood up. That simple act drew every eye in the room to her, and Diabolus grinned wickedly as her eyes turned yellow, the Dark Side within roiling, her hatred of these weak, fat fools eager, ready to be used. "Congratulations. You have all proven that you are too stupid to live! You came here to me, to the Sith, to demand reparations, to push for peace," she hissed the word as if it was a curse. "To run and flee from your own faults and actions, trying to put all those actions on us."

She waited for a moment as her diatribe wiped away all noise within the room. When she pulled out her lightsabers, the snap-hiss caused many cries of shock as everyone there backed away hurriedly. The Techno Union leader and the leader of the Trade Federation both activated personal shields. Their races were unnaturally durable against the radiation shields created, and so could get away with it. Meanwhile, the rest of the executive branch quickly hid behind them, all understanding what would occur.

The members of the parliament did too, and hundreds of them were armed, pulling out holdout blasters, pointing them at her over or through their fellows while the doors behind them opened. Four squads of Magnaguards entered from the three entrances the members of parliament had come through, followed by a platoon of Super Battle Droids.

With them came Karoc and Vinoc, two of only three remaining Dark Acolytes. All the others had died since the war began. The process started with the Chiss Vandalor, who had died in a small nothing battle against a suicidal Wookiee of all things blowing them both up along with the building they had been in. The weakling's Force abilities had barely been enough to merit interest, and his death had proven that. Sev'rance Tann, his lover, was still missing to the best of Diabolus' knowledge, a loss the Dathomiri felt far more keenly.

One death Diabolus could not bring herself to care about was the latest to die, Tol Skorr. The proud, arrogant and hateful former Knight had been one of Diabolus's rivals within the Acolytes, one who was too stubborn and stupid to realize who he was overmatched. He had been blown out of space along with his starfighter. Skorr, like all the other Dark Side users, had

been effected by the shattering of the Veil back when the Chaotic Locus had conquered Wayland, and had been in mid-battle at the time.

Karoc and Vinoc had survived to this point by leaning on one another. Twins, they had a Force bond to put any apprentice bond to shame, acting and moved as one in battle. Somehow that bond had shielded them enough for the twosome to survive having been similarly caught mid-battle during the final dissolution of the Veil.

Artel Darc, the only other surviving former Jedi, had been sent by Tyranus to Dromund Kaas to aide the Prophets of the Dark Side there to remove themselves into the Outer Regions the day before. Although many had been on Wayland and died against the invaders, there should be at least fifteen or more surviving there.

That had happened two days ago, but since Dromund Kaas was well out into Outer Rim already, Diabolus didn't think she or her Master would hear from them for another few days.

Now, the twins spread apart, their lightsabers igniting as one, their other hands moving to push back their dark hoods, sneers on their faces as they looked at the politicians. One then flicked his lightsaber up and batted a blaster bolt aside into one of the politicians, causing a cry of shock from many as they realized what was about to happen. "How nice, brother, some of the Maramu have teeth."

"Plucking such teeth while sheering the rest will be most fun, brother," Karoc agreed with his twin's observations.

Then Diabolus was charging forward, leaping off the raised dais into the air, her lightsabers flashing and reflecting a few bolts that could track her movement as she shouted, "Learn what the Sith truly are, fools! You will all take the lesson to the grave!"

With that, the slaughter began.

Killing several thousand sentients with lightsabers and blasters was not quick, even for a Sith like Diabolus. It took time, but with the doors having pneumatically sealed themselves on her orders and the droids all with her, the delegates never had a chance to escape. They fought back, but as individuals, and with the rest screaming, surrendering or pleading for mercy, no real defense could be organized.

Splattered by some of the blood that the Magnaguard's victims had accidentally splashed her with. Diabolus turned back to the Executive Council, gesturing around her at the droids that had taken part in the slaughter. "On top of the droids I have ordered to protect you, Karoc and Vinoc will be your guards from now on. You will move and remain as a group while I am gone. Once Tyranus and I have returned to resume full control of the Confederacy, that will change. You will be allowed to resume your regular movements and receive rewards for being loyal to the cause. Until then, they will be added protection."

All of the executives, even the calculating Tambor and the head of the Banking Clan were staring at the windrows of dead in front of them, the blood and gore from the Magnaguards, the crisped bodies left behind by the blaster cannons of the super battle droids, the hundreds of dismembered dead left behind by the three Dark Side users. Now the Techno Union member shook his head slowly from side to side. "And *Hiss* insurance for you and your Master."

It was a statement, not a question, but Diabolus still nodded her head. Her eyes still gleamed yellow, the anger in her abating only slowly, gleeful from the slaughter she'd just committed. "You understand exactly."

"You realize that this and whatever preparations you made elsewhere will not succeed across the board?" the voice of the Commerce Guild leader had gone beyond horror, becoming almost dead as Shu Mai stared at the bodies in front of her. She had rarely been so close to violence before and never on this personal yet large a scale.

"I know. But so long as the majority of the Confederacy was convinced of this and continued the war efforts, that is enough for now. Because as long as the war continues, both sides will continue accumulating reasons to keep it going," Diabolus said, laughing wickedly.

Thirty minutes later, the members of the Executive Council were quickly being hustled out of the building by Karoc, Vinoc and several droids, all of whom had been cleaned. Other members of the parliament building were also seen trying to evacuate, members who Diabolus had ordered sequestered upon their arrival, randomly chosen to survive if imprisoned. But even as these evacuations occurred, the building behind them exploded, taking with it all the evidence of the true origins of the massacre.

The Executive Council and the few survivors of the parliament were now thoroughly cowed and under the command of droids who would only answer to the Sith. And rumors would go around that it had been the dreaded Republic Intelligence who planted the bomb, and indeed several cells of Republic Intelligence Members would be rounded up in the next few days on Raxus Secundus and be forced to admit that they had done the deed.

Of course, most people in positions of power within the Republic and the Confederacy would probably not believe it. But most of those people in the CIS were now under Diabolus' control. They would toe the party line well enough, and the confusion as to what was truly behind it would serve just as well as the outrage at the idea that the Republic had ordered such a thing at such a time of turmoil. Any idea of making peace with the Republic was dead in the water now.

Still, the Shu Mai's words were spot on. Given the Confederacy's size, Diabolus' plans could not work across the board. Some planets would undoubtedly overthrow their local Confederacy overseers. But that would in no way be a peaceful process. While the violence and bloodshed would no longer feed the Veil of the Dark Side and thus be fed directly into Tyranus,

the Sith would still enjoy it for its own sake. Moreover, those planets would be in no position to rejoin the Republic regardless.

While the CIS had started to splinter, that process was in no way finished. Fear and the droids would allow the CIS to continue the war.

OOOOOOO

The turmoil caused by Sidious being outed as a Sith did not just affect the Senate or the CIS. The Republic as a whole was reeling. Palpatine had been a respected, even liked leader for years, and had connections, both hidden and not throughout the Core Worlds. Even with the evidence laid out, billions across the galaxy didn't believe it. Some sector governors demanded Ranma be put on trial for the murder of the Chancellor and the framing of him. Chaos and confusion abounded throughout the Republic, with outright anarchy being the name of the game in several systems and even whole sectors as news of Sidious being a Sith of manipulating the war and even more revelations began to be shared.

That so many Senators were also being indicted made this reaction worse. Others, pro-human supremacy worlds, were simply splintering from the Republic, seeing the downfall of the human Palpatine as a plot. Long built-up resentment against the Jedi Order and aliens that Palpatine had helped hide now boiled over without him holding the strings of power. Several Core World sectors were now facing anti-alien riots. Still, other Core World sectors had closed their borders, firing on any starship with a nonhuman planet as their planet of origin.

Not that any of this mattered to Ranma. Instead, he spent as much time as he could by Shaak's side, helping her to recover. By the third day after Ranma himself had woken up, Shaak could walk on her own and even engage in certain non-walking activities in their bedroom on the *Wild Blade*. Considering the Mandalorians, Nova Guard and the padawan pair were housed in the temple, Ranma and Shaak felt they could get away with that, although Shaak admitted that she probably should have waited a few more days, given how strenuous that certain activity could be with Ranma.

She recovered and smiled at Ranma as they talked about their next mission.

"I got to admit, as much as I don't want to, we need to add some more lightsabers to our crew. My vote would be for Anakin and Kit. We've worked with them before, and regardless of what he did first, Anakin redeemed himself a little in my eyes with his stance against Sidious that slowed the bastard up." Ranma shook his head, remembering that race and the battle afterward. "He came far too damn close to getting away from me to disappear into the rest of the district. If Palpy had, I doubt we would have been able to stop him from escaping to the Confederacy fleet in orbit."

"True, although I know you far too well to believe that you will simply allow Anakin's actions to slide," Shaak teased gently. "Nor do I believe that The Order will willingly let him go."

Regardless of his final actions against Sidious, he nearly caused a complete and utter disaster before that.”

“You know me very well indeed,” Ranma said, leaning over to give her a kiss, a kiss that would possibly have turned ardent if Shaak wished to expand once more her energy in such a manner. Since she didn’t, she gently pushed Ranma away, giggling at the pout he sent her way.

“Still,” he went on quickly, “you don’t know until you ask, you know? And since Yoda’s been saying we should leave every time he comes out of his mediation, I think we must get ready today if you’re up to it.” When Shaak nodded, Ranma continued with a faint scowl on his face. “Although the frog’s not told me where we’re going.”

“Yes, Master Yoda did mention earlier today he wanted us to leave by evening. As to where we are doing, I believe that has little to do with knowing where Tyranus is going. He said we need to gather more firepower first.”

Ranma nodded. “So Zonama Sekot then?”

“And perhaps first Mandalore,” Shaak agreed.

“Bo-Katan would surely love to be in on the kill, that’s for certain. Although... I’m not looking forward to telling her about Janice.” Janice had been one of Bo-Katan’s first protégés, much like the young Keala Kryze, her cousin. But she had a right to know how Janice died, and Ranma would tell her about everything that occurred since returning to Wayland and his battle with Sidious.

Shaak nodded sadly. Janice had been her friend, one of many they had lost in this war. *A war that has not ended yet.*

“Probably. For now, let’s make certain that we are stocked up on food and repair parts for the starfighters. I know we wanted to take on a few starfighters as well, and settling them into the Wild Blade is a somewhat arduous process. After that, I will go and get our padawans, while you speak to Master Yoda.”

Ranma did this with all his normal diplomatic aplomb. Walking lazily into Yoda’s meditation room, he smacked the doorframe hard with one hand. “Yo, old frog, are you gonna be ready to go in like an hour or so? You said you wanted to leave by evening, and it will be pushing evening by that point.”

Yoda did not look up from his meditation. Instead, he simply waved a hand, and one of his specially reinforced gimer sticks rose from the corner, rocketing towards Ranma. It would have stabbed Ranma in the forehead if he hadn’t caught it. “Ready to go, I will be. Deaf, I am not. Rude, you most certainly still are when reason to be there is not.”

“It keeps you on your toes. Far too many people around here are all too ready to bow and scrape in your presence. You too are mortal, Yoda,” Ranma said, allowing a bit of seriousness to enter his tone before squatting in front of Yoda. “And speaking of mortals, I want to take Kit and Anakin with us. Kit and I have worked well together numerous times.” The fact the Nautolan was Ranma’s best male friend was beside the point. “And Anakin, for all his mistakes, is one hell of a good lightsaber duelist and pilot. With the losses we’ve sustained to our crew, we need both.”

Yoda did not reply for a moment, but when he did, he finally opened his eyes. “Agree with your points, I do. But officially allow Anakin to go, I cannot. Master Windu, Master Rancisis agreed on this point they are. Atone, Anakin must. Silent contemplation and meditation he must face.”

Ranma instantly hit on the most important part of what the ancient Grand Master had said. “Officially is it? A kidnapping it is. In fact, this seems a perfect time to kill two birds with one stone. I don’t suppose you would care if I humiliated him a bit?”

The two of them exchanged laughs. Yoda was still laughing, sounding almost young for a moment, as Ranma exited his meditation room.

Ranma heard Kit’s voice before he reached Anakin’s room, slowing to a halt as he listened to his friend’s disbelieving tone. “I cannot believe you were serious about placing a second lightsaber in your leg! I had thought the process of creating a new lightsaber for yourself an excellent use of your time. But now? I’m wondering if we need to talk about the dangers of paranoia to a Jedi.”

“I’m not paranoid, Master, but you must admit it could be useful. It was either that or a blaster in the boot. And I figured that would be very hard to hide from scanners and aim appropriately in a fight,” Anakin answered cheerfully.

Ranma grinned as his friend laughed at that, standing in the doorway as Anakin continued, his tone becoming a little more somber as he continued to fiddle with his robotic leg, very much not looking his Master in the face at present. “I don’t suppose you could convince Master Windu and the others that I should be allowed to head into the Senate District for a bit? I’m not going to do anything or try to run away. Which I swear Master Windu thought I might the last time he talked at me. And it was **at** me, not to me. That lecture was almost painful. But I just want to apologize to Padme about how I treated her.”

Taking that as his cue, Ranma entered, changing his plans on the fly as to how precisely he would humiliate Anakin. “You mean you haven’t already?!”

Both Jedi within turned to him. Having sensed Ranma’s presence, they weren’t surprised, and Kit shook his head at Ranma’s words, while Anakin answered. “No, like I said, I haven’t been allowed out of the temple. And I don’t want to do it by holo either. She was my

friend once. Like you, Ranma, she was part of how I became free to become a Jedi. She deserves better than that from me.”

“And the fact that you still have romantic feelings for her did not affect this plan? If I believed that, you would have a garden world to sell me,” Kit answered with a healthy dollop of snark.

“I’m not going to comment on that, although I believe he owes the lady an apology in person too. You don’t just kiss a girl out of the blue like that. And, considering that Shaak and I want to leave by evening, let’s get this done now.”

Kit should have spoken about how the Jedi Order did not allow attachments and that letting Anakin see his crush would not happen. A proper, New Oath-abiding Jedi Knight should have pointed out that it was putting Padme in danger that Anakin should apologize for. And that a holo-call was perfectly acceptable. That Anakin’s emotional connection to Padme was all in his head, an obsession built upon Padme becoming an image in his head. Kit could even have pointed out that Anakin had other sexual relationships and hadn’t been as interested in them.

But Kit was not a normal Jedi Knight. Indeed, he had recently renewed his oath to the Order in the Old Oath. Kit had also been in Padme’s presence and knew the feeling the young woman gave off in the Force. He had even sensed some kind of connection between Padme and Anakin. He wasn’t certain what to make of it, but it felt like a... well, Kit would have called it a thread of the future if he wanted to wax lyrical. A potential future that was no longer needed but still promised good things in the future.

And Kit also knew Ranma very well. Ranma had become his best friend by this point, and Kit knew he was both still somewhat annoyed at Anakin nearly giving the game away to Palpatine. And it had to be said, their senses of humor were somewhat alike too.

So instead of protesting, Kit looked at his chaotic friend closely, and then stood up from where he had been sitting beside Anakin’s chair as he worked on the robotic leg, taking two steps backward. “I do not believe the High Council would approve of my young Padawan leaving the temple at this time.”

For all his growth in the past few days and self-awareness and control, Anakin still couldn’t quite read the mood as well as his Master could. And the idea of meeting with Padme again had somewhat overwhelmed him for a moment, so he actually spoke over his Master in his haste to get the word out. “Do you mean it, Ranma?”

Ranma didn’t address Anakin, not verbally, anyway. Instead, he reached over and grabbed Anakin by the robotic leg he had stuck onto the table in front of him. He gripped the metal with ease, then lifted Anakin into the air, ignoring his harsh shout of protest, or his flailing, catching the lightsaber as Anakin tried to call it to him stowing it in his ki space along

with his own. "You're right, Kit. This is a kidnapping. Anakin's not officially being released to join the rest of us. I'm just dragging him along. Literally."

Laughing, Kit followed Anakin as Ranma dragged him out the door. "This is also my part in paying you back for nearly screwing the entire galaxy over. Don't worry, Anakin. I kinda like you, so I won't bounce your head on the stairs."

By the time they reached the third floor of the temple, Anakin was **very** grateful that few Jedi were around and that the younglings were either all in classes or already off-world at the other temples the Jedi had set up before the war had begun. *Thank the Force for small mercies. Although I wonder what will happen to those smaller temples now? Master Fisto mentioned that Master Windu believes the Order should continue to remove us from the image of being a tool of the Senate. But he never went into detail on how that was going to be done. Although, isn't Master Fay involved in that and in the whole leading the Republic thing?*

Anakin let his thoughts drift for a time almost in a meditative manner as Ranma dragged him through the temple. However, when the sunlight hit him, he became aware once more of his current humiliation. "Dammit, Ranma, are you going to actually drag me all the way there?!"

"Yep. Like I said, this is my payback Anakin. Considering the size of the problem you nearly caused, the humiliation has to be just as big."

Anakin thrashed then, trying to lift up his other leg to kick at Ranma, but that had just as much impact as keeping the Jedi Temple itself. He tried to use the Force, but Ranma's grip was unbreakable. He simply pulsed his ki outward like he had so many times before, and Anakin's attempts to use the Force on him faded instantly. He tried to find anything nearby to hurl at Ranma, but this failed too.

As they entered the Senate District, he tried to change tacks. "Help, kidnapping, murder, he's dragging me off to defile me!"

"I like the last one, that wasn't bad, Anakin. If anyone believed ya, it might've caused me problems," Ranma said musingly as Anakin's cries went ignored by the passerby. Many of whom popped open their datapads to take photos but did not move to help him since Anakin truly didn't look all that frightened, just angry and annoyed, and Ranma's face was extremely well known by this point throughout the district. The man who outed and then battled Palpatine was very obviously a law unto himself, and no one in their right mind wanted to get in his way.

Anakin realized this and subsided again, trying to meditate, but failing miserably this time, crossing his arms and huffing as he was dragged along. As they reached the floor where Padme resided, he began to thrash and try to break out of Ranma's grip once more. But this failed too, and Anakin found himself hoisted upside down in the air as Ranma rang the doorbell to Padme's apartment.

Padme was inside, going over some of the notes that Master Fay had rather jokingly called her homework for the day before. Surprisingly, she found herself helping Master Fay re-create the Peace Party to reach out to their fellows on the Confederate side. It was interesting work, but finding ways to reach out to their former acquaintances that could not be tracked was tough.

A break from that work was extremely nice, and she opened the door with a smile on her face, one that did not go away but turned rather crooked as she took in the image of Ranma standing there with Anakin held up in midair beside him. "Hey Padme, the Wild Blade will be leaving Coruscant soon, and Anakin's going to be coming with us along with Kit. But he has something to say to you first."

"You seem as if you're trying to sound like his friend, Ranma, here to give support. That goes very poorly with what I'm seeing here. However, I am perfectly willing to listen to anything Annie says."

Anakin winced at the name, muttering under his breath, "Oh joy, a hint of emasculation added to my humiliation." But, with his newfound sense of self and control, Anakin could take this in stride as he looked once more at Padme.

Despite everything that had gone on, despite all of his growth since becoming a Jedi or even since seeing her last, the feeling of Padme in the forest still had an impact. It wasn't quite like looking at another Force user, but it was definitely very different from looking at anyone else. *Like looking at a pearl in comparison to a diamond, maybe?* The rainbow colors of her Force presence captivated him. *And this is the woman you kissed out of the blue, who then slapped you and had a point about why it was a bad idea.*

"Good to hear on both counts. I just hope his apology's heartfelt. If not, I'm gonna say sorry now for anything coming out of his mouth. I was not involved in his formative years," Ranma snickered.

"Thank you, Ranma!" Anakin muttered, finding himself at least upright for the moment, if not standing under his own power, given the grip on the back of his neck. "Padme, I, I have to apologize. Kissing you out of the blue like that was wrong. And I know that our meeting like that dragged you into Ranma's mad scheme and put you in danger. I know that doesn't bother you, but it does bother me. You may have made your own choices after that, but my actions toward you still dragged you into things in the first place. And kissing any woman like that, well, that was wrong of me too."

He looked over at Ranma, asking politely, "Could you somehow change your grip so I can at least bow for a moment?"

Ranma did so with a chuckle, and Anakin proceeded to bow toward Padme as he continued his apology. "I was under a lot of emotional stress. I realize that doesn't excuse my

actions, but well, you have come to represent over the years how I was freed from my slavery. I have never forgotten that first sight of you in Watto's shop, and I doubt I ever will. I am in no position right now to be acquainted with you again, Padme, but I think I would like to, if you would allow it, become so in the future."

Padme looked at the younger man thoughtfully, then smiled. *Well, he is quite handsome. And I have to admit his eyes are quite compelling.* "I think that was as good an apology as I've heard in months. And really, the event was quite minor in the grand scheme of things. If you read up on romance, especially timing and body language signals before you see me again, I might be happy to remake your acquaintance, Anakin."

From the grin on Anakin's face, he read about as much interest in that as Ranma did, and the pigtailed martial artist rolled his eyes. "You realize I'm going to have to humiliate him now even more, right? The whole point of this display was to grind my annoyance with his actions into Anakin's face, and that bit of encouragement just undid all my hard work."

At that, Padme allowed her smile to become a little wicked, and she waved her hand airily at Ranma. "Feel free. He did nearly give the game away to Palpatine, and even if I feel he's apologized appropriately next to me, he still owes an apology to the rest of the galaxy for nearly screwing it in the ass without consent."

Ranma and Anakin both gaped at the crude words coming from the senator, and Anakin was still gaping as Ranma lightly tossed him up into the air a few inches. Anakin found himself whirling in midair until Anakin's head was again down by Ranma's feet, and Ranma had gripped his mechanical leg again.

That woke Anakin up from his momentarily stunned status, and as Ranma began to drag him off once more, he shouted out, "Betrayal, betrayed by my angel!" The last sight of Padme that Anakin had was a small blush on her face as she closed the door and Ranma continued to drag him away.

Ranma glanced over his shoulder, saw Anakin's grin and shook his head. Kit and the rest of the Jedi Order would no doubt have something to say about Anakin wanting to form a romantic relationship, let alone with someone outside The Order. While they had slowly begun to allow relationships following Shaak's example of renewing her oath to The Order in the Old Oath, Ranma understood that the High Council carefully vetted those they deemed able to sustain the dual loyalties of a loved one and The Order. To the best of his knowledge, which was extremely sparse, very few Jedi had been allowed to form such emotional attachments, though he knew Obi-Wan had wanted to ask for such permission.

Physically, the Jedi Order had long understood that some species needed to engage in sex to remain mentally stable. It was the emotional attachment and the way that could split the loyalties of individuals that The Order was still extremely leery of.

But I am in no way in a position to comment on that at all. All leave that to his Master and Yoda, I suppose. Although I hope the old frog will stay out of this discussion, considering his species doesn't produce like the rest of us. For now, though... "I see that smile. Evidently, I haven't done enough yet. The stairs it is."

"No, not the stairs!" Anakin shouted as Ranma bypassed the left and headed to the emergency staircase.

An hour later, a somewhat bruised Anakin joined his Master, Yoda and the crew of the Wild Blade on their ship. Kad and Anakin, who had created something of a friendship during the trip and subsequent battle for Wayland, hit it off instantly, and Anakin plied him with questions about the various starfighters he'd flown since then and about his new robotic arm, while the Wild Blade itself in battle. Anakin hadn't been aboard during any of the actual space battles.

With all of the people once more situated, Ranma and Shaak stayed in the cockpit with their padawans behind them. "So where to?" Ranma asked as Shaak piloted the ship out of the Jedi Temple's hangar and into the air.

"Stop at Mandalore, we first must. After, a fleet we might need at the end. To Sekot, we will go," Yoda intoned, confirming Shaak's earlier words. "From there, hunt began it will."

End Chapter

This chapter was a sort of necessary segue into the final battle. There is still a hell of a lot going on beyond Ranma's sphere of influence. Things that will take years to deal with. But if the Sith are removed and the CIS fragment, well, it won't all involve a lot of dying. That will be enough for Ranma and Shaak, who are really looking for time away from the rat race LOL. As for Anakin. He's gone through a lot of ups and downs in this fic. But I think he can very obviously be seen as on the road to improvement from now on. He'll still be the unpolished, impetuous man he is in canon, but the underlying anger and arrogance is gone now.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this.