

I don't own SW or Ranma.

Heyo, folks! Here is the next chapter of *Horse*. Two reasons I'm putting this out folks: one, this puts me between two to four chapters of finishing this work, and second, let's face it, that cliffhanger was really harsh.

In other news, *ATP* is still being gone over by Observanc3, and he has done such a great job editing it since he began that I am more than happy to let him keep it as long as he needs to. Observanc3 has told me he is nearly finished, but at this point don't hold your breath for a last minute update this month. I would say next week is much more likely.

However, *Fate Touched* will be up tomorrow night. It won the small story poll by a significant margin.

This has been edited by Hiryo. I tried to edit it via Grammarly, but I spent so much time last month doing that for other works, my enthusiasm for such a chore was lukewarm at best. So I will apologize for any small mistakes you see, and hope they don't harm your enjoyment of the chapter too much.

## Chapter 29: Chaos Vs Darkness

As Ranma was hiding behind Padme and the Senate meeting began, Grievous stood on his new flagship. His flagship was one of several new constructions that had finally been finished, although many of them had been laid down before the war began. His ship was called the *Malevolence*. Nearly five thousand meters long, it was massively armored, well shielded and well-armed, with five hundred twin turbolaser batteries, a few quad cannons for starfighter defense and proton torpedo launchers.

Its main weapons, however, were its ion cannons. Two ion cannons the likes of which would have been found normally on the planet, only larger, with a wider area of effect. They had so much power that they could knock out the electronic systems of entire squadrons of capital ships.

Beyond the *Malevolence* was a core group of thirty Lucrehulks and a hundred and twenty Munificent class with even more Hardcell units. But the reason for the small amount of Lucrehulks was the presence of the other new design that was slowly being incorporated throughout the Confederacy, the Subjugator class battleship. Built along the same lines as the *Malevolence* bar the ion cannons and its power grid, these were true battleships, ship killers that could stand up against the ships of the enemy who were designed to kill other capital ships and beat them down. There were only ten of them with his fleet, and they had yet to be built in great numbers unlike the Lucrehulks, as the construction was very different, and they were designed to be actually crewed.

That, and diverting from normal peace time trade, the necessary parts for that many capital ship-sized turbolasers, would have been next to impossible. Many of those parts were extremely expensive, and the necessary gas to power the turbolasers was an entirely magnitude bigger than for any six or seven Lucrehulks in comparison. So, the prewar Confederacy Industrialists had decided to go with the Lucrehulk rather than the battleship. But since the war began, the lack of a true ship-to-ship capital class had hampered the Confederacy several times.

The *Malevolence* had been going through his trial runs, when Grievous had led the assault on Corellia and it had finally finished working up. Now, it was a fully manned and tested battleship, which Grievous would use to make the Republic bleed for how they treated his people, for how they treated him.

Coming out into the target system, a system that should not have had been as Grievous expected it to be defended as heavily as Wayland been, and he was not disappointed, although to his surprise, the fleet came under attack almost instantly. A squadron of twelve Dac patrol craft, large gunboats with only a few weapon systems but extremely good shielding for their size instantly made for the fleet, guns blazing as they tried to get in among the Confederacy ships before they could launch starfighters. Meanwhile, from all around the fleet came scattered wings of the Coralskippers seemingly out on patrol.

But, while the Lucrehulks lacked in true ship-to-ship killing ability, they more than made up for that in their ability to see off smaller threats. The Lucrehulks began to fire, and shoals of the incoming starfighters died under the coordinated, interconnected defensive fire of the fleet.

But when they closed, those Coralskippers showed a surprising tactic. Because instead of going for assault runs the few that broke through that defensive barrier rammed into the closest ship they could, detonating whatever fuel or whatever they were using as power at once. Two Munificents staggered out of formation, shields blown where they were pounced upon by the arriving Dac patrol craft. Most of those attack craft died as the defenses of those ships were not impaired much but the engine of one of the Munificent sputtered out, the side of the engine cowling exploding.

Grievous let his flag bridge staff run the initial battle, pouring over the data for the system as the fleet's sensors reached out. After the experience reported by the fleet that had tried to retake Wayland and his own experience running the blockade of Balmorra, the former Kaleesh warlord was wary of traps. Before the battle around the fleet began to die down several wings of Vultures spread out in every direction, not taking part in the battle, simply using their advanced sensor packages to enhance the data the fleet was getting.

But already from this distance he could see that the planet did have a fleet defending it. Forty-two converted Mon Calamari freighters, heavy cruisers by any parlance, moved around the planet, coming together now to face his fleet. Several other smaller vessels were also there,

and in pride of place, another massive living ship like the one that had defended Wayland rose from the surface like some giant monster from the depths. *A Sun Destroyer, is it? Pretentious, but given the pounding that one survived, perhaps also quite aptly named.*

Worse for the attackers however in a way, was the fact that already the Vultures with the scouting sensor packages were spotting mines. "So, this will be a slogging match. Very well, the enemy will learn once more in this kind of battle, the Confederacy has no equal," he rasped in his electronic tone, and as the last of the outer system's defenders fell, the Confederacy fleet began to shift into formation.

**OOOOOOO**

In the control center where Zonama Sekot regularly spoke with his people, Master Pong Krell crossed both sets of arms as he glared into the holographic display. "Two unknown types of ship, one a single ship like our own Sword Breaker and ten more of another unknown type. I don't like dealing with the unknown here, especially given what all else they are packing."

Even as the Jedi Master spoke, more of the Vultures were being launched not to join the rapidly dying away dogfight around the fleet where it had come in, but to zoom forward towards the planet. "Get the other outer defensive ships in with us, order those nearest the enemy fleet to skirt around them, they are not to engage."

That would give the defenders further sixty patrol craft, which would join the eighty dedicated gunboats that the Mon Calamari allies the Dorneans had sold to the Mon Calamari and which had been posted out here almost in their entirety. Krell had a great deal of faith that design and hoped to blunt the Vultures that the Confederacy would obviously be able to use up in droves. Along with the patrol craft came several thousand Coralskippers.

And perhaps alone in the galaxy, Zonama Sekot could produce enough starfighters on its own to match the wave of starfighters a Confederacy fleet like this could launch. Even as Krell barked orders to the fleet in orbit, hangar bays the world over were opening, and Coralskippers began to burst out from them. First hundreds, then thousands rose up to join the defensive fleet.

With them went several hundred manned bioships, each of them slightly different, each of them bonded to their pilot. Ever since Krell arrived, there had been at least fifty mixed knights and padawans scattered across the planet training on the bioships, bonding with them, while other Jedi like the master he had arrived with handled the temple.

Others came and went, rotating in and out of the system as they too were put through the bonding exercise to being their own Coralskippers. Now the vast majority of the Jedi here on planet were rising in its defense, leaving behind their brethren who had not been trained to pilot starfighters or combat skill was questionable at best.

Only Krell was left behind of those Jedi on the planet, who could actually fight, staying in overall command of the battle. “You see why I demanded that we spend so much of our resources on defense? Hiding away is something that can only work so far.”

“I admit you were right Jedi, you do not have to rub it in. However, I am wondering why you are even bothering using our regular defenders? I informed you a few weeks ago about my own weapons,” Sekot’s voice echoed all around the command center.

“Yes, you did. But like any ace in our hand, we want to use it when it is most devastating. That is why I want them deeper in the system. That is why I have made the moves I have, the obvious ones, the ones that look like I am playing a purely defensive battle. We don’t want the enemy to have any inkling that strike is coming before we fire.”

Sekot let loose his equivalent of a grumble, but that made good sense. After all, his weapon was very much a line-of-sight kind of weapon. *If I could fire it more rapidly, that would be a different story but even I have a limit to how much Living Force I can use in such a manner without resting.* “When will you let me fire?”

“When the attackers have passed the secondary line of mines. They’ll have gained confidence by that point but their eyes will still be on the close-in threat, rather than any movements from the fleet in orbit. That will change when they enter the target zone, but our own fleet’s moves will distract them from the truth. And you are certain that the buildup of energy won’t be discovered?”

“Positive. My bioships are hard to detect normally, my Living Force energy building up within my crust? Impossible to detect unless you’re a Jedi on my surface,” Sekot answered.

Krell grinned like a shark at that, and absently patted the side of the pillar that denoted Sekot’s brain fibers. “Excellent.” With that, Krell turned his attention back to the battle, directing several more of the non-manned Coralskippers in to attack from the edges of the enemy fleet. It wouldn’t do for them to think that the defenders were being idle after all. Otherwise, they might see the trap ahead of them.

**OOOOOO**

Grievous watched as the first monstrous horde of Vultures ran into the minefield that their sensor package armed brethren had discovered. There they met with the Coralskippers, and hundreds perhaps even thousands of quad cannon mounted satellites which opened up the instant they entered their range.

The Vultures gave as good as they got. Say what you would about the mass-produced droid starfighters, but they were incredibly maneuverable, and their concussion missiles, when given enough time to lock onto an opponent, could be deadly. The satellites could not maneuver to dodge, and for every four Vultures that went down, so too did a satellite. And

while the Coralskippers had a surprising amount of durability and agility, they couldn't quite match the weapons of the Vultures.

"Sir, should we order our Munificent class and other ships in?"

"No. That would simply propagate the same issue we have had numerous times before. The Lucrehulks are not proper battleships, and the Munificent class is vulnerable to starfighters. Leave them together. The Malevolence will take point, with the new battleships arrayed around us in a three-dimensional diamond pattern. The Lucrehulks will remain directly behind us and push forward if the enemy starfighters attempted to engage en masse at any one point around the formation," Grievous ordered.

Unlike his tactical officer, Gravis had kept his eyes on the planet, and the fleet still in orbit around it. A fleet that was making no move to join the battle in the minefield. *It seems as if the unmanned version of the Coralskippers are as disposable as Vultures. Very well, I anticipated something of that nature.* "Communications, order Commadore Grakal forward."

Within moments, his fleet was joined by a group of sixteen other ships. Six were of the Captor carrier class, and instantly began to launch their full weight of starfighters, taking over CAP duty over the main fleet as the Lucrehulks flung more of their own stored starfighters forward. Then those six carriers turned around, exiting the system, heading for the nearest Confederacy planets to restock on Vultures and come back if need be. Hopefully they wouldn't, as the total travel time was five jumps and an hour, to say nothing of the loading time. Loading Vultures aboard ships always took longer than sending them out.

At present however, that didn't matter, because the immediate reinforcements gave the Vultures numerical superiority within the minefield, forcing the defending admiral to make a choice: send forth his remaining starfighters to further blunt the wave of Vultures, and more importantly perhaps, retain the mines in sufficient depth to make a difference, or hold them back.

Unfortunately, there appeared to be a third choice, and Grievous hid a grimace as still more Coralskippers rose from the planet, barking out a command to his tactical officer. "Make a note of where those starfighters are coming from, the original run launched too quickly for us to do so. Assign one of your juniors to keep count of the total number of Coralskippers in the combat area, and another to give me a read on that bioship dreadnought. Is it fully operational?"

The answer to that one came back and in an extremely equivocal, "We don't know." At Grievous' glare, the man stammered that the dreadnought seemed to have much of the same power readings that the Ardent Defender had over Wayland, but it wasn't built precisely the same. "There seem to be more anti-starfighter blisters on the exterior, fewer of what were called magma cannons, but far more in the way of apertures that could be proton torpedo launchers. Overall Sir it might not have as much of the shielding as the Ardent Defender but it

might be even more deadly in terms of anti-starfighter duty and capital ship combat. And we just don't know enough about its capacity."

"Blasted fish," Grievous muttered, cursing the Mon Calamari. "Could they not make a design that is uniform across the board?"

Shaking his head at that, Grievous looked over at his tactical officer, who admitted that they could only pinpoint the places where the starfighters had launched from the surface of the planet that was currently facing them, which Grievous had already known. His glare made that clear and the man hurried along quickly, the Neimoidian's green skin paling noticeably under his admiral's glare. While Grievous did not go out of his way to be cruel to his people, he had only one response to what he thought of as incompetence or cowardice. "We estimate at least twenty-two thousand Coralskippers are over there at present."

"Amazing, but I wonder if that means that the planet itself has foolishly concentrated solely on starfighter creation beyond that one living ship dreadnought," Grievous mused.

Gulping, the tactical officer took his courage in both hands, and advised, "Sir, if it hasn't, we won't know about it. We know something about the Coralskippers and the dreadnought equivalent, we know what to look for thanks to the battles in Wayland. But even if that information we're not getting any kind of readings from the ground other than what might be small installation sized shields here and there. There doesn't even seem to be a planetary energy grid."

Grievous growled but acknowledged the man's point. "But they are not the only ones that have brought surprises to the battle."

As the invading fleet began to move in system beyond its second wave of Vultures, the first wave had been pretty much devastated by the reinforcing Coralskippers. Those selfsame starfighters were now reinforced by twelve thousand more, but the Mon Calamari heavy cruisers, the Sun Destroyer, the gunboats and the patrol craft that joined them from elsewhere in the system were not coming out to engage still.

Seeing that, Grievous sneered. The defending Admiral was a cautious sort it seemed. He would let the mines take what bites they could of his fleet before engaging. *That is fine with me. If we can control the space around where the mines are, both the Malevolence and the Munificent class will have a range advantage on the enemy fleet with our spinal-mounted weapons.*

Grievous' slight feeling of pleasure at that disappeared, when the Hardcell units and the second wave of Vultures reached the minefield. As he had suspected, still more mines activated, not having been cleared by the first wave of Vultures. But these mines were not just the heavy turbolaser or protonic explosive mines that he was anticipating. Rather, these were Dovin Basal mines.

The *Ardent Defender* and the *Wild Blade* both used Dovin Basal based defensive weapons which shot out small, localized Dovin Basal explosives, essentially tiny black holes that sucked away solid-state weapon systems like concussion missiles or proton torpedoes.

However, the mines were each the size of a small starfighter, and their gravitonic impact was far larger.

An extremely unlucky Hardcell ship became the first to realize this. Where that ship would have been able to take at least ten heavy turbolaser blasts before their shields went out, or seven proton torpedo hits before exploding, one Dovin Basal mine literally tore the ship into pieces, the gravity energies of a black hole crushing and shredding it, ignoring its shielding entirely. The only way to defend against something like a black hole suddenly appearing nearby, was to be outside of its grip. No energy shield could stop that kind of thing.

As he watched, three more Hardcell ships destroyed, Grievous wondered why he hadn't seen any such system previously and decided that perhaps they were expensive. *Or perhaps their shelf life as mines is too low? They have to be replaced far too quickly to be used in any system that can't actually create them themselves?* Regardless, the efficacy of those mines forced him to send in his gunboats and frigates to help clear the mines away.

Any other fleet in existence would have protested this move, would have kept on urging to use more Vulture fighters or even manned starfighters. However, the Confederacy didn't just have droid-piloted starfighters, the vast majority of their ships were also manned by droids, with only the bridge and occasionally engineering crews being living sentients. Those command crews boarded their transfer shuttles and raced back to the rest of the fleet as their frigates slaved themselves to the flag bridge, his tactical command. After all, this wasn't exactly a subtle maneuver that they needed to do.

The frigates and remaining Hardcell ships flew into the mines, their weapons blasting out at anything their sensors detected, while once more a massive dogfight began around them, the Coralskippers that had been sent forward, fighting it out with the Vultures and frigates, now to defend the mines as best they could.

"Hold the main fleet out of range of that minefield. Those odd gravity mines are deadly."

"I wonder if we could somehow figure out a way to make the same kind of thing mechanically," the tactical divisions second officer muttered, but since that was an interesting question, Grievous did not take umbrage at his speaking out of turn.

Grievous did become annoyed however, when his Vulture fighters started to die too quickly, and he had to half his fleet's CAP, sending the other half in as reinforcements, leaving the fleet with only a dozen wings as an emergency backup. Still, eventually, a hole was made in the minefield.

Still, it had cost them. All of his Hardcell units were gone, as were nearly all of his frigates.

Yet, Grievous could not care less about that. As his ship moved into position, he smiled as much as his cyborg body could allow. "Tactical, analyze whether or not it is worth our time for the Malevolence to target the Sun Destroyer. Or should we target the rest of that fleet?"

This took several moments, as the two formations of his fleet moved forward, and the six Captor-class came back in system, launching their Vulture compliment and then jumping back out. As that happened, Grievous allowed himself a small feeling of satisfaction. The enemies having remained in orbit over the planet meant that they could not hyper out to engage his reinforcements as they came. If they'd had other ships, ships on the other side of the planet from his which he could not detect, and which could then move out of the gravity well in that direction, they would've done so and jumped his reinforcements.

The fact that they didn't, told him that what he saw was all they had.

"Sir if we target it, we can knock out the Sun Destroyer's shields, and at least one third of its weapons systems. But we will only hit four of the other heavy cruisers if we fire at the segment of the enemy fleet around the Sun Destroyer. If we wait until we are at the Munificent class's range, that number goes up by two. If we target..."

The tactical officer's words were interrupted by his Lieutenant shouting out, "Status change!"

Grievous and the tactical officer both turned to look at the holographic system as it updated. The position of the defending fleet was changing, shifting positions, spreading out and splitting into four distinct formations. They seemed almost even bar the Sun Destroyer, which had gone upward from his former position. The rest had spread to port, to starboard and down retrospective of their original positions. All of those formations were also moving forward now, pushing out of the gravity well of the planet in order to try and envelop the Confederacy Fleet.

Which made no sense whatsoever. That would just allow the Confederacy to concentrate their own firepower wherever they wanted, while the Lucrehulks tied down the attackers wherever they struck the attack fleet's formation.

Grievous stared, frowning. "Could they know about the Malevolence and its ion cannons? Is this some way of their attempting to force me to choose which formation to target with it? But each of those formations is out of position to help one another, and none of them are dangerous enough to hurt us much on their own." Grievous did not like it when his enemies did something he didn't understand, and this move made no sense, even if they knew about the Malevolence.



An uneasy feeling filled Grievous, and he looked at his tactical officer and the man's Lieutenant, gesturing towards the hologram. "What am I seeing here!?"

Both of them were staring at the data as well, frowning. There was something but none of them could figure it out. They were very reluctant to admit so to Grievous as he began to stalk around the hologram, his legs making sinister hissing noises, while the Confederacy fleet continued on its moved towards the planet, daring the four Republic formations to come to them before they reached orbit.

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"They're not breaking formation in turn, good. That was my one concern with this aspect of the battle," Krell muttered, leaning forward, one hand coming up to stroke his large heavily chin, while his other arms fell to his lightsabers, tapping them gently with a few fingers one after another. "Show me where your gravitic well ends."

Two of the Langhesi did so quickly, and he nodded, a feeling of atavistic elation filling him, a feeling of delight that he almost instantly began to push away, feeling it had a little too much of the Dark Side to it, a delight of the destruction of his enemies. Yet he could not deny that that was what was about to happen. *I have never met you Chaotic Locus, and frankly given what I know of your personality, I don't want to. But just this once, I will say that the Force has most decidedly blessed the Jedi Order with your presence and Zonama Sekot for what you taught it.*

Reaching out with the Force, Krell held up his hand, his fingers stilling, knowing even as he closed his eyes that every eye in the control room was on him, both physical, and metaphorical. He could literally feel the anticipation building within Sekot as the Living Force had been doing ever since the enemy fleet had entered the system. Finally, the enemy flagship had entered the gravity well along with the front of the enemy formation. And he knew that Sekot could fire well beyond that point. "Fire! Formations A, B, C and D, jump!"

Even with Jedi leading those formations, Krell and the Jedi themselves had been very reluctant to put any of the formations between the planet and the target fleet. However, they had been perfectly willing to attempt to jump out of the gravity well to specific points elsewhere in the star system. In this case, behind and above and below the enemy fleet, or rather... the remnants of it.

For as he clenched his fist, Sekot fired the same planet sized Moko Takabisha that Ranma had taught Sekot how to use on an unfortunate asteroid more than a year ago. And Sekot's Living Force had only grown stronger since. Now a bolt of ravaging energy the height and width of a large continent blasted out from Sekot's surface towards the enemy fleet along a straight line.

The tactical officer aboard the *Malevolence* would never figure out what was bothering them so much about the enemy formation's new moves. Grievous would not see his vengeance on the Republic, nor would he even go out in a final honorable battle. Instead, he, the *Malevolence*, and two-thirds of the fleet with them were utterly vaporized as that ball ravaging energy smacked into the front of the diamond formation and plunged clean through and out of the other side. Not even ashes were left. The ships hit simply disappeared, like so many leaves in a bonfire.

The result was everything Krell could've hoped for, and he clenched his jaw tightly, trying not to let loose with a very un-Jedi like a whoop of delight at the destruction they had wrought, watching as the formations the defense fleet had broken up into appeared out of hyperspace and charged forward. There was a momentary hesitation from three of those formations, the ones led by Mon Calamari Commodores who didn't know what they had been expecting. But that was all right, as it let the Sword Breaker engage the one remaining battleship of the enemy fleet.

Bereft of its fellows, the enemy battleship tried to twist upward and attack with its side-mounted batteries, but their weapons simply battered into its shields, as it returned fire. Shoals of proton torpedoes crashed into the battleship, followed by turbolasers and then magma cannons as they closed the range. And with it came the rest of its formation, hitting the few remaining Lucrehulks from that edge.

As the starfighters accompanying the other formations surged forward, the Commodores leading them got their act together and charged as well, enveloping the enemy formation. The Lucrehulks remaining still had their shields, bar four that had been at the edge of the beam of energy from Sekot, which had snuffed out their shields in passing with an ease that was perhaps mildly terrifying, given the panicked response of those ships, as they tried to shift this way and that, looking for a way out of the enemy formation. But only two of them had enough sense and had been far enough back that they hadn't entered the gravity well yet to be able to jump to hyperspace. The rest, they were doomed.

"Contact all of our capital ships. If they start surrendering, we will allow them to, provided that they do not erase any of the data aboard their ships. All escape pods are to be towed to the planet," Krell said, only now allowing himself a small smile. "In particular, I would like to know which Admiral we have had the pleasure of destroying today."

When he did learn the answer to this question several hours later, Krell could only clap his hands together in delight despite his self-control. In one fell swoop, yet another Confederacy fleet had been annihilated, and the most ruthless, possibly best Admiral for the Confederacy side had been turned into so much stardust. That, Jedi Master Krell thought complacently, would be a good day in anyone's book.

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Deep below the Senate District, several layers below where life as most Coruscanti knew it was possible, the cable trail that Shaak and her group were following had petered out, going from being an obvious metal-clad cable in the surface of the roof to embedding into the roof itself. Thankfully, there was now only one way forward, so it was obvious in which direction they had to go.

After all, they couldn't turn back any longer. The Nova Guard's demolition expert, whose name was Melo, had exploded the roof of the tunnel behind them.

K'Kruhk, Shaak and Ahsoka took the lead, moving ahead of the rest of the group, using their lightsabers light the way for themselves, while straining their senses forward, feeling out the lay of the land as best as possible. Eventually, the Whiphid was the first able to sense the change ahead of them. "We're coming to an open area. And I am sensing quite a lot of life, no sentient or animal minds, but plant life that is... unusual, I have never quite felt the presence of anything like it. It feels almost... Dark."

Shaak nodded a second later, feeling much the same thing, although her eyes were narrowed as she did. "It reminds me of the deep jungle on Kashyyyk, plant life that has been touched by the Dark Side. That is not a good comparison. Ahsoka head back to the rest of our team and warn them what might be coming."

The rest of the team had stopped about twenty minutes ago for a brief rest, taking in some water and nutrients. They had, after all, been down here for at least ten hours and fighting for an equally large portion of that time. Soon, the rest of them joined up with the Jedi, and they moved forward as one, with the Jedi spreading out the moment the near-rocklike corridor spread out into the large area the Jedi had sensed.

For a moment, Ahsoka thought perhaps that this area was made of the real surface of Coruscant, so dark brown and moldy did the walls and ceiling of the area look, and so vibrant was the foliage covering the ground. Several bits of it were bioluminescent, creating an eerie light throughout the area. But after a moment common sense came back to her. Even as far down as they had traveled, they couldn't be more than halfway to the actual surface of the ancient ecumenopolis.

The plants also grabbed Shaak and K'Kruhk's attention, and the pair of them very carefully moved forward, examining them as if they were so many predators. Most of the plants were of the vine variety, covering the ground and the walls to either side. Several of them even dripped down from on high, creating loose waves of vines covered in different types of fronds. Others were trees, solid, fat-looking trees with an incredible number of small branches coming from circles around the trunk. Each branch carried large, fat leaves, which almost looked like mouths thanks to the way they were situated around one another.

However, for Sergeant Cro and the rest of them, the plants were not the most interesting thing they could see in this strange area. No, their attention was on the doorway on

the far wall, a doorway with a small control pad set to one side that showed the red of a power source even as it signaled the door was locked. "We're close," Cro muttered, the first words anyone had spoken since entering the cavern echoing lightly despite the Nova Guard officer's low tone and helmet. "I would wager that the Sith temple proper begins past that doorway."

"Get back," Shaak ordered, having felt a change in the environment around them. Where before the plants had been quiescent, they had suddenly become aware of the group's presence. Now she and the others saw several of the vines actually twitching, a few of the closest crawling vines on the ground reaching up towards where they all stood by the hallway leading away. And as they did, Shaak became aware of a certain amount of malevolence, and hunger within the plants.

At the same time, K'Kruhk saw something underneath several of the vines. Bodies, lots of bodies, their features and even species obscured underneath the covering foliage, their skin and bones turned into foliage. "I have to wonder if these plans are how the Sith dispose of the bodies of their own dead and those who somehow have discovered their presence here on Coruscant."

"Torture and disposal service all-in-one you think?" Kad Solus the ace Mandalorian pilot asked almost dispassionately as he and the other Mandalorians moved to separate themselves, staring up at the number of vines and so forth growing from the ceiling.

"Probably more disposal service. I would think that torture would be done by the time these plants were given their...feed," Shaak grimaced. "But they are Dark Side tainted. They might be natural plants down here, but I rather doubt they would gather in such abundance normally, nor feel such delight in feeding. Let me see if I can do something before all of you come over violent."

With that, she closed her eyes and reached out with the Force, gently touching the limited sentience within the plants, soothing, calming, trying to negate their Dark-sided-enhanced predatory instincts. Shaak always had a way with plants as far back as she could remember. She could, through the Force, manipulate them to amazing degree. Even the plants on Kashyyyk had eventually yielded to her touch.

But for the first time in a long while this ability failed her. The plants, much like the creatures they had fought earlier, could not be controlled through the Force simply because their instincts to hunt and feed were too strong. *The Dark Side merely makes them enjoy it. But these plants can still be manipulated a little bit.*

With that, Shaak began to give out orders. "Stay back. Ahsoka, with me. K'Kruhk, lead the others across when I tell you. Stay in a combat formation, but do not engage the plants unless they engage you first. We used so many of our blaster cells, we need to conserve what we have left is much as possible."

With that, Shaak strode forward amidst the vines, slicing down around her feet and up above her head as the first of the plants began to reach for her. Ahsoka followed, merging her Jar’Kai style into her Master’s personalized Makashi with the ease of months of practice and violent combat. The two of them moved forward, while the others had retreated back into the tunnel they’d come from, for now, with Sergeant Cro having taken one of the shields from one of his fellow Nova Guard, standing at the front with K’Kruhk.

“Master, what exactly is the plan here?” Ahsoka asked even as she cut one of the nearby tree limbs off at the base. A second later a flick with Force flicked the branch up and over her head to land in among several of the other plants, the ones that looked almost like Chandrian ferns. Except ferns shouldn’t have leaves that wiggled like that.

“You will see in a moment, my Padawan.” With that, Shaak darted forward, crossing the remaining distance to her initial target in an eyeblink. Her lightsaber whirled around her in an elaborate cascade of light and ‘FZZARK’ noises as she chopped numerous branches from the carnivorous tree out of the way, before her lightsaber cut forward in a long arc, slicing the tree in half at around waist height. A Force Push then sent the sliced portion flying to crash into the far wall. The two of them then leaped up on to the large stump, whereupon Shaak ordered Ahsoka to concentrate on the threats coming at them from the ceiling above, the numerous vines winding down towards them.

As the younger Togrutan took care of that threat, Shaak took care of the few plants that could reach them from the ground, while also reaching out with the Force, looking to manipulate the instincts of the carnivorous plants all around them. Instead of sensing the entire team, Shaak obfuscated their senses, concentrating their senses and their desire to feed on herself and Ahsoka. She couldn’t have made them unaware of their presence entirely, but this more subtle approach worked.

All of the plants in the area move towards them instantly turned their attention to the two Jedi, trying to get at them even though they couldn’t reach that far for the most part. Those that could, the Master and Padawan pair dealt with, while the others slowly moved through the area, with K’Kruhk leading them.

Soon, they were by the door, where Dralshy’a went to work, taking apart the control panel, wiring it. A moment later, the red light turned green for a second, and the doorway started to open. It stopped halfway, and then began to close as some other system took over, but by that point, the Whiphid Jedi had reached in, and now grabbed the door, pushing it back into its recess, holding it there against the whining of servomotors.

Soon the rest of them were inside the door and almost instantly, Ahsoka and Shaak could make out the noise of blaster fire. It was evident that even here, in their hidden sanctum, the Sith had created some means of defense.

“Time we move away,” Shaak announced, and a moment later, the two Togrutans leaped forward as one, their lightsabers flashing to either side of them, as more of the plants attempted to attack them. Soon they reached the doorway, tucking into balls as they rolled through the entrance that their large companion was, whereupon he jumped forward as well, letting the door clang shut behind them.

By that point, the four repeating blaster style security guns near the doorway had been dealt with by the Nova Guard and Mandalorians. Sergeant Cro and one of his fellows were in the lead with their riot shields forward, moving down the hallway through a series of small areas and compartments rather than stopping to clear each room, leaving that to the follow-on teams of two behind them. This area looked to be energy generators and storage, so they had yet to run into any further threats.

But K’Kruhk announced they would, certainty in his tone. While Ahsoka and Shaak were having a lot of trouble feeling out anything in the roiling Dark Side energies within the temple, K’Kruhk could sense things through that morass the two Togrutans could not. “I sense some Dark Side touched animals, many bugs, at least as many as we dealt with at your wedding, Shaak. There is also one Sith user here, I can feel her uncloaked presence ahead of us. There...” As he wound down, his voice turned into a thoughtful tone. “There is also something else here, some other source of Dark Side energies, but... but I cannot discern what it might be. Perhaps a Sith spirit, or a Sith version of a Holocron? I cannot tell.”

Elsewhere in the Sith temple, the young human woman who had once been Jedi Knight Komari Vosa woke from a deep meditation, pulling her hand away from where she had spent hours injecting more of her Dark Side energies into the Thought Bomb. After all, the thing was supposed to take the Dark Side energies of a dozen or more Sith Lords to empower. Even now it wasn’t as powerful as it should be, but the computers estimated it would be powerful enough to take care of the temple and the Senate.

Sanvia roused herself to the sounds of the security alarm going off, a sound she had never heard before and had never expected to hear down here at the heart of the Rule of Two Sith Order. Scowling, she lifted her hand away from the Thought Bomb, letting it rest on her lightsaber for a moment. *Dark Side take them! How did the Jedi find us? Have I been so out of it that I have not sensed their approach, or have they become so good at hiding? And why didn’t Lord Sidious warn me?*

So busy had she been for the past week with the Thought Bomb that Sanvia hadn’t even reached out to the Force in any other manner. So, she did not know how chaotic and impenetrable the future had become to Jedi and Sith alike.

Grimacing, and thrusting away any thoughts about her current weakness, Sanvia left the laboratory where the Thought Bomb had been constructed, knowing that the roiling Dark Side energies within the temple would be disturbing the Jedi and also knowing that her Master had several different experiments going on down here, which could help her even the odds. As she

passed through the next laboratory, Sanvia barked out an order to the controlling program of the temple. "Activate all security programs on the various cells and laboratories. Release the beasts within. Activate the attack droid company as well."

Those droids were primarily used for training purposes, but they could be used to defend the temple at need, considering that all training for the Sith was live-fire training.

Coming out of the laboratory branch of the temple, Sanvia paused as she stared at the Jedi making their way towards her, for she recognized one of them personally. The others were only known to her through security briefings.

But she had met Shaak years ago on Mandalore, where she had been sent to try and learn anything she could about the Chaotic Locus and his abilities. At the time, she had been desperately jealous and angry that she couldn't sway Ranma to look at her as he had Shaak. She had left angry and furious at the way her mission had gone. But that was years ago. Now, having spent the intervening years steeped in the Dark Side and obeying her Master, all she saw in Shaak was one of the prime reasons why the Great Plan had become so much more difficult for her Master to control.

She stayed within the shadows for a few moments, as the first of the monsters arrived in the main hallway. Terentatek howled and bounded forward, ten of them, all larger, darker skinned, and stronger looking than the normal variety the crew of the Wild Blade had dealt with before. These had been carefully nurtured over time by her Master to be the ultimate Jedi killers, and now they howled and raced towards the Force Sentients they could sense in front of them.

Behind them came still more abominations, created out of Sith alchemy. Numerous types of bugs and flying creatures, much like which had been used to try and slay the Chaotic Locus and the Jedi whore as they wed on Shili. Beyond those bugs was a new variety, a fast centipede-like creature that had been manipulated through the Dark Side to be far larger than normal and to seek out Force Users much like the Terentatek.

On their heels, Sanvia raced forward, unwilling to anticipate that the monsters and droids now attacking from another hallway entering into this one from the side would be enough to defeat these attackers. Her lightsaber came on with this habitual snap-hiss, and she screamed, her voice empowered further by the Dark Side as she launched herself forward, trying to use the Dark Side to create fear and uncertainty among the non-force followers of the trio of Jedi.

For a moment, the Nova Guard and Mandalorians faltered as the impact of that technique washed over them. But it didn't last. Both groups came from warrior cultures and had been trained in how to deal with fear from a very young age. Indeed, one of the Mandalorians took a snapshot over the head of the others towards Sanvia, forcing her to bat it

aside with her lightsaber as the young man shouted, "If you think fear is going to turn us away from you now, you know nothing of Mando'ade!"

"Target the bugs as they come in," Shaak ordered, reaching out with the Force and pushing at the bugs, halting their flight in place for a few moments. K'Kruhk charged around her along with Ahsoka and Cro to engage the Terentatek in close combat. The vibro-staff wielding Cro was the first one to reach them, his polearm's longer reach allowing him to slice at the forward thrusting arm of one of the Dark Side creatures, smacking it aside. His vibro-weapon cut into the creature's paw, but it showed no sense of being injured coming on even as Cro brought around the other end of his staff, and thrust forward, catching it in the throat. It died within seconds, and he pulled the spirit out of his throat, leaping up and over the next one to charge at him just in time to avoid its wildly gnashing fangs, letting K'Kruhk engage that one, his lightsaber slicing out. The armor of the creatures stopped the blade, but not the punch that followed up, shattering its skull.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Nova Guard and the other Mandalorians had shut down the exploding acid or poison bugs slaying the strange centipede-like creature coming towards them across the ground with one of the concussion grenades Malo had somehow hoarded to this point. The droids on the other hand were still laying down a withering hail of fire, causing several of the Nova Guard to have to crouch behind cover, or the two riot shields they had brought along. However, the Nova Guard had heavy weapons, and now with the immediate threat of bugs dealt with, they set them up quickly, beginning to fire heavy repeating blaster into the droids that advanced, along with sending concussion missiles into their ranks. The nature of the hallway played to the Nova Guard's strength here, just as it had in the first battle of Wayland, and the droids could not close with them or amass enough firepower to break their defensive position.

The Dark Side creatures on the other hand could not be contained just by Cro and K'Kruhk, and now Shaak and Ahsoka were engaged with them as Sanvia leaped upwards, kicking off of the roof and coming down in between two of the Nova Guard. Dralshy'a whirled around, blocking her first strike with her vibro-weapon, which barely gave her a second to dodge. One of the Nova Guard switched from his blaster to his staff and began a flurry of strikes against the Sith.

She blocked all of them and her lightsaber took him in the leg, dumping him down to the ground. But by that point, Shaak turned away from the monsters, and shouted orders. "Mandalorians, spread and fire from above! Nova Guard, forward into the hall with the droids. Create a defensive position behind yourselves."

Of the Nova Guard, only Cro had advanced in his training enough to be a truly equal to a Jedi or Sith warrior in combat. And he was already engaged with several of the monsters, with K'Kruhk nearby and equally hard-pressed, both of them already showing places where their robes and armor had been cut.



“You think you can take me on on your own, how arrogant! Is that the sin of pride I hearing your voice, Jedi?” Sanvia taunted.

Shaak did not reply, simply blocking her blow with a cool repulse of her own, slipping into her favored form of mixed Makashi and Djem So with ease. Sanvia matched it, her own Dark Side style the equivalent type, specialized in dueling, something that remained in her from her days with her original Master, Dooku. The two of them locked blades for a moment, then a well-timed Force Push hurled them away from one another to either side of the hallway. Shaak found herself in among several of the monsters, but kicked and punched out, showing the strength she had built up with Ranma, her lightsaber now stabbing instead of slicing, aiming for eyes and mouth’s, the weaknesses of the monsters, not being as strong as K’Kruhk, despite her far more advanced Ranma-style training.

For her part, Sanvia found herself near the entrance to the research wing, where she rolled to a stop, grunting under the impact, feeling the pain and using it to fuel her hatred and rage. *Dammit! Empowering the Thought Bomb has weakened me so much, I am nowhere near my best. Yet* Sanvia knew that was but an excuse and set it aside as she charged forwards once more.

The first to feel her attack this time was the younger Togrutan, who had moved forward to back up the Nova Guard warrior and the Whiphid Jedi.

As strong in the Force as Ahsoka was, she should never have been able to block the next series of strikes from the dueling specialist Sith warrior empowered, as she was by the force of the Dark Side here in the Sith temple. But this Ahsoka had trained with Master Ti for months now, one of the best duelists in the order and one of the better instructors as well. She had trained alongside Mandalorians, and Ranma. Her entire body was a weapon.

This she showed a second later, to duck under a blow, redirecting it with her lightsaber to one side and twirling into the taller woman’s guard. A palm thrust out, catching Sanvia in the diaphragm. The blow wasn’t nearly strong enough to get through the Sith’s toughness training, but it did stagger her backwards, and Ahsoka followed up with a rising elbow blow to the chin, which sent Sanvia staggering further back into one of the monsters.

The monster roared and turned, clawing at her automatically, disrupting its assault on K’Kruhk, but its claws could not harm Sanvia, who cut its head off with a single strike from her lightsaber. But by the time she had done that, Ahsoka had retreated, knowing not to press her advantage.

Her Master took her place, her lightsaber flicking out to engage the Sith woman’s. The swirling combat pulled them away from one another for a few seconds but then the two of them were leaping or rolling clear of the maelstrom of the monsters fighting the trio of Cro, K’Kruhk and Ahsoka.

A few hundred meters further down the corridor, one of the Nova Guard's had fallen, and Kad had lost an arm before they had gotten enough distance to pull away from the monsters. Now however, with the droids all destroyed, and having retreated behind the large shields of the Nova Guard. The heavy fire of their repeating weapons once more came into play, downing several of the monsters and clearing the way to the bunch around the trio of close combatants.

Seeing the battle already going against her, Sanvia hissed in fury, and reached out with the Force Choke to Shaak, who broke the technique easily with her own power, closing quickly. As tired as she was from using the Thought Bomb, Sanvia was no longer any kind of match for Shaak and both women knew it.

"Surrender. I do not know from where, but I recognize some of your features, Sith. Surrender, and perhaps you can come back to the light," Shaak said as she battered her way through Sanvia's ever increasingly desperate defense.

Her words created a frisson of fury through the Dark Side user, and she screamed again, trying to use her power on Shaak alone this time. But her attempt to break the Togrutan's assault with the mental attack failed, her fear assault disappearing almost like it had been swallowed up by the calm serenity and focused aggressiveness that Shaak radiated mid-battle. Her lightsaber was smacked to the side, and Shaak's blade came back around, cutting into Sanvia chest.

The strike didn't do anything thanks to her toughness training, but it did seer through her clothing. And then Shaak was turning, engaging in another series of elegant strikes, forcing Sanvia back. Her attempt to jump around the Jedi failed too, Shaak turning in place, battering aside a Force Grab with her own, and continuing to engage the furious Sith who shrieked obscenities at the woman, so lost to her anger and fury that she didn't realize she had been turned entirely around, until an explosion at her feet sent her stumbling forward. One of the grenades from the Nova Guard had landed right behind her, fired over the ongoing battle against the Dark Side monsters.

Shaak's next strike came at Amaguriken speeds, her lightsaber flicking and stabbing at several hundred slightly different areas around Sanvia's body, spreading the heat and thus dissipating the toughness training's ability to deal with that heat. Unlike with Ranma, it was the heat of the plasma blade which mattered the most, and while the Sith had figured out ways to enhance their durability against even heat, those ways could still be overcome by a technique like this.

But that didn't mean Sanvia was without recourse. Reaching forward with the Force, she found one of the Sith alchemically created bugs, one with acid within its body. It wasn't alive, but the acid was still there in its stomach, and with a snarl, Sanvia grabbed the bug and hurled it up into the air, before bursting its body right in front of Shaak Ti's face. The Togrutan Jedi

dodged to the side but couldn't dodge enough to get completely away from the splash of acid, which hit her shoulder, right leg and arm, causing her to scream and fall back.

But as Sanvia grinned in triumph, she found her lightsaber flying from her hand into Shaak's. The next second, that blade also struck at her other side, and then Shaak's green blade was coming towards the same side that had already been heated so much that Sanvia had been burned already. The blow struck home, slicing through the Sith's weakened side.

The woman was dead before she hit the ground, and Shaak dropped the now-deactivated red lightsaber to the floor, grimacing and not just at the pain of her wounds. "I will look up your face in our archives, fallen one. I hope that your deeds as a Jedi will at least be remembered, if not, how you fell into the Dark Side."

By that point, most of the monsters had also been dealt with. Cro was injured, holding his side and backing away, letting the two lightsaber wielders finish off the last of the Dark Side monsters moving back to the rest of the assault team.

As the last monster fell, Ahsoka raced to her Master's side, staring down at her arm and side in dismay. "Master are you alright?"

"Not particularly," Shaak answered through gritted teeth. She closed her eyes briefly and began to use the Force to wipe the bits of acid away from her skin, shaking her head once more. *If I hadn't pursued the toughness training to the level I had, that would've finished me. That would have finished anyone else but me or Ranma. And even then, if it had been used so little as two or three months ago...*

The Jedi Master shook her head, and reluctantly peeled off her Jedi robes, tossing the ruined robes to the floor, standing there in her underthings for a moment examining her side, leg and arm visually to make sure she had gotten the last of the acid, which had also deadened all feeling within her arm and side. Ahsoka helped, finding one spot on her hip and using the Force to pull the acid off of her body, letting it drop to the ground below. There, it sizzled and spat eating into the metal of the temple's floor.

"It is good you are not hurt, Shaak, for we are not done yet," K'Kruhk stated, staring past Shaak and her padawan, his eyes wide in a horror. "Can you not feel it?"

"You know you're better at feeling the eddies of the Force in general than I am, my friend," Shaak answered, although she had already turned her attention in the same direction, and was now frowning... "What is that? It does not feel like a sentient mind but the Dark Side is so concentrated..."

Ordering the others to start backtracking through the temple to make certain that they had dealt with any defenses, the three Jedi headed toward the doorway where the Sith had appeared. Ahsoka stumbled to a halt every few steps, the sheer power of the Dark Side ahead

of them acting like a tornado wind pushing at her brain and body alike. Only her Master and K'Kruhk's protective presences allowed her to move forward until they could investigate the laboratory where Sanvia had been working.

Within was a large silvery glowing egg-shaped device. It was held in a hover-field and seemed composed of glass and metal. But within, was a cloud of roiling energies that gave the thing its silvery color. And it reeked of the Dark Side, so much that all three of the Jedi felt sick to be in its presence.

"It, it must be some kind of weapon. We need to dispose of it somehow," K'Kruhk stated, staring at it.

"How?" Ahsoka trembled, feeling fear now far greater than she had ever felt before as she stared at the thing.

"Either we disarm it, or remove it from Coruscant and detonate it, so it won't harm anything," Shaak said, looking around for some manner of controls that they could use to move the dangerous device.

**OOOOOO**

How long it took for the Senate to finally slog through all of the known points on the agenda for the day, Ranma didn't know and had no wish to. But eventually, Padme smacked her head back into the back of Ranma's, bringing him out of his attempt to meditate without performing katas in the shadows behind her just as a robotic voice intoned, "The Senate recognizes the senator for the Chommell Sector."

"You're up Ranma. I just hope you know you're doing," Padme hissed, even as her hover bubble rose into the center of the Senate Hall.

"I don't know how the rest of your fellow senators are going to take my little presentation, but yeah. I know what I'm doing when it comes to Lord High Asshole," Ranma quipped, displaying his usual insouciance instead of the roiling worry in his gut. This was all his plan, and realistically, the plan to oust Palpy probably couldn't fail. But even so, knowing the plan rested entirely on his shoulders made him very nervous. *Man up dude! This is nothing you haven't done hundreds of times before. Make him, mad, make him stupid, get him to act out.*

To one side and above the slowly rising hover-bubble of the pacifist senator from his home planet, Sidious held his hands together in his lap, hidden underneath the guard rail of the Chancellor's terrace. Despite the past few hours going precisely as they should have here in the Senate, he was feeling even more out of sorts than he had when he arrived. The swirling of the Force and the Dark Side, the feel of it through his Force Cloak was so bizarre, so wild and untamed. Never had he felt the like before, not even when the Veil had been originally ruptured.

Yet everything within the Senate had gone according to plan. Well, except for a few people interrupting things and shouting out questions about whether or not Sidious had a daughter... or a sex slave. Or had turned his daughter into his sex slave. The rumors begun earlier that day had multiplied, molded around one another and spread as such things always did.

One of the people who had apparently felt there was substance to these rumors was a staunch centrist who had backed Sidious in pretty much everything he had done simply because Senator Gon Tar of Aleena believed firmly in the rule of law. Never should someone like him, a reptilian-like being, be taken in by such rumors. But it was as if in seeing that young slave, that the man's political savvy and basic intelligence had gone out the window.

He, and indeed most of the others in the Senate, should have realized instantly that it was simply a strange way to tarnish 'Palpatine's' good name. But none had. Instead, the Senators had all simply taken it as a given that there might be some reality to the rumors simply because this was the first time such rumors had ever occurred around the Chancellor. The fact this credulity was something the Sith had slowly fed in the Senate up to this point did nothing to calm Sidious's growing anger and hate for the people who still harped about it.

There was also the fact that Sidious knew they were coming up on the time where plan three called for the Confederacy to launch an attack on Coruscant. Within another thirty or forty minutes by his mental estimation the Confederacy fleet would be in orbit, and Sidious would need to finally make a decision to either run or use it to his advantage in some way. At the core of that mental calculation, was the same problem that Sidious had been worrying at like a Rancor with a bone, fueling his growing sense of being off balance. A sense that had begun with the Jedi landing on Wayland. *Do they know of me? Have they discovered me? Can I still salvage the Great Plan?*

That last question was why Sidious still remained. The Great Plan as laid down by Darth Bane, the plan to subvert the Republic from within, to weaken the Jedi and the Republic over time. To supplant them via political power, and then finally turn the Republic against the Jedi, catching them between two fires. A plan the Order of Two had been following for longer than even Yoda, ancient annoying fossil that he is, had been alive. A plan that would have ended for all time the Jedi Order, bringing eternal supremacy to the Dark Side.

Sidious would not, **would not** go down in Sith lore as the Darth who had allowed the Great Plan to fail by running prematurely. Not unless there was no other way to ensure his survival. Because only by surviving could Sidious still push forward, still make certain that the Sith had their revenge on the Jedi, plan or no.

So subsumed was he by this mental debate and the work of the senate was Sidious that he had not realized that the Senate Hall was now being broadcast live across the Republic. Nor had Sly Moore or Pestage, standing with him. Indeed, no one within the Hall had noticed that this, the first part of Ranma's trap for Sidious, had already been sprung.

When the notification rang through the hall that Amidala had been the first to indicate her desire to speak when the call for new business was announced, Sidious was almost looking forward to being able to tune out the next few moments, so he could try and concentrate further on the Force, on centering himself in a way that Sidious had never really needed to concentrate on before. After all, why would he need to listen to anything one of the Peace Party members said? They were powerless at this point, respected for the fact that they still clung to their own moral code, yet derided at the same time for that code, with few swayed by their rhetoric.

However, all thoughts of taking it easy faded instantly as instead of Padme standing up in her hover bubble someone else moved behind her. Someone else who Sidious had seen thousands of times in numerous video recordings, someone who Sidious had long sought to murder. *The Chaotic Locus, here! Have I been so truly blinded to the future that I could not sense him or is it because of his presence has become so strong that I have been blinded?!*

Hopping lightly up and over Padme, Ranma landed so lightly on the front of the hover bubble that it didn't even dip in the air as he reinforced his throat and mouth with ki, a simple enough technique. "Ladies gentleman and sentients of the Senate! I realize that Padme was the one who wanted to speak, and I am truly sorry to interrupt your flow, but there are some things about the war that have not been reported to you through official channels before this. And my Jedi friends and I decided that I would be the best one to come and talk to ya, considering I've been at the pointy end of a lot of shit since before this war even officially started. My name is Ranma Saotome, and I am here to speak of the hidden threat, not the Confederacy, but the people behind it, the Sith."

Ranma's words and appearance drew an instant reaction from the Senate, shouts of shock, explanations of surprise, shrieks denouncing Padme for letting him in here, questions of who he was from those who did not recognize him from videos or discussions going as far back as the Mandalore Debate, and shouts at Ranma for breaking protocol. Ranma let that go on for about twenty seconds, trying not to look up at Sidious, it wasn't time just yet.

His one glance at the older man had shown his eyes widening, a rictus twitch developing in his mouth, but the hidden Sith had swiftly controlled himself, schooling his features to one of stern surprise so quickly that Ranma doubted he had seen the movement when another crack had appeared in his self-control. But it was there, and Ranma knew it.

*And you know why I'm here don't you, you ass! You know I'm going to oust you. But can you stop it? Would it even matter if you did? How to play this? You don't know yet, because this is so far outside of your prepared plans. Cry chaos fucker and let slip the dog of Anything Goes!*

When Ranma felt enough time had passed and saw the Chancellor about to stand up calling for order having decided on some way of acting, Ranma took the initiative away from him once again. Even as the Chancellor hit the override button and silence descended on the hall, Ranma used the Big Demon Head technique to a degree that he had never done before.

To everyone there Ranma's head seemed to grow until it appeared larger than the hover bubble Ranma was standing on. And with that image of a far larger head came the feeling of fear and dread as Ranma began to bellow at the top of his lungs. "Are you all children, trying to shout over one another? I have told you why I am here, and I am making no threats, making no accusations, making no demands of you as some of you were shouting. The reason of why I am here should be obvious."

Ranma's voice almost came out with a hiss, as his image seemed to shift to an even more terrifying appearance for those who were watching him, as if a cat deeming became infused with his already terrifying visage. "The hidden enemy, the Sith have infiltrated the Hypercom network to a degree where we cannot speak of important matters over it regardless of coding or any other layer of security. But it is time that the Senate listen!"

At that point, Ranma's face seemed to shift back to normal, bringing with it a relief from the growing fear and shock his Big Demon Head technique had evoked. "Now, you will listen to me! You can argue and debate afterward, but unless you truly are children who would rather stick their fingers in their ears and go 'la la la I'm not listening,' you will at least hear my news and information before trying to take it apart. Am I clear!?"

With that, Ranma's head went back to normal, and he nodded over to the Chancellor, showing the man a certain amount of respect if not formality. "Sorry to steal your thunder Chancellor, but as I said, there is information that you and this body need to know, and it could not come through official channels."

"..." For a moment Sidious said nothing, staring down at Ranma, no longer having to hide his shock, as everyone around him was feeling the same. No longer needing to hide his anger only the degree of it. But Sidious knew he had been backed into a corner.

For even as he stared at Ranma, the Senate became alive once more with shouts. Those shouts weren't allowed to carry far individually thanks to his hand on the override button, but they were a vast growing susurration of noise in the background.

Because a lot of the Senate did recognize Ranma. He had been in the news several times, involved in several incidents where Dark Side users had attacked him or the Jedi around him. He had been in the news during the battle for Corellia, and there were even some confusing reports about his curse that had reached the Senate's ears numerous times over the years.

Ironically, it was that thought which allowed Sidious to regain his self-control. *It was him, it was him! He used his curse to become that, that redheaded slut that was going around impugning my name today!*"

Knowing that that had been the action of an enemy instead of random chance actually helped Sidious push down lingering fury at that and at the name that Ranma had used during

that incident. And with that self-control came certainty. *I will have to run, but the longer you talk, the more time the Confederacy fleet has to get here and batter its way through Coruscant's defenses. The more time my viruses and so forth have to work.*

With one hand, Sidious sent a signal to his aid Sly Moore, who was standing behind him on the Chancellor's ledge. She instantly moved into the background further, as the Chancellor raised that selfsame hand and gestured for quiet. *Keep this braggart talking, give Sly enough time to send out various commands, and I will leave behind not only the death the Thought Bomb will cause within the Senate and the Order, but chaos and destruction across the entire Republic!*

He did not see Sly's eyes widen when her computer returned an error message. Diving into it Sly found that there was no available bandwidth to send a message out, and that even her Chancellor's override could not divert some to. Thanks to Kit Fisto, all the Senate's normal means of communication were being used to display what was going on both across Coruscant and out into the Hypernet beyond. She would have to take a step outside the hall to get a message out, and as long as the Senate was in a closed session, even aides such as the Umbaran could not leave.

As Sly began to move further into the back of the Chancellor's box and frantically type at her datapad, Sidious began to speak. As he stood there, Palpatine looked every inch the master of the hall, his voice stern, his eyes somewhat condemning and his tone firm. The only sign of his inner fury was a few twitches of his finger's where they rested lightly on his chair's armrests. "While I cannot condone the means with which this messenger of the Jedi Order and the war effort has come to us, I also, like many of you recognize Ranma from various military briefings and recordings. It is true that at times it seems as if the Jedi have been waging a private war against their fellow Force users, and perhaps it is a good thing that we are now finally learning the true import of the Sith threat. Speak, Ranma, the Senate will listen."

*Oh, he's good! And I can see his self-control reasserting itself with each word he says. That's pretty darn impressive. But you are no longer in control of here, my man. Like I told Shaak, I will back my own ability to ride the chaos I'm about to cause way better than you.*

"Well first, a bit of background. My name's Ranma Saotome. I represent, call it a different sect o' Force users. We use the Force solely to enhance our bodies. What you saw a moment ago was one of our techniques," Ranma began, dumbing it down severely. "Since meeting the Jedi first in the form of Master Dooku and then the rest of them, we have begun to share techniques between us. I was involved in the Naboo crisis, where the Jedi Order first became aware that the Sith were still out there and have since fought them or their tools on dozens of occasions." Ranma paused, and then scratched at the back of his head. "But before we go on, maybe I should give a brief breakdown of what a Sith is."

He grinned wryly. And now that the hall's broadcast system was on, everyone there could see his face easily on the screens in front of their seats, heard his voice just as easily.



“Now, I know you’ve heard it before, but I bet even with all the history out there about them, it’s gone in one ear and out the other right? To you all, the Force is this invisible thing only the Jedi seem to care about. Trust me, it took me a lot of time to understand the Force was the same thing as my people’s ki.”

There were some chuckles at that, and Ranma went on, smiling that same, almost disarming smile. “You see, to my mind, the mind of someone who wasn’t steeped in the whole Force mysticism thing, the Sith are morons.”

Ranma let that thought percolate throughout the Senate, waited until he heard snorts of laughter before explaining what he meant, carefully not looking at the Chancellor’s box. “The Force is real, it’s a real thing, and it is out there, able to be used by those who have the skill. The problem is, if you reach out with it with strong emotions, those emotions are kind of reverberated back to you. That’s why the Jedi espouse control, and, when they have their head screwed on right, the lighter emotions, devotion to duty, protectiveness, happiness and so forth. Because when you feel those emotions coming back to you and don’t control them, sometimes, they can override any other feelings you might have.”

At that, Ranma’s teeth flashed in a grin that had lost much of its humor. “That is true for the Sith, which is why I call them morons. Because they use the darker emotions. Who would want to hate all the time, who would want to be angry all the time? Who would want to fear everything around them? Is power so important that you would let those emotions push out every other kind of emotion? Dumb. And I’m not even going to go into the fact that the Sith are always about power and wanting to conquer shit. Even a cursory glance at old history of the Republic would show that. I’ve never understood the drive for that kind of power, seems way too much like work to me.”

Laughter now abounded throughout the Senate. While many of them were shouting out about how Ranma was oversimplifying things or was being far too idealistic, most were simply laughing at his foreign take on the Jedi-Sith conflict. Many of them had noticed that he had taken a swing at the Jedi too when he said, ‘When they have their heads screwed on right.’ Others were taking this in, putting it with what they had already known about the Sith. How they always seemed to self-destruct given enough time, and never really made for long-term stable leadership.

But regardless of how they took his statement, every eye in the Senate Hall bar Sly was on Ranma. Even Sidious was somewhat surprised by the sheer amount of good-humored charisma Ranma could somehow generate, while behind him, Sly Moore’s attempt to get her message packets out continued to fail.

And across the galaxy, what had once been a somewhat boring, if informative communication from the Senate – and one that had superseded many other programs – became suddenly the most watched Holocom transmission of the month. From one end of the Republic to another, the Hypernet carried this moment to every planet it could reach.

“Anyway, back to the conflict between the Sith and well everyone who isn’t one. The assholes who have never gotten over their angry bitter teenage years have been hiding in the shadows for at least a thousand years. Over the last five years or so, the Jedi Order became aware of this have been looking for them. Occasionally they were found, occasionally the Jedi were found instead. A lot of Jedi lost their lives in that shadow war,” Ranma announced, his tone becoming serious before becoming once more almost contemptuous the Sith. “And a lot of Sith and the resources died, when they were sent after me and those traveling with me.”

Even as many of the Senators started to shout questions about that point about what Ranma’s relation to the order was, and why the Sith had seemed so dead set on attacking him, Ranma moved on. “And each time they did, the Sith lost more. Every time they use them, they lost whatever criminal elements they were using. Their attempt on my life and that of Jedi Master Shaak Ti backfired horribly, pushing the Mandalorians into the Republican camp, something that has been obvious for months now since the war began. It was the Mandalorians who came to Corellia’s aid along with the Jedi, and it was Count Dooku working with the Mandalorians who rescued Master Windu from Bulq’s ambush, when Mace made to try and broker a peace between the Confederacy and the Republic, only to discover that Bulq too is a Sith.”

He snorted that, shaking his head. “You would’ve thought they would’ve learned by then, but every time they were smacked back into the darkness, they tried to attack me, again and again. Because they knew my way of thinking was a threat, my way of using the Force was too different for them to allow. But it is my training that have allowed Jedi to walk away from being struck by blaster bolts occasionally and far more in the way of blunt trauma. And it was in trying to deal with me that the Sith began to make mistakes. See what I mean about them being angry teenagers? They just couldn’t let it go that I was better than them.”

Now more laughter throughout the Senate, as well as a few angry mutters. People were amused at Ranma’s ego, but also angry at how he seems to be denigrating the Sith, a threat that far too many planets had direct historical connection to. Nor was Ranma telling them anything important enough for him to have sneaked into the Senate Hall like this.

For his part, Sidious was infuriated anew. Hearing the Sith Order, the most powerful order of Force Users to ever exist simply being denigrated like this, was stoking his inner anger to the point where his carefully restored self-control was already fraying. The fact that Ranma was right and it still more fuel to the fire. If Sidious had simply left Ranma alone, much of the cracks in the Sith’s armor would never have occurred. Sidious had been able to turn much of that to the advantage of his public persona, but it had certainly worn away at the Sith Order’s resources.

The only thoughts that Sidious could use to comfort himself on the number of mistakes he had made with Ranma was that for the most part, he had been acting on information given to him by others, he had simply signed off on things. And the fact that getting in Ranma’s way

no doubt slowed the time it had taken him to figure out where Wayland was and thus start the downward spiral of both Sidious' public position and the Great Plan.

"Eventually though, myself and my companions figured out a way to use the Force to discern where the Sith could be hiding. This took a lot of Jedi working together in conjunction and a lot of information that had long since been deleted from the Republic's public domain. But it led us to a little place named Wayland. A lot of you might have noticed that the Republic have been scoring a few victories in the Ojoster Sector. That's because of the amount of resources that the Confederacy has been ordered to by the Sith to bring to bear on Wayland. Doing that weakened them throughout the rest of the sector, allowing the Jedi and the Republic to score several victories."

Finally, one of the Senators could not be silent any longer. But to Sidious's chagrin, this was one of the Senators from a planet, where the New Sith Order had done atrocious things during the last war a thousand years ago. "You're glossing over too much! Why did you say it as if the Confederacy was being ordered to do this by the Sith as if they were two separate entities. Is not Bulq the center of the Sith order?"

"No."

Ranma allowed that one word to drop like a mortar round into the hall for a second, before going on. "Because the Confederacy, and Bulq himself is not the center of the Sith's plan. All along the Jedi with me who have been dealing with the Sith at the pointy end have wondered who was pulling the strings. Have wondered, if Bulq was the top of the food chain. After all, Sith were doing a lot of damage to the Order from the shadows. Why come out to lead the Confederacy?"

Ranma looked over to one hover bubble, where a middle-aged man sat ramrod straight wearing the Republic Navy's uniform and the rank markings of an admiral. "And I'd wager anything you and any other admiral with a brain in his head have wondered about how the Confederacy didn't seem to have any real goal other than destruction right?"

With that he leaped over the intervening distance, making many of the senators shout and the admiral to stiffen. But he landed safely and gestured down at the admiral. "You tell me, my man, could they have won the war if they had just overwhelmed, say, Corellia, Coruscant and a few other places? The Confederacy had a massive numerical superiority across the board. Why didn't they start the war launching attacks like they did on Kuat?"

Grumbling, the admiral, Yularen, nodded. "I... that question has been posed several times since the war began. It was felt that the Confederacy hoped that by showing their willingness to wage war the Republic would back down, even if that was patently impossible. Or perhaps the various polities and admirals within the Confederacy could not agree on an overarching strategy. Many even felt that Master Bulq had yet to solidify his place as head of

the Confederacy and had to wait until they started taking losses before truly acting in command.”

“But Bulq isn’t at the top of the food chain,” Ranma answered, before turning around, leaping to another hover-bubble, this time the one belonging to some human core world, making his way from there to another, ignoring the noises of consternation from around him, using ki to once more help strengthen his throat and enhance his voice. “There’ve been numerous clues for years hinting at the fact that someone else is behind him. Information leaking out when it shouldn’t, the destruction of the Hypercom uplink center that served Kashyyyk, done to stop the trail from being followed. When we were looking for the Sith, we were not led to Bulq or whatever planet he was hiding on at the time. We were led to Wayland.”

Ranma paused on Senator Organa’s hover bubble, recognizing him from one communication with the Senate he had overheard during the Mandalorian conflict. He pointed over at someone wearing a uniform in his own hover bubble nearby where the Chancellor’s ledge sat at the center of the hall. “Back to you in the uniform. Why do you think the Sith were so determined to take back Wayland they were willing to throw whole Confederacy armadas away. When there didn’t seem to be anything connecting it to the Confederacy or its war effort at all?”

For a moment, the Admiral hesitated, looking over to where the Chancellor sat. But before either could say anything, Ranma’s demon head technique was back, albeit in a far smaller form. With the Dark Side no longer enabling Sidious to have a hint to the future, Ranma could keep pressuring him like this. “I’m not asking a political question here, don’t look at Palpy for how you should answer. Tell me about the military side of things, or are you just a dressed shirt instead of a real soldier?”

Sidious practically lost it right there and was now visibly holding onto the railing of the Chancellor’s ledge, his knuckles going white to Ranma’s eyes. But to his surprise, the man didn’t lose it yet.

For his part, Yularen answered almost instantly, himself incensed by Ranma’s words. He listed off several planets in the same sector that the Republic had reclaimed, then the planet of Balmorra. “They had to break the cordon around that planet, and Balmorra is one of the greatest suppliers of weapons and weapons development projects that exist within the Republic. Already new weapons designs for military walkers, military droids that we the Republic can make to combat the droids on the Confederacy side have come from them. It isn’t a massive strategic blow considering the size of the war, but it is a clear and concise victory for us throughout that sector of space.”

“Over at Republic high command we’ve wondered why this out of the way planet was so important to both the Confederacy and the Jedi so to warp the local strategic picture. But if

knowledge is power then then it must have information..." Yularen trailed off, his eyes widening.

"Exactly," Ranma interjected before the guy could go on, sweating bullets inside now. Palpatine might not've snapped just yet but his Force Cloak had faded entirely. Ranma could feel the pressure of the Sith Lord's unleashed power all around him, throbbing with dark menace almost. Indeed, it was so heavy in the air it was like being near a bonfire of hate and anger. The pigtailed martial artist was shocked that the rest of the Senate couldn't feel it.

Unbeknownst to Ranma or even Sidious, a few people throughout the Senate were not blind to what was occurring. One, the Senator for the Farstey Sector was a Miralukan, a species who, though blind, had a profound connection to the Force. Now he was staring up at Sidious, his face shifting to one of horror as what had been hidden to his senses practically flooded them now. Another, a young blue skinned senator who seemed far too young to hold the rank she did, also stared between Sidious and Ranma, slowly ducking down into her seat.

Padme also began to edge her hover bubble backward, shifting back to her original position, seeing as it was no longer needed. *And I really don't want to be at ground zero for that confrontation,* she thought grimly.

Others, like the Senator for Ryloth could also sense something shifting, something beneath the surface.

But the only one Ranma noticed was the aide sharing the ledge with the Chancellor. The man was simply staring at Ranma as if he was a cobra ready to strike, his face set in a grimace that Ranma could see from here. But the woman, she looked like a drug addict getting her fix as she stared at the Chancellor's back. *So Palpy has some backup even here?* In contrast, the human beside her was looking more and more worried. *You're not worried enough.*

"Wayland is a treasure trove, not just of Dark Side learning or artifacts, but of technology, history, and information. Information on who the hidden Sith was. That was why the Confederacy was ordered to throw away several fleets against our defenses. That was why a Sith Acolyte, or berserker I would think is a better term, basically committed suicide in an effort to defeat us," Ranma went on.

Ranma shook his head, leaping again from where he had landed a moment ago over to another hover bubble, making a full circuit around the Senate, feeling the Force roiling around him. *Now, if there weren't so many civilians around, I'd be using this moment to create one hell of a tornado. But there are. Still, circling like this keeps everyone's attention on me, including Palpy. I can't let him figure out he's not getting any signals out or that I ain't here alone.*

As he moved, he spoke, ignoring again the noises of those around him. The Senate was not the audience he was playing for right now. "I mean, I just tore through several companies of droids with my bare hands, barely took any injuries, and then disarmed the idiot in question

and she still thought she was in a position to threaten me and mine, spouting her madness like some drugged up rage-monster. See what I mean about the Sith being morons? No matter how much self-control you have over your anger, over your hatred, eventually it will break.”

“The Sith even used a sleeper agent within the Order in an attempt to destroy the memory cores. Knight Quinlan Vos, who might be known to some of you, had been turned to the Dark Side by Bulq, being given the name Invictus. During the last battle, a battle in which the defenders of Wayland were pushed to the brink, he attempted to destroy the computer core of the mountain fortress. It failed, like everything else the Sith have ever done,” Ranma said.

He nodded over to Padme, who gulped but inserted a small data disk. And from out of the speakers around the hall, an audio recording began to play, with Ranma talking over it for a few seconds. “But even if the rest of the sector remained in our hands, and those computer recordings of been destroyed, the Sith would’ve counted it as a win. Because of the position of the Sith’s hidden master, the one at the center of it all, at the Sith order, at this war, was too important, was worth any price to keep hidden.”

He finished speaking, allowing the recording to continue throughout the Senate as he leaped upward landing on one side of the Chancellor’s square-shaped ledge, staring at him. “Because the truth of the matter is that the Sith have been playing both sides of this war from the very beginning. Hell, from long before the first shots were fired in anger. Ain’t that right, Sheevy?”

As the ledge under the Chancellor’s hands were crushed by a Force Crush generated through his hands, and he whirled on Ranma, the snap of Sidious’s self-control should’ve been heard around the universe along with his response. The snap his of his lightsaber coming up towards Ranma in an arc of red light. “DAMN YOU, BOY!!! If I cannot rule everything, I will at least kill you!”

**OOOOOOO**

When the plan to extract his Master from Coruscant was sent through the various cutouts to him, Tyrannus was ready, having been preparing the Confederacy for a series of devastating one-shot strikes. Despite the losses taken in Wayland and the sector around it, the war continued throughout the republic, a series of back-and-forth battles, large-scale, small-scale, infiltration and so forth. The Confederacy had vast numbers of Lucrehulks and Munificent, which the Trade Federation and Commerce Guild had built during the lead up to war. Furthermore, their ships needed so few living sentients that they had no trouble crewing them either. This was a problem that the Jedi Order had run into with their own Katana-class cruisers, and one that the Republic was also dealing with, even though the Republic used clones.

With those vast numbers, they could have knocked the Republic out of the war, if the Sith had wanted to actually win the war but that wasn't what the Great Plan called for at present. Perhaps that would change soon, if Sidious was forced to cut and run, but at present, hundreds of battlefields that ground away both sides, killing thousands of civilians and handfuls of Jedi, which served the Great Plan.

It was because of that buildup and a series of newly built ships that the Confederacy had laid down, only shortly before the war began or even during - several of their shipyards, could turn out capital ships in a matter of months - that Tyrannus was able to build three Grand Fleets, each with a different target. Trench was leading one such assault into the D'Astan sector. Grievous was in charge of another assault, one chosen thanks to the information Sidious had passed on the day before: the location of the source for the odd, living ships the Jedi had begun to use. Their lethality, particularly the Wild Blade and the Ardent Defender, made destroying the source of those ships a necessity before more could be produced.

As for the third assault, the one on Corellia? Tyrannus decided to lead that on his own. This armada consisted of eight of the new line of Subjugator class Battleships, including his own flagship, the Seeker, eighty Lucrehulks, three-hundred Munificent's and sixty divisions of Hardcells and frigates.

It was a massive fleet to be certain. The single largest yet assembled. Yet, against the defenses of the capital of the Republic, this fleet would only serve to perhaps blast a way into orbit and hold a segment of it for a time. And even that was only if the attackers could get there in the first place, past the outer-system's defenses and the hordes of mines scattered throughout the system.

But the fleet itself was not the most dangerous tool in Tyrannus' arsenal. The first was that he was a Sith. While he had never really practiced the maneuver, like the Jedi, the Sith could calculate hyperspace jumps to a far finer degree than most astromech droids could. He could also command the fleet, keeping it together in hyperspace so they came out in formation, which they did several hours after the senate meeting began.

Of course, this brought them out into one of the many minefields, but that was all right, regardless of the feelings of the sensor specialist throughout the fleet, whose universal opinion was shouted by one of Tyrannus's flag bridge officers. "We've come out into a minefield! The mines are responding!"

Ignoring the sound of panic barely hidden under his sensor specialist's professionalism, Tyrannus quickly typed out a series of codes, and ordered every ship in his fleet to broadcast those codes as loudly as possible. The fleet had been primed for this, so within seconds, the mines, thousands of which had begun to power up their weapon systems or their thrusters and more towards his ships, halted. The mines now recognized the Confederacy Fleet as friendlies, despite where they had come out in system, and only a few of the frigates and gunboats at the

outer edge of the fleet had been destroyed by attacking mines before the rest of their swarming brethren fell silent.

The same message was also conveyed through the comms systems out to the defenders of Coruscant as the Confederacy fleet closed in. Several of the defensive platforms in orbit over the capital suddenly went dark, their onboard shields failing, their power systems shutting down.

Not all of them. Viruses coming through the communications network had a long way to go before they actually could do impact the actual systems of the target construct, and at each leg of that journey an intelligent and aware computer specialist or ECM officer could see what was going on. Still, even knocking out ten of the hundred defensive fortifications across the planet before the first shots were even fired was a good sign.

“Assume formation Sigma,” Tyrannus ordered calmly, just as starfighters from both sides of the battle launched. The defenders of Coruscant got over the shock of the planet suddenly being at the front line of the war against the Confederacy quickly.

Thousands of vultures were matched by equal numbers of Aethersprites racing up from the ecumenopolis or from a scattered dedicated carrier installations. Coruscant could boast greater defensive than any planet in the known galaxy, and a large portion of that defense came in the form of starfighters to back up its formidable orbital defenses.

*But the planet does not have any artillery installations, only starfighters and anti-starfighter guns. Lots of those admittedly, if we were sending starfighters down under the planetary shield, somehow, they would be wiped out. But my task is to smash down these defenses, I must trust my Master to be able to get away on his own.*

Even as he continued to bark orders, ordering his Lucrehulk ships to pull back, and for his cruisers to move forward, Tyrannus had to fight off the thought, *and if he doesn't, then I become Lord of the Sith!*

This was not the time for such thoughts, if ever such a time existed. Tyrannus understood that striving to become stronger than others, striving to raise yourself above other Sith was part of the creed. But the former Jedi Master knew himself far too well to think that he could lead the Great Plan as well as Sidious could.

*No, the Great Plan needs him. It needs his contacts, needs Sidious's drive and mastery of the Dark Side, even if he loses his position as Chancellor. Perhaps if the Jedi Order is brought low, then will come a time for thinking such thoughts. But not now.* With that, Tyrannus set aside the thoughts of ambition and concentrated on the battle.

“Battleship divisions, close in. Those two defensive installations are handling themselves a little too adroitly. Cruiser division six and seven, fall back behind battleship division four until



those installations have shifted fire, then spread out.” He repeated this order several times, having already noticed that the heavy defensive fire was having a marked impact on five of the Munificent ships already, which had been at the front of the formation.

With the majority of the Munificents staying behind to provide long-range fire power from outside of the range of their enemy with their spinal mounted turbolasers, the defender’s shields began to go down slowly, the planetary shield slowly receding, leaving the stations to their own devices. The spinal-mounted turbolasers of the cruisers could do a tremendous amount of damage at range. Each flotilla worked on a specific target, scattered around the planetary shield first, then some switched to the battlestations.

Meanwhile, the Lucrehulks provided Vultures and anti-starfighter fire in the main, although ten of them had been set to keep clearing the mines away from the fleet. It was only a matter of time before those mines became active once more, and if they did, they could severely damage Tyrannus’ fleet. Unfortunately, the Vultures were needed elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the other Munificent ships, the new battleships and other Lucrehulk divisions pushed into orbit around Coruscant, firing at the defensive installations. The Munificent class was not playing to its strengths in this kind of knife fight, but the Lucrehulks had shields to spare and enough offensive firepower to duke it out with the enemy.

Not evenly of course. Most of the battlestations were made to kill capital ships, which this war had shown was not the strength of the Lucrehulk class. But that was what the battleships were for.

Tyrannus had concentrated his fleet’s front on a narrow angle of attack, with eight Lucrehulks and his Subjugator-class battleships engaging three defensive installations, spreading out and in between their positions in orbit as the planetary shield was knocked back.

And, of course, the starfighters began the largest dogfight in the history of the war so far above, below and even within the fleet. Despite the sheer amount of firepower, the fleet had and the several hundred wings of Vultures, the enemy was coming at them from every angle, and the Aethersprites’ better shielding and slightly better weapons were letting them punch through in various places. His Hardcell transports and frigates were taking a pounding, the frigate’s poor design, a compromise of various missions was proving not up to the task of war.

Watching that aspect of the battle, Tyrannus frowned. “Lucrehulk squadrons one, ten, fifteen and seven, unload your second loadout of vultures. All other ships, keep them in reserve for now. All Munificent class, launch fighters. Keep them in close to the fleet as a combat air patrol.”

“We could use those numbers at the front my Lord!” relayed one of his captains via his communications officers. “We are being hard-pressed to make any headway against their

superior starfighters, and you know starfighters like that will be a threat to any of the other ships with us barring the Lucrehulks. If our mission is to actually invade Coruscant, we need to pull in the Hardcells now.”

“No. Our ships can handle any starfighters that get through at the tip of our formation. But there are more starfighters in coming from defensive installations elsewhere in the system behind us, along with gunboats and real capital ships...”

That Captain quickly understood when the combined sensors of the fleet spotted the incoming rash of red icons barreling towards them from Centax 1 and 2. Those two moons were a military installation and a penal colony, but both had more than two dozen defensive installations on them. These included the homes of a locally designed frigate, the Centax class. It was a somewhat decent up-jumped gunboat and anti-starfighter ship. And now there were more than two hundred of the small swift vessels charging towards his fleet intent on doing whatever damage they could. They were accompanied by a further one hundred and forty-eight starfighter squadrons, the entire ready group from the two moons.

Back at the forefront of the battle, the fire from the Republic space stations battered the shields of Tyrannus’s capital ships, but only one of the Lucrehulk looked to be in danger of losing its shielding at all as two of the three defensive installations that were the target of the front of the spear of his feet died. As they did, still more of the Lucrehulks entered orbit, spreading out in either direction to take the other defensive installations under fire, as all around the fleet that dogfight continued.

Just as Tyrannus had seen, Centax class frigates struck, but the sheer number of vultures that Tyrannus had ordered, launched in the defensive position blunted their forward momentums. Thousands of the vultures were blasted out of space but what was surprising was how more than one Munificent class was rammed by the smaller vessels, several others pounced on the wounded, withering turbolasers strikes battering against its armor. A large number of the Centax class ships exploded for little gain, but they still took several of his ships with them and a large chunk of his starfighter corps.

Seeing something else in the hologram, Tyrannus winced as eight dots that had been light orange now turned dark red to designate a chance in states. three of the twelve battlestations directly above the Senate District that had been taken out by the virus had been destroyed or knocked out of commission by this point. But now the other eight began coming back online.

Beyond them, still others maneuvered with their limited thrusters towards his fleet from all across the globe even as his fleet spread out to meet them. And beyond them, came still more. And while the majority of the defensive installations would not be able to get into position to target his fleet, so long as the Confederacy fleet didn’t spread out too far, the capital ships now coming together from all across the system were much more of a threat.

“Get me numbers on those incoming capital ships,” Tyrannus ordered. “And has our ECM activated?”

“We’re trying to dampen the local comms net sir, but were not having much luck,” the communications officer answered, knowing he would not be punished for it. This had been a problem known well before the strike at the republic’s heart, or rather, as most of the Confederates put it, the brain. It was well known that the Republic didn’t have a heart, much like it didn’t have a soul. “We might be able to start doing some damage to it once Republic ships are close enough but not at the moment.”

The sensor officer spoke next. “We have twelve cruiser class, twenty-two ships of a similar size and gravitic weight but unknown design, plus at least a hundred plus various cruiser class ships. We’re counting more starfighters and at least a hundred and eighty-nine more Centax-class frigates. They are all staying in formation bar the Centax, and their moving around is messing with our sensors at this range, sorry sir.”

Without Ranma around later on in the war, the Republic would begin to shift to a larger capital ship-based fleet, rather than its current motley mix, having learned it was folly to try and match the numbers of starfighters the Confederacy ships could put into space. But at this point in the war, barely going on a year old, that shift had only just begun to be thought of.

This meant that even here in the capital, they lacked sufficient capital’s ship strength to truly match the Confederacy, if the Confederacy was willing to gather enough ships into one attack force. And unlike Kuat, Coruscant actually lacked the home-grown industrial capacity to build dreadnoughts.

That didn’t mean that there weren’t any around. Because what Coruscant did have was importance, and a **lot** of money to buy defensive ships before the war had begun. Including ships that had officially never existed. “We are also reading five Mandator class dreadnoughts moving around the planet. They’re keeping well away from us and moving to link up with the rest of the defenders.”

There was cautious respect in the sensor’s specialists’ words and Tyrannus could well understand why. Even one dreadnought class was an equal to any two or three Lucrehulks, even backed up by an equal number of Munificent class. Even larger than a Lucrehulk, their shields were stronger, and they were entirely devoted to killing other capital ships. *Much like my own battleships but larger.*

*But only five will not make any difference here. We have the numerical advantage, and we have already achieved orbit over the Senate District.* “Communications, order the twelfth and thirteenth cruiser divisions to keep firing on to the planetary shield,” Tyrannus ordered. “The rest are to continue hammering the battlestations. We can destroy a few more of them before the defensive fleet reaches combat range.”

Orders given to the rest of the armada, Tyrannus let them to it, shifting the ships in orbit under his direction to bring them to bear at various points against the battle stations. Two more of the defensive installations exploded under the Confederacy fleet's fire before the defending fleet began to close in from all sides.

But that had been a mistake, and Tyrannus barely acknowledged their assault. This simply allowed more of the Confederacy ships and starfighters to engage, rather than bringing sufficient power to any single point to start truly knocking out the capital ships in any appreciable numbers. Twenty Munificent class ships were forced to pull back, eight more were destroyed, but the Lucrehulks were able to shrug off a large amount of damage from the smaller Republic ships.

And when the Mandator dreadnoughts moving forward divisions of the fleets Lucrehulks shifted to meet them with an accompanying number of his Munificent class to match them. Tyrannus was pleased with that, as he didn't need to pull any of his battleships, which were being battered as it was, away from orbit. Thus far, everything was going as well as he could have expected.

*Although, the speed with which the defensive formations responded is somewhat annoying,* Tyrannus thought, taking a brief glance at his chrono. It had only been thirty minutes since the battle had begun, and his Master had made no sign of being able to get to orbit. The planetary shields on the other hand were starting to flicker, pushed back into the outer atmosphere. *Yet it is only a matter of time before the defenders are able to wipe their mines of the virus, and more reinforcements arrive despite the various other assaults the Confederacy has launched today...*

Tyrannus's thoughts stuttered to a halt as the Dark Side blared a warning at him. It was the clearest warning he had received in weeks, ever since the initial implosion of the Veil. Concern, warped further by the current state of the Force, rose withing Tyrannus for the first time in the battle, and he turned his attention entirely away from the battle in orbit to examine this new threat.

**OOOOOO**

Aboard his flagship, the confusing dreadnaught-class heavy cruiser, Katana, Thrawn took in the tactical screen with a glance. "My compliments to Master Yoda and the rest of your Jedi Aayla, we seem to have come out directly where we wanted to."

"It helps to have the local space control sending you detailed information, while you're calculating," Aayla answered, staring hard at the holographic display, shivering a bit. *By the Force, this is the largest battle I've ever seen.*

For his part, Thrawn didn't care about the size of the battle. After a certain point it was all numbers, it was the mind which drove those numbers that mattered the most. "All ships

launch starfighters, keep them in defensive formation. The fleet will advance to combat range in formation arrow. No starfighters are to leave the defensive umbrella of the fleet”

The fleet was almost ragged as it moved into the formation he had demanded, which was a wide multifaceted formation, with multiple prongs going out in every direction like a three-dimensional ‘X,’ with the center of the ‘X’ pointing out and forward from the rest of the fleet. That segment of the fleet, which consisted of eighteen Mon Calamari heavy cruisers, would impact the enemy’s still disjointed rear first, while the other from arms of the formation would then come in from every angle.

In this manner, Thrawn made a virtue of the different segments of vastly varied groups that made up the fleet he had been able to assemble. A fleet that was only about two-hundred ships strong, but generally had more cruisers and gunboats than any other ship class. Further, the enemy’s Vultures had already absorbed insane losses and his fleet had a full load of Aethersprites piloted by Jedi and veteran clones.

The Mon Calamari ships, which had arrived originally in Metellos system barely a few hours before this attack, acted as a single unit, their professionalism impressing Thrawn even though he did not particularly believe that their ships, pieces of art all of them, were as good combat platforms as they could have been. *Still, who am I to tell an artist not to give form to his imagination? And their layered shield design makes them perfect for the initial point of impact, even better than the Mandators, which are already embroiled on the star-ward flank.*

The battlefield had spread out some, but the attackers had been very good about not spreading out in orbit of Coruscant, which would have allowed more of the defensive installations to join the battle. eleven of those battlestations were gone, and thirteen more were being hammered into pieces by Lucrehulks and a new type of dedicated battleship. But that was all the installations that could move to engage the Confederacy fleet where it had entered orbit, anyway. *Concentrating on them further is a mistake, my Weequay opponent.*

Under the multiple strikes of the rest of the defensive fleets, the Confederacy formation away from orbit had become somewhat disjointed. They must have dealt with the original few counter strikes well enough but now the Confederacy fleet seemed made out of a series of differently sized discs. Each of them was somewhat organized, and the different capital ship divisions were working together, but they were not a unified whole, none of these makeshift divisions were supporting one another.

*Mind you, my own fleet is not a solidified whole, we had no time to work up with any of the units bar the various Corellian groups.*

*But we can at least strike the same target just as Bulq did. And if my read on his people’s mentality is correct, he will be leaving the various divisions under their own commands by this point bar broad orders.* The Weequay were telepathic in nature, and while Tyrannus would no doubt be giving out orders at the start of the battle, he would expect his officers to understand

and know the plan going forward without his input from then on. He would not see the need for further orders from on high. This left his fleet with numerous small weaknesses.

As Thrawn had anticipated, the initial impact of the Mon Calamari caused several of the smaller 'disc formations' to shift and move to engage them, leaving off battling the already battered forces of the Republic that they had been fighting previously. Further, they concentrated their fire on the Calamari, instead of pulling back and waiting for the other formations of his fleet to engage. This allowed his fleet to take them from several different angles. Led by starfighters some of whom were manned by Jedi, those formations hit from every angle, and for the first time in this battle, a Lucrehulk was destroyed.

Its shields came down under a lucky strike in one segment. This was followed by a Mon Calamari cruiser targeting that segment of the whole, blasting through it and into the engines. Four Munificent class also died to the combined fire of several of the Jedi heavy cruisers, along with numerous frigate-sized vessels, and the odd Hardcell units.

*"Inform Commodore Numbari that he has full discretion on when to pull his ships back." The Mon Calamari are practical people, but they are also ones who revere life and they will pull back when needed. I can also trust the Commodore to be able to make certain that any ship that takes too much damage will be ordered to retreat alone. Given the nature of this battlefield, they might even succeed in getting away.*

"The other Commodores are to be given their heads to a certain degree, but I want the attack concentrated on the back of the enemy formation. Keep us away from orbit, which is a hard order. We must seem hesitant, as if we are unwilling to engage Tyrannus in close combat. Beyond that, individual ships are to be prepared to follow up on any orders I give them directly."

"Why?" Aayla asked quietly as the communications specialists all quickly passed on the admiral's orders. "I would've thought that pinning the enemy fleet against defenses of the planet would have been a better idea. Mind you, I never thought they'd bring this large a fleet on so dangerous a mission."

"That would have been a viable tactic if not for the fact that Tyrannus has already destroyed a significant number of them in the combat zone. If we could force them to spread out further and thus become engaged by the other defenders, that would be one thing. But he has the numbers advantage and is keeping that area of his fleet under stricter control than the rest. Further, once the battle is going against him, he will have no choice but to run. And if he runs at any kind of angle to get away from us, he will then perforce be engaged by the remaining battle stations around the planet's orbits. And thus, slowed down. No, we can destroy a goodly portion of his fleet and force him to come back towards us to stop our assault. or run that gauntlet," Thrawn explained, before he went on to bark out commands to a few of the Commodores, to pass them along to single ships, which he had noticed were in trouble.

Aayla nodded, frowning a bit, but then she realized. “We, we don’t have to beat him, do we? We just need to hold him in position, keep him from impacting whatever is going on down on the planet.”

“Exactly,” even as he answered Aayla however, Thrawn noticed that his fleet was fighting better than he had expected. The disparate groups that made up his fleet, units occasionally as small as a single starfighter squadron, which had never worked together before this, were fighting together as if they had for months. When several starfighter squadrons broke off an attack on a Lucrehulk and moved to intercept a force of vulture fighters before they could engage a battered heavy cruiser, which they should not have even seen, let alone understood the need for, his red eyes narrowed. When another group of gunboats shifted in order to protect one of the local vessels from the attacks of a Munificent class division that narrowing of eyes became more acute, practically a glare as one of the local Mandator classes closed with that division and blew several of them out of space in a few moments of fire.

Suspicious, Thrawn looked over at where Master Yoda and Master Windu sat, their eyes closed, their hands held in the meditative position.

“What are your fellow Jedi doing?” he asked, looking over at Aayla, before ordering a division of heavy cruisers, pulled from Rendili and Alsaka, to shift targets to a group of Munificent class that had just gotten behind another Mandator. As he had anticipated, those ships could not turn fast enough, and two of their number died before they could break off and shift back into the defensive envelope of the rest of their ‘disc formation.’ The Mandator retreated, its shields gone, most of its weapons knocked out, and the heavy cruisers, without any prompting continued, even though one of them soon exploded under enemy fire, but not without taking two Lucrehulk with them.

Aayla looked up from where she was directing the CAP around fleet, keeping the vultures at bay. She barely glanced at Yoda and Master Windu before she replied. “Battle meditation. It’s hard to explain, but it buoys up the spirits and willingness of people to work together, while also using the Force to anticipate your enemy’s movements. I’ve never seen it used in space battle, kriff, I’ve never even seen it used at all. But I know the signs from history texts.”

Thrawn found that somewhat disturbing, but it wasn’t outright mental domination, something Aayla was quick to explain away when she saw his faint frown. Still, it had massive implications for the future if more Jedi could learn it and if this war continued. As Thrawn, he estimated it would. He could not predict the actions of the Confederacy’s political leadership, but he had a good grasp of how Tyrannus, Grievous and the other members of the Confederacy military thought.

They would keep fighting, if for very different reasons from one to another. Grievous would keep fighting because that was what his honor and personality dictated. That, and taking delight in causing pain to his opponents. Bulq would continue, because he was a Sith and as

long as the war continued, the Dark Side would be fed, enhancing his personal strength. The others would not be willing to give up their personal strength or had true issues with the Republic as a whole.

Regardless, Thrawn was not one to turn away luck when it came to him, and he turned back to commanding the battle, his teeth grinding as he tried hard not to lose the bubble.

Aayla turned back, demanding that the communications people contact the local high command, and get them to turn over leadership of the mobile units to Thrawn. When several more of the Centax frigates and local cruisers exploded along with only one from his own fleet's, this proved a sharp addition to her argument. Aayla being a well-known Jedi Knight speaking for Master Yoda and Master Windu also helped. Soon enough, she had an agreement hammered out between Thrawn and the defenders. "It looks as if the local admiral, Yularen, is also not in communication with the rest of the high command. None of the rest are willing to stick their noses out right now. That is good. It means that we can fight this battle out without too many cooks messing up the soup."

With that, Thrawn turned, staring into the holo-sphere as he began to give out further orders, his eyes flicking everywhere. This was his realm of expertise, his art and he was a master at it.

**OOOOOO**

From the moment Sidious swung his lightsaber, Ranma knew that he'd underestimated the old fucker. The man was **fast!** Faster than any opponent Ranma had met in this universe, faster than maybe even Saffron, Herb or even Mint in his past life. If Ranma hadn't already been on edge waiting for the strike, that lightsaber would have hit him. Whether or not it would have done any damage Ranma didn't know, but he wasn't willing to chance it, and he flipped himself back and away from the strike, before using a hand on the railing to twist himself back in, lashing out with a kick so quick it looked like he teleported to most of the horrified senate.

Yet despite Ranma's own insane speed, Sidious blocked it with his lightsaber, using the plasma blade to push Ranma's kick out of the way. Ranma hissed as the blade cut through his slipper and seared his foot. It didn't burn all the way through, but was enough to hurt him, and Ranma pulled back the kick quickly, rolling forward onto the Chancellor's ledge ducking under another strike then dancing around a third as Sidious roared in anger. With that roar came a Force Crush in every direction, so powerful and so sudden that Ranma found himself picked up and hurled backwards into the railing, which shattered, even as his own bones were ground together painfully.

Ranma broke the Force Crush grip on him, landing on a hover bubble below him as shrieks and shouts of shock and horror abounded throughout the Senate. Many of the Senators were now moving their hover bubbles well away from the point of impact in every direction. And couldn't help, but notice only the Wookiee Ambassador and two others, were making any



move to close with the now revealed Sith. One of whom was the admiral, who somehow had brought a blaster in here. *Senate Security, yeah right!*

He was about to leap up towards the ledge again, when Sidious appeared, standing where Ranma had just been flung from. He glared down at Ranma, and there was so much hatred and fury in that glare that even Ranma found himself pausing for a second.

That second cost him and the Senate as a whole. His lightsaber twirling above his head for a moment, Sidious reached out with both hands in a cross pattern, and with that move the Dark Side obeyed. The Force grabbed the hastily retreating hover bubbles, hurling them around the Senate Hall like they had just been caught in one of Ranma's tornado attacks.

"Gah!"

"Help!"

"Oh, kriff!!!!"

"Waaaghh!"

Shrieks and cries of agony and fear abounded as the hover bubbles smashed into one another, killing several dozen senators within those first few seconds. Staring at that, Ranma leaped backward and away, bouncing off several hover bubbles, grabbing people out of them in midair as they whirled and crashed into one another. Looking around, Ranma realized that the Force attack didn't have much weight to it and he tossed the people he'd just saved down towards their fellows.

This move was an automatic response to seeing people in danger. And only after he had saved the third senator, a young, blue-skinned alien girl who looked far too young to be a real senator, did Ranma realize his error. "Shit!" Ranma shouted a semi-broken holo-projector showing Sidious making his escape along with his two aides.

"Excuse me!" the girl shirked in turn, smacking Ranma's chest, showing she still had the wherewithal to scowl at him as he cursed. Her scowl shifted into a gasp when Ranma deposited her in the lap of one of the other senators, an elderly human gentleman who quickly grabbed her around the waist, pulling her down into his hover bubble as Ranma turned around and leaped upwards to see still more.

By that point Sidious was gone, having torn the doorway leading into the Senate Hall from the Chancellor's ledge out of his way despite the distant Kit having tried to activate a series of security doors that should have cut off the Senate Hall from any exterior threat, or in this case, kept Sidious inside. However, a Force Grab and Crush of prodigious strength simply battered the doorways out of Sidious's way, one door after another, hurling them back out and over the fleeing trio's head.

As he ran, Sidious pushed aside any thoughts about how much he had just lost, how the Great Plan was now in ruins. Survival was all that mattered. Survival, and doing as much damage to the Senate and the leadership of the Republic as he could. He growled, "Moore, can you send out your signal now?" He had heard her babbling about it as soon as the two of them had cut their way through the initial doorway leading into the Senate Hall.

"Yes, but not to the Hypernet. One of the viruses activated already, the internal security systems will activate to attack any Jedi, or the Senate if they try to leave the hall. I also alerted the Senate Security force," Sly gasped as she ran beside him. "But I can't get any signal to the Hypercom network, or into the Jedi Temple. All I'm getting is an error message!"

"Clever Jedi, they used the Locus to distract me, while they were moving outside the Senate Hall," Sidious growled. "You will head to the communications center, grab as many of the Senate Security men you need to take it over. Those codes must be sent!"

*While we won't be able to turn the clone army against the Jedi, we can still do a lot of damage to the Republic and the Jedi Order with the various viruses and other traps in the Hypercom network, to say nothing of the Thought Bomb.*

Sidious's personal change to the Great Plan had been the inclusion of the clone army to fight the war, and the inclusion of control chips into the clones. At a given signal, those control chips would take the clones over and force them to act upon the orders given. But at this point the Jedi were still watching the clones and their indoctrination too closely for that to pass. A few years of war would have led to laxer oversight but now that was impossible.

Sly gulped but nodded as they began to see the concourse Sidious had passed through earlier ahead of them.

"I must get to my office to send out another message." The Chancellor's office was the only one directly connected to the Sith temple far below the Senate District, and thus Sidious had to reach his computers there in order to activate the Thought Bomb. *And if I was blind to this strangely well-planned assault, Sanvia will certainly not be aware of what is going on.*

Regardless, Sidious was determined to wipe the Senate District and the Jedi Temple clean, even though intellectually he knew that the vast majority of the Jedi were not in point of fact at home within the temple any longer.

Pausing in his run, Sidious turned to Pestage, who was hyperventilating, staring behind him at the destruction along the root out of the hall, his eyes wide with fear. A Force Choke around his neck brought his attention back to Sidious, and Sidious slammed his head into the wall. Not hard enough to cause a concussion, but only hard enough to cause a bruise to start up immediately along one side of his face. "Pestage, you will go with Moore for now, split off when you run into any members of Senate Security, take command of them. The Jedi have declared war on the Republic. They have joined hands with Master Bulq. Do you understand?"

The pain and the clear-cut order made Pestage come back to himself, and he nodded quickly, following after the two of them. Sidious felt the weakness within the man but knew he didn't have time to deal with it right now. *Hopefully these fools will cause enough trouble to at least stop any other Jedi from joining in the chase.*

Back in the Senate Hall, Ranma had finished catching the last of the hover balls, which were bouncing around thanks to the Chancellor's Force Push, dumping the survivors down on to their fellows. A few though had been buried under the rubble of several of the hover bubbles, which had smashed into one another so hard they had fused, before crashing down into still more and he hesitated, staring at the wreckage.

"Get after him!" shouted another Senator, as the old Admiral, Yularen, pushed himself out the wreckage of his hover bubble, where it had smashed into several others. "Yularen and I will organize medical efforts here! The Sith must be stopped. No matter the cost!"

Nodding at that, Ranma leaped upwards, grabbing on to the ledge and flipping himself up onto it, racing after Sidious.

Fortunately for Ranma, Sidious, Pestage and Moore had already run into another obstacle.

**OOOOOO**

"Kriff, Kriff, the Chancellor, the Chancellor! He's a Sith!? He, he's been working both sides!?" the manager for the communications center muttered, as he and everyone else in the communications center were glued to the video coming out from the Senate Hall. "God, how, how did..."

"How he was able to hide from the Jedi Order is something that we will be trying to discover ourselves." *Although I will wager now that ego and simply his skill at Force Cloak will have a lot to do with it*, Kit thought ruefully before going on. "How he was able to take command of the Senate is another question entirely, one that the Senate will have to ask itself some serious questions about. However, that kind of thinking is for the future. Right now, I require that all of you stay where you are and keep the recording going. That will help relief efforts tremendously when aide reaches the Senate Hall."

He then turned and moved over to the doorway, stepping outside and closing the door behind him. It was well he had, because marching down the corridor towards him came a squad of Senate Security. They wore their full armor complete with helmet, with riot guns in some hands and blaster pikes in the rest. When they saw the green-skinned Jedi, they instantly began to fire, shouting out, "Stand down! By order of the Chancellor, the communications center must be secured!"

"Why did they bother shouting at me to stand down when they are already firing?" Kit mused as he charged forward to meet them, using Shien momentarily to block the incoming blaster bolts and return them to their shooters. Then he was in among them.

These men were well-trained though, and several of them fell back even as two of them moved to engage him, keeping Kit in contact close in while the others tried to fire at him from just out of lightsaber range. This didn't work however, and the blaster pikes simply could not stop his lightsaber blade, which chopped through them and the men holding them before Kit turned his attention to the blaster bolts coming towards him, redirecting them once more into their fellows. Within a minute, he had decimated the entire squad, killing most of them.

Staring down at the bodies and more often pieces of bodies scattered around him, Kit shook his head, and moved back to the doorway, awaiting the next rush. "Let us hope that the rest of the Senate Security Force is not as brainwashed to obey the Chancellor's orders..."

Elsewhere, Talli and HK also had trouble with the Senate Security. The security center they had been in had been someone on edge since they had been informed that the Senate meeting was being sent out live, something they should've been informed of. Occasionally broadcasts from the Senate caused riots among the general populace beyond the Senate District, something that the security force had to prepare for.

Yet to Talli's astonishment, none of the Senate Security members present seemed to care enough to actually watch the presentation. She asked about it at one point, looking up from her ostensible work on her datapad. The young padawan was told that watching that kind of recording was against procedure while on duty by a man whose apathetic tone horrified her. But she didn't try to argue about it, lest it draw more attention to her.

But then a signal came in causing the officer of the watch to slam a hand down on a red button in front of him. This set off a series of alarms through the security center and in several others scattered throughout the Senate District. "The Senate has been suborned, the Chancellor is declaring martial law within the Senate District! Special reaction forces move out! The rest of us..."

That was as far as he got before Talli reached under her robes and pulled out two smoke grenades. She had hidden them by wrapping them to her chest as if they were her breasts. She was now somewhat annoyed both that this had worked, and the fact that she had yet to build up any kind of chest herself. Setting that annoyance aside, Talli hurled them forward as she shouted out, "Now HK!"

HK instantly stood from where he had been folded into himself, reaching the doorway into the weapons locker and tearing two Senate Security members there into pieces with his claw hand before turning and firing into the ready room where the ready squad had already been moving towards the doorway. "Ecstatic tone: finally! Give me some more of that glorious violence!"

Several of them went down, but others fell back, using benches or turned over lockers as cover, firing back. And through the smoke from the grenade Scott had hurled came several other blaster bolts to one side.

That was fine by HK. "Joyful observation: good, I like it when you meatbags try to fight back. It makes slaying you all the sweeter."

For her part, Talli activated her lightsaber and rushed forward to engage the man in the control center, ducking aside as blaster bolts came towards her. Moments later she was in among them, facing one of them in particular who was armed with a blaster pike already, the end of which was coming towards her face so fast, she had to reach up and grab it, redirecting it. Talli used that momentum to hurl herself up and over the strike, her leg lashing out in a kick taken almost entirely from Ranma's teachings. It cracked into the man's armored chest, causing him to stumble but doing no real damage until her lightsaber flashed up, cutting into his chest and sending the man's upper body one way, his legs the other.

Landing, she grimaced, staring at the burnt half of a man's waist in front of her at eye height. This was her first actual human kill, but both Ranma and Shaak had walked her through the emotions she would be feeling now, and that, garnered with her earlier Jedi training allowed her to throw off her shock and horror.

Deactivating her lightsaber and ducking forward, Talli rolled under the corpse's legs coming out the other side, legs and fists hammering out as she launched herself into the center of a small defensive group that formed around the communications and security consoles at the far end from where she had previously been by the doorway. She used her short height to best advantage, going for groin, spine, thigh and feet, disabling and moving on before coming back when opportunity arose.

Within moments, all of her opponents were down, unconscious, many of them sporting broken arms or other limbs, with one of them having had his head smashed into the console he had been stationed at a moment before the vines began. The last two went down to precise shots from HK, and Talli turned, surveying the battlefield, then pointing a finger at the doorway leading into the locker room for the heavy weapons. "Do something about the weapons in there HK, and then let's get moving. The other security centers will be responding too."

"Thoughtful response: yes young Mistress, that sounds like a good idea. And might I say that you are following in the Master's footsteps of glorious hand-to-hand related carnage quite well for spending so short a time with him? This gives me great hope for the future and that you too will turn into a trouble magnet."

"Was that a compliment or a curse on my future?" Talli murmured, moving over to the doorway and peering out, grateful to not see anything outside just yet. Behind her there were a series of muffled explosions, and she soon felt the presence of HK behind her. With that she

opened the door, and led the way outside, a purloined blaster-pike in hand, her lightsaber clipped back on her belt for now.

Unfortunately for the Jedi, it turned out that yes, much of Senate Security had been brainwashed by this point to follow the Chancellor's orders regardless of the lawful nature of those orders. Only two of the security bases within the Senate District decided to sit on their hands and wait to see what was happening. The rest essentially turned against the Republic that day. Throughout the Senate District other Senate Security personnel were responding, turning from whatever they were performing, or racing out of their bases armed to face terrorists or direct Confederacy attack in order to engage and subdue the Senate.

They ran into several problems with this. For one thing, while much of the Senate Security had not watched the recordings, the rest of the workers throughout the district had. Many of them were undecided as to what they believed. Many were horrified at the very idea that the Chancellor could be a Sith, while others thought there was no way what they were seeing was real. That uncertainty faded as security forces began to gun down anyone between them and the Senate Hall. It was replaced by anger, perhaps intensified by the storm of Dark Side energies that Sidious was unleashing on Ranma.

Regardless, the civilians of the district, people who, regardless of job, had been almost psychologically trained like Pavlov's dog to respond to authority, threw off the yoke of that authority and began to fight back. They used makeshift weapons or their own personal blasters and hundreds died, but they still tried to fight the Senate Security forces wherever they could.

And Master Rancis and the rest of the Jedi on Coruscant had been ready. As soon as the Chancellor struck out at Ranma, a band of eighty Jedi were racing across the bridge into the Senate District, spreading out in groups. The civilians greeted them with cheers or pleas for help, while the Senate Security troopers moved to engage them, fully believing the lie they had been told: that the Jedi had seized the Senate. Such was the amount of mental domination Sidious had used on their brains.

But all that was a slideshow in comparison to the battle going on between Ranma and Sidious. Although at first, it wasn't solely between the two of them.

**OOOOOO**

Anakin had set himself up in the same concourse that Palpatine had passed through earlier. He knew this concourse and the lift at the end of it was the fastest way up to the Chancellor's office. Initially he had hoped to wait there but had been turned aside by the Senate Security squad on duty. While Anakin could overcome them, he could not have done so without being recorded by the video cameras everywhere within the Senate District, which would have given the game away. So he simply waited here, among the trees and statuary, with his datapad open and watching the emergency Hypernet broadcast.

In this way, Anakin had watched Ranma at work. He had watched the buildup, watched the final breaking of Sidious's out her persona. When it did, Anakin smiled, feeling almost serene as he knew now that the man, he had become so close to over the years, had been a construct. A false personality created by the Sith in order to interact with the Senate and the rest of the world.

*None of it was real, not a bit of it. It wasn't that I was so blind I didn't see it, it was just that Sidious was so good at portraying that image that he fooled not only me but everyone. That, like anger and hatred is part of the Sith, guile, trickery, hiding who they are. Knowing that makes me feel much better. There really is nothing in the Sith Order that is good or just, is there?*

With that revelation, Anakin centered himself in the Force, reaching out to it even now when it was gripped in a wild frenzy the likes of which no Jedi had ever felt before. Yet such was his connection to the Force that it came to him readily enough, and when Sidious and his two followers ran down the hall, Anakin met them, his eyes clear, a wry twist on his lips as he wondered how the Chancellor was going to play this. "Chancellor!"

For a moment as he stared back at the young man, Sidious's mind blanked, removing all thoughts of his attempting to get away from the Locus enough to send out the order to the Thought Bomb and then escape up to orbit. Not only had he missed the fact that the Chaotic Locus planet but he had missed Anakin's presence! The sheer blindness to the future that that entailed was humbling and frightening in equal measure.

But then, a wild thought occurred to him. *I can use this!* He had hidden his lightsaber before he'd run into the security post, and now smiled wanly, hearing the alarms blaring throughout the district was the first bit of good news Sidious had since Ranma had first showed himself. "Anakin! I did not know you were back, but I am quite happy to see you! Come, we need to get to the Naval headquarters. There is Confederacy fleet in orbit, we need to know what is going on and I am afraid the Senate has responded to this assault poorly."

However, Sidious's attempt to prevaricate faltered instantly, which he had been halfway expecting as Anakin pulled out his lightsaber. "Still going to try to trick me even now? I regret to inform you, Chancellor Palpatine, if that is your real name, that the jig is up. I was the first one to recognize your voice and those recordings, I was the first to have my eyes opened to what you hide underneath that guise."

Sidious snarled, his visage changing entirely within a second, while Sly Moore moved to one side, activating her lightsaber, as Pestage took several steps away from everyone. "You know all about that wouldn't you, Anakin? The whole Jedi Order is built upon lies! They lied to you about what is important, they lied to you about the Force, about where power really comes from! You have felt it, haven't you? The power of anger and hate. I can see it in you, you have discovered that power occasionally, used it. That power, it can allow you to achieve anything you desire, anything you dream of."

For a moment Anakin was silent, and Sidious smiled thinly, moving forward, his hand outstretched. "Come. Come with me, and we can remake the universe. Do you desire to end slavery? Take your anger at that and cut down all those who would make slaves or sell them! Do you desire something or someone, use the Force to seize them! Do you desire acknowledgement? Take it! The Dark Side is powerful Anakin if you but have the will to see it. I can teach you the way."

Staring back at the older man, Anakin shook his head at the sheer gall of him. Here Palpatine stood, his lies uncovered, running for his life from Anakin, from retribution, and he still tried to bring Anakin to the Dark Side? A bit of that actually fed Anakin's ego slightly, that he was so important that even with Palpatine's plans falling all around them he thought that bringing Anakin to Palpatine's side might allow him to snatch some measure of victory. But it was also so tone deaf, so lacking in knowledge of the travails that Anakin had gone through for the past few weeks, since the Jedi Order that it struck Anakin almost as false as a discordant note in a song.

Yet for all of that, the will of Sidious bore down on him, the Dark Side enveloping him, demanding he submit. It was only with intense difficulty that Anakin fought it off with, activating his lightsaber.

"No," Anakin announced, the word pushed out through clenched teeth, but the sound of it, giving his thoughts voice, gave Anakin strength and he pushed back against Sidious's presence in the Force. "Plagueis might have created me, and you might have thought you could turn. But you have never understood me! I've never wanted power beyond what I needed to defend those I care for! I've never wanted to rule. I am a Jedi, and you will not sway me."

Anakin watched as Sidious's face twisted into a sneer of anger and hatred, feeling a small sliver of fear going through him, but casting it aside, reaching out with the Force as he brought up his lightsaber to point that Sidious. "Chancellor Palpatine, you have been accused of being a traitor to the Republic and a member of the Sith order. Come along quietly and you will have a chance to defend yourself in court."

Sidious stared back at him, then activated his own lightsaber, gesturing Sly and Pestage to run away. "So be it. If you will not be turned, then you will be destroyed!"

The younger man matched him, using a variety of Djem So and Shi-Cho, creating an extremely chaotic, aggressive style. Sidious matched him, his own style aggressive beyond belief, but also rooted in the use of the Force through various means beyond Force Precognition, which was barely working at the present moment. Both combatants were struggling through the wild nature of the Force around them, and while the Dark Side gave Sidious a tremendous edge, Anakin's greater connection to the Force gave him some aid here.

The younger man bounced up off of the walls around the two of them, coming down from on high with strikes from Ataru, pressing Sidious as hard as he could as he used his greater



mobility to try and press any advantage he could. Anakin was fast, accurate, every move flowing into every other, the Force signing through his body in a way no other Jedi could have matched given the tumult that had seized the Force save Fay perhaps, although she would never have been able to use it in combat as Anakin was now.

But Sidious was a master with a lightsaber, more experienced than his opponent. His connection to the Dark Side and oppressive presence was beyond anything that Anakin had ever faced before. No other living Jedi save perhaps Windu with his Vaapad could have fought Sidious so well, but in minutes, Sidious had Anakin on the back foot, pressing him hard with his lightsaber and reaching out with the Force around them, tearing up trees and tossing them at Anakin, and he was forced to either put them aside with his own Force powers, or cut them with his lightsaber, while also engaged with Sidious.

Sidious paused for a second to avoid a branch, which had bounced off the ground and would have tangled his legs. Anakin instantly used this moment to bounce away up into the air, then coming down hard, his lightsaber crashing down to try and attack Sidious from behind.

But Darth Sidious turned, blocking his blow almost negligently, then reaching out for Anakin with a Force Crush centered on his head. Anakin blocked that with his own Force powers, landed, and lashed out with his lightsaber only to have it smacked aside.

Leaping away once more and forcing Sidious to turn and match him, Anakin reached into his robes, coming out with a second lightsaber. This was one that had originally belonged to one of the Jedi who Invictus had slain. Anakin had taken it, reasoning that it could be repurposed, maybe made into some kind of memorial along with his own Master Giiett's lightsabers, although they had had been mostly destroyed when he had used an explosive device to finish himself off after having been mortally wounded during the assault on Wayland.

Sidious blocked the blue blade, his eyes widened in surprise, and Anakin was off of the ground coming up at him with his other lightsaber, pushing Sidious back under his furious Jar'Kai assault for a few seconds. But then a Force Grab caught his leg, halting Anakin in place just enough for Sidious to stab through his defenses, which had opened up as he had used an attack from Shi Cho. Only a desperate backflip and breaking that Force Grip on his leg protected Anakin from being impaled.

But as he flipped away, Sidious flicked his lightsaber down in a small arc, cutting through one of Anakin's legs directly below the knee despite the fact Anakin had gone through the toughness training from the Order. Unlike the Sith's version, the Jedi toughness training wasn't up to stopping over-heated lightsabers like Sidious.

"ARGH!" Anakin cried out in agony as he flopped to the ground, the pain from his wound nearly overwhelming him for a second. He recovered himself a bit by using the Force to stop all sensation from his leg reaching his brain, but had his lightsabers swatted out his hands by a Force Push.

Sidious snarled and was about to stab the ungrateful brat, the so-called Chosen One, but then his eyes widened and he turned away. With a gesture of his free hand, he gathered up several of the trees and hurled them down the hallway Sidious and his aides had come from. That, and the rictus snarl on the older man's face informed Anakin that he had held the man just long enough for help to arrive and he smirked despite the pain of his missing leg. "Too slow, Sith."

As Anakin spoke, Ranma came barreling through into the concourse, his light pike slashing the trees to pieces. He closed furiously with Sidious, forcing Sidious to block his light pike with his own lightsaber. "Where you goin' old man? God a bathroom break ya need to get to?"

"Foolish whelp!" Sidious snarled, then ducked under a strike from Ranma's fist, before returning one just as quickly. The two of them began to exchange fist and leg strikes as they danced around one another, moving so fast they were almost a blur to Anakin's eyes, only the Force giving him a sense of where each of them were.

Seeing Sidious totally concentrated on Ranma, Anakin used the Force to cut off all feeling to his missing leg. Then he slowly reached out with the Force toward a lightsaber that he could sense somewhere nearby. Seeing his blade bounce into the air, Anakin slowly pulled it towards himself through the air, keeping it low down by the ground and deactivating it soon as he could see the activation button.

Sidious furiously began to bounce around the concourse, utilizing a bit of Ataru now as he tried to overcome the reaction time of his opponent, which had saved Ranma several times already from strikes that would have weakened or perhaps even crippled him. Two had gotten through, but his ki healing had healed him almost as quickly as the wounds appeared. Once more thanks to his own toughness training and the Phoenix pill, Ranma showed a distinct level of immunity to heat-based weapons. Sidious's lightsaber might have been set to a far higher degree of heat than most lightsabers, but even that couldn't quite get through Ranma's skin, not without sustained contact.

His Force Crushes on the other hand **were** getting through Ranma's defenses, as Ranma was concentrating so much on the physical battle that he couldn't quite anticipate Sidious's use of the Force. Twice now Ranma's arm or leg had been crushed, only to heal almost instantly. Several times his throat had been grabbed, but Ranma was quick to let out ki bursts in order to break away, and he was moving so quickly his neck was too small a target for Sidious's larger attacks to hit.

But while Ranma was pressing Sidious hard, Sidious was moving his way back towards the elevator. He was also concentrating on the ceiling, and with a scream of tortured metal and ferrocrete, chunks of the ceiling came crashing down toward Ranma.

For a second Ranma gaped up at it, shocked even as he whirled his light pike above his head, slicing the pieces coming towards them into chunks that had been battered away. *I've never seen someone able to concentrate on something like that and on fighting me before.* So busy was Ranma from defending from that assault, he didn't notice as Sidious reached the entrance to the lift, whereupon he tore the locked doors off of it, and reached inside, grabbing the lift and pulling it out and tossing it at Ranma in turn.

Sidious watched in astonishment as Anakin pushed himself to his knees and abandoning the lightsaber, he had been trying to pull towards them, thrust out his hands towards the incoming rubble. "HAaaaaaH!" His own Force powers pushed back against Sidious's holding the lift in place for a second.

Seeing Ranma leap up over the stopped rubble and moving towards him again, Sidious snarled. But despite his desire for violence, to kill this man above all others, he turned, leaping into the darkness of the elevator shaft bouncing off the far side heading upward. Defeating the Chaotic Locus was not his goal. Survival was, and that meant sending the signal to activate the Thought Bomb and getting away into orbit.

For a moment, after landing Ranma stared up into the darkness of the lift, then looked back at Anakin, who had fallen to his side amidst the rubble of the concourse. Before he could speak though, Anakin shouted at him. "Go!"

Nodding, Ranma turned away, hopping up into the darkness above the entrance way into the shaft. "You did good Anakin! I'll see you in a bit."

As he ascended up the shaft bouncing from one side to another after his opponent, Ranma used his light Pike several times to cut doorways and at one point another lift out of his way, wincing at the noise of the rubble falling towards him contained within the shaft.

More dangerous to him though was when a series of water pipes apparently going from one floor to another directly next to the shaft were cut into by Sidious, letting hot and cold water flood down towards him like a waterfall. Barely able to make out steam from the light of one of the doorways leading into the elevator shaft, Ranma hissed, but couldn't stop his upward leap in time, only able to redirect himself a bit before the water hit him.

Ranma's lower body was splashed with hot water, his upper body with cold. The cold to the face and upper body triggered the change, but thankfully there wasn't quite enough hot water hitting her to cause the curse to fight itself. The redhead held on to the side of the shaft first second gasping at the close call, then raced upward once more.

High above Ranma, Sidious reached the floor where the Chancellor's office was and tore the doorways open again as he had several times already, tossing them back down towards Ranma.

The Senate Security men here had remained on station, despite the chaos going on, elsewhere throughout the Senate District and snapped to attention as Sidious appeared. Seeing that, Sidious gestured over his shoulder down into the shaft. "I am being pursued by a Jedi, they have betrayed the Republic. Kill him," Sidious snarled, reaching out with the Force to crush any attempt to disobey.

However, there was only a flicker of that desire. Instead, the four-man squad saluted, moving past Sidious to the entrance into the lift. Where they began to fire down into the shaft, simply saturating the interior of the shaft with their blaster bolts.

Two more guards quickly joined them as Sidious reached his office, ordering them to join their fellows as he entered before racing to his desk. There, he inputted a series of commands, trying to send out a virus into the Jedi Temple and out over to the hyper net. But even his Chancellor's authority could not get through now, halted at the Hypercom uplink center itself. The Jedi Temple was also still completely cut off, so that failed as well.

The only one of the three signals he sent off which succeeded was the one it down to the temple, which activated the Thought Bomb...

**OOOOOO**

While the threats Kit was facing were not very threatening to him, HK and Talli were having a semi easy time of it too, the threat to all of the Senate District and the Jedi Temple deep within Coruscant's rising heart was something else entirely.

There, Shaak, K'Kruhk, and Ahsoka were still looking around, trying to figure out a way to move the device in front of them. Then without any warning both Togrutans paused, turning their heads towards the device as they heard something, a low hum that would be inaudible to human or human-equivalent ears. "What is that?"

So warned, K'Kruhk turned to look at the creation as well. He sent out his Force senses and as he did, his skin visibly paled in a way that was quite unusual for a Whiphid. "Something has changed within that device, I can feel the potential within it building up to a crescendo!"

Shaak could feel it too and was already moving, racing around the device, cutting free several dozen wires the connected to the repulsor projector underneath it, and a few others that connect to the device itself. They had been leery of doing so before because none of the wire had any seeming meaning, as far as they could discern. Perhaps Malo might have been able to tell them more, but the demolitions expert had died, gutted by a Terentatek.

But even as she moved, Shaak knew they were too late.

"What should we do, Master?" Ahsoka asked, staring up at her master then back to the device.

"We need to somehow contain it or removed the Dark Side energies within. I'm afraid I have no idea how to go about that second one, but the first one might be equally impossible given how deep we are," K'Kruhk answered for the older Togrutan.

Shaak scowled an expression she normally would not let show, frustration at their current circumstances filling her. Wishing they had some means of detonating this device prematurely, but the sheer power of the Dark Side within it was telling her that there was no place on Coruscant that would be safe even if they could do it. *IF this thing is here, that means it has more than enough power to reach the surface when it explodes. Which means we can't just run away either.* "Cro, have you found a way to the surface yet?"

"Yes, there's a lift here near that looks like the living quarters. Although where it comes out, we don't know yet," the Nova Guard officer answered. "I just sent the Mandalorians up it to look around."

The next twelve minutes passed very nervously for the three Jedi as they stared at the device, feeling whatever was going on within it continuing, almost as if a timer had been started and the compounds within were mixing now. And when they did, the device would go off.

The Mandalorians came back quickly and reported that the elevator went straight up to what looked like a private landing pad, hidden somewhere on one of the lower levels of Coruscant. There was another lift there, one that looked like it almost went sideways according to one of the Mandalorians who had forced open the doors despite the lift's box not being there at present. "It keeps going on a very mellow incline. It reminds me almost of a tramway rather than a lift," Dralshy'a answered.

"It doesn't matter. The landing pad will do. Tell me we were lucky enough to find a starship there?"

Kad shook his head. To his irritation, Kad had become the de facto leader of the Mandalorians after Janice had died, a role he was unsuited for, but not as unsuited as the others. "Sorry, but no. It looks as if there could've been as many as four Aethersprites in that area, or maybe two larger craft. But there's nothing there now."

"We'll never make it to the surface!" K'Kruhk announced, staring at the device. "We're going to need to figure something else out."

"I am open to suggestions," Shaak answered, somehow once more sounding calm despite the threat facing them. "But the only means I am seeing of making sure this thing doesn't hurt anyone is to either send it out into space or containment. As the first choice is out, we are left with the second choice, but that is going to be... problematic."

"Agreed," K'Kruhk answered. "Yet still we must try."

Shaak nodded, sighing faintly. If they didn't do this right, Shaak knew that bomb would kill her within seconds. The future with Ranma she had hoped to see, the children she hoped they might eventually have if the Force blessed them, the joy they would take in one another and the universe as they explored its beauty, all would be gone. *But this is part of what makes me a Jedi, my willingness to put myself in harm's way so that others are not harmed. I, I am sorry Ranma, but if this is my time to die, I will meet it clear-eyed and without fear.* "Ahsoka..."

"Don't even think about it!" Ahsoka growled, wagging a finger at her Master. "I am not going anywhere!"

Shaak stared at her, but seeing the raw intransigence in Ahsoka's face, nodded once more. "In that case, let us see if we can do this in the first place. This might be a task for Force Light you two."

Both K'Kruhk and Ahsoka could use Force Light to a certain degree. It was extremely draining for them, but Ahsoka had learned it back on Ossus and K'Kruhk had learned it on Wayland. The three Jedi moved to sit around the Thought Bomb in a triangle, her hands outstretched towards it.

"You all need to get out of here. If this thing goes off, I doubt you want to be at ground zero," Shaak warned, looking over at the rest of their team.

"We're not going anywhere without you Jetii. We are Mandalorians, we fear nothing, and we will accept this challenge head on," Fabian announced proudly.

Keala Kryze was much more honest about it. "Besides, even with our rocket packs it's doubtful we'd get out of the blast radius if that thing is powerful to reach the surface."

Ahsoka snorted at that, but then had to concentrate all of her willpower on the gestalt that Shaak began a moment later, connecting the three Jedi together, using their Force powers as one. Each Jedi began to glow with a white light, somehow purer looking than the silver light from the device, and a moment later Shaak's Force Light reached out for the others, each of their own doing the same. A pyramid of Force Light appeared around the device,.

Within the device the Dark Side roiled, hate, anger, fear, a need to control, a desire to kill, all of these emotions roiled within the pure Dark Side energy trapped within the explosive. The Dark Side powers had been transmuted somehow, becoming something entirely different, a kind of energy.

When the device went off the energy within crashing into the Force Light pyramid, Shaak could somehow sense the intent behind it. This energy would not harm anything constructed, but it would erase all living things within its boundaries. It would turn them into nothing, not even dust would remain as their very souls were shredded.

*But that isn't going to happen*, Shaak thought grimly as the Dark Side energies beat at her, the strength of it almost stunning her within that first few seconds of mental combat. For Ahsoka it was worse, and she nearly crumpled. Indeed, her part of the web would have shattered if not for her Master reaching out, taking up more of the web for her for a second. K'Kruhk also felt the strain, but he took it stoically, a fatalism coming upon him. He knew what he would be called to do, and K'Kruhk accepted his fate.

That pressure did not fade as the battle continued. It was not a living thing, rather it was like an explosion contained in the Force, powerful roiling, trying to escape its confines in every direction, held in place by the web of Force Light. The energy within had to be used up, that was the only way to defeat this bomb.

For several minutes, the three Jedi stood firm. But then, Ahsoka faltered having given of all her will and energy. And this time Shaak could not reach out to help. The younger Togrutan crumpled, and the Force field around the Thought Bomb started to fray almost instantly. The two older Jedi compensated quickly, but the damage had been done. The device was overpowering their defenses.

"We cannot contain it much longer!" Shaak growled out through gritted teeth.

K'Kruhk had come to the same conclusion, and scowled, before deciding on a somewhat rash, indeed suicidal, course of action. Instead of trying to contain the energies of the Dark Side turned into physical force, K'Kruhk opened his being to it, drawing that energy inside of him, the web of Force Light becoming a funnel, weakening the Dark Side energies and compelling them into his body even as his body continued to glow with Force Light itself.

Instantly Shaak felt what he was doing, and her eyes flicked open, in shock. "K'Kruhk, no!"

"It must be this way, my friend. Our present tactic is not working, we will all be overcome soon. Ergo we must change our tactics. If we cannot stop it from exploding, we must direct its energies elsewhere," K'Kruhk answered, his voice serene as he prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice.

Grimly, Shaak had to concede the point and she began to help K'Kruhk's efforts. "The Force be with you, my friend."

If this had been the Thought Bomb created by the original ritual, such a move would have been impossible. Indeed, even with Force Light their efforts to contain the Thought Bomb would have failed within seconds. No matter the strength of the Jedi in question, the Thought Bomb would have simply been too powerful to stop. But this Thought Bomb was a much smaller, much less powerful version and so it was possible if extremely difficult.

And as both Jedi had known, this technique came with a cost. As the battle continued, K’Kruhk's body started to fade. No physical being could contain that much of the Force united, Light and Dark, without his body being overcome. Slowly it happened, painfully, it happened, as K’Kruhk became one with the Force in slow motion, his corporeal body overwhelmed by the Force energies within.

How long this process took neither could tell, but eventually, K’Kruhk's body was almost entirely gone, along with his spirit, depleted into nothing almost like matter had met antimatter. And then it became Shaak's turn.

But in sacrificing himself first, K’Kruhk had severely weakened the Thought Bomb, and Shaak had developed a profound amount of her own Living Force energies while training with Ranma. As fast as the now heavily depleted Thought Bomb's energies entered her, Shaak’s body was able to heal itself, keeping Shaak Ti alive.

When the Thought Bomb's explosive energies dissipated, Shaak was still kneeling there. Her breathing was ragged, and Shaak’s skin looked as if it had been entirely drained of blood, turning her normally red shade into a very light pink, while the white markings on her looking equally dried out.

When the last of the silvery energy faded away from within the confines of the outer metallic structure of the Dark Side device, the Mandalorians and Nova Guard raced forward, several of them moving to lift Ahsoka off of the ground, while others moved to support Shaak, helping her to her feet and practically carrying her between them.

When she answered their frantic queries of whether or not she was all right, her voice was barely a whisper of its normal tone, and she looked as if she had aged several dozen years all at once. Indeed, Cro could feel Shaak’s bones through her skin as if all of her health had been drained away. *She feels as if she is so weak, I could break her across my knee.*

But even so, Shaak practically demanded that they stop by the robes that had been left behind, when K’Kruhk had passed on. A gesture had the two holding Shaak helping her down to her knees. Reaching forward, Shaak gently picked up K’Kruhk’s lightsaber, bringing it up to her forehead as she closed her eyes in memory. “Your sacrifice will be remembered, K’Kruhk,” she whispered, before resolutely attempting to stand to her feet, helped along by her two companions. “Come, let’s get out of here. The other Jedi can explore this Temple if they so wish. I need to see the sun above us once more.”

OOOOOO

Kit Fisto was still standing outside the communications center more than forty minutes after the initial attempt to reclaim it. Another squad of Senate security men and women lay unconscious or dead throughout the hallway, mostly in pieces rather than the whole bodies.



Fighting a Jedi in close range without something to counter his or her lightsabers was foolish in the extreme.

Still, Kit knew that by this point, Ranma might well have caught up with the Chancellor, and judging by what reports the communications center passed on to them, the fighting throughout the Senate District was dying down. The battle in orbit continued, but there was nothing about that issue Kit could do it present. "Concentrate on what is in front of you, concentrate on the here and now instead of the future," Kit murmured, reflecting that seemed to be part of the creed of those Jedi who like Shaak and Ranma, looked to the Living Force rather than the Unifying Force.

His musings on the subject however were interrupted as two people run across around the and the hallway towards him. One, a human male somewhere in his fifties or sixties, backpedaled rapidly. The other one a Umbaran female scowled and took several steps to close the gap between her and Kit.

"I do not know who you are, but as you bear a red lightsaber, I'm going to assume you're an enemy," Kit drawled, pulling his own lightsaber from his belt and activating it. "Surrender please. There is nothing more you can win here, no other goals to achieve but those of petty reactions to your being ousted in your position as Chancellor. Please, surrender, and perhaps eventually you can be pulled from the Dark Side."

For the first time ever giving that little speech or one of its many permutations Kit saw he might have found someone willing to actually go along with that idea. The man behind her seems to be much more amicable and had even gone so far as to hold his hands above his head. But the lightsaber wielder didn't reply, instead racing forward with a shout of fury.

Kit sighed and began to fight her, only his quick reflexes stopping him from taking a thrust to the chest as the woman slid from Djem So to Makashi. The dueling style, which incorporated many thrusts into its style, along with controlled movements and short sharp jabs or slices. And being in a hallway made Kit's own base lightsaber style, Shi Cho didn't really help here.

But in the end, he didn't need it. The woman wasn't very good with her lightsaber. It was almost as if she had been trained haphazardly, and even then, not often. In comparison to Kit, she was but an amateur for all her hatred and rage towards him. Eventually, Kit got through her defenses, cutting her legs out from under her just below the pelvis.

"ARGGGH!" the woman screamed as her upper body collapsed downwards but was astonishingly still alive. Whether or not she would stay that way was up in the air. Often times, the shock of losing a limb or in this case two, would be enough to literally shock someone to death.

With that taken care of, Kit looked across at Pestage, who stood there with his hands still up, shaking his head. "I wish to make a deal."

"And you would be?" Kit began, before whirling, his lightsaber coming up to deflect the ball not meant for him, but for the man he was talking to. Somehow, the woman he had just been fighting had enough wherewithal to reach out and grab up a fallen blaster, turning it on her companion. "T, t, traitor!"

Those were last words she spoke as Kit's lightsaber intersected the bolt of plasma, redirecting it right back at her. Her face disappeared under the impact of the plasma balls, and Kit turned back to the man, his lekku twitching in question. "You are saying something about surrendering?"

"Conditional on my life, I am willing to turn courts evidence," the man repeated still holding up his hands even as he stared over Kit's shoulders at the woman he had arrived with. "My name is Sate Pestage, I have been an aid and agent for Darth Sidious since well before he became Chancellor. You give me that, and I will give you far more than you can imagine."

When it came right down to it, Pestage might have been a believer in the idea of an empire and a single Emperor ruling the Republic. Yet he was also self-serving and cowardly to a degree. And now that the fire had started, this rat was more than willing to flee the barn before it went up.

It was well he had, because about twenty minutes after Pestage surrendered, the side of the building came apart. And it was only being near Kit Fisto that saved his life in the ensuing tumult.

**OOOOOO**

True to Sidious's internal prediction, his office's security detail could not stop Ranma for long. He had barely time to exit his office and race to a nearby segment of wall, opening a hidden panel there, when Ranma appeared at the far end of the hallway leading to his office. Two buttons opened a secret panel there and Sidious dove through.

Ranma skidded to a halt in front of where Sidious had disappeared, staring down into, "Another shaft, really?" Grumbling, Ranma hopped after the older man, noticing that this construct was far smaller, far thinner, and very much looked as if someone had added it in at some point recently. Thankfully, it wasn't all that long. Instead, it came out onto a level five levels down, abutting a walkway that led out into the open air.

As Ranma reached the walkway, she became aware of the distant screech of sirens still going off, and the chaos that was occurring elsewhere. Ranma only had to look around at a few of the other open-air walkways and she saw several security guards fighting it out with Jedi and civilians. Men and women were dying in several places, and Ranma wondered if somehow the

Senate Security had been so brainwashed, they could be conducting some kind of purge. But she couldn't concentrate on that, as Sidious was racing away, heading towards what looked like a landing pad in the distance.

Forcing more of her ki into her legs, Ranma raced after him, as Sidious ran into a problem not anticipated. Other people were using this walkway and saw him coming. And whatever respect for his position and authority there might've been before was gone now, sapped away from the recordings still playing from the Senate Hall, providing background noise to the disaster therein. "There he is the traitor! Get him!"

Two idiots actually tried to bar his way, but Sidious cut them down with a single swipe, causing the rest of the crowd to run away screaming. But ahead of him, several of the ships he had hoped to commandeer for his escape to the Confederacy fleet lifted off. One of them was so close that the backblast of its repulsors activating nearly blew Sidious off of his feet, halting his forward momentum.

He turned at bay as Ranma reached him, grinning cheerily at Sidious, only the darkness in her eyes giving away her cold wrath. "So sorry, Sheevy, but there's not going to be any escape for you today!"

Staring at the redhead across from him Sidious roared with fury. "You! It has always been you! Since you first appeared, my plans, the Great Plan, you have ruined everything!"

Bringing around his lightsaber, he launched a series of cuts and slashes one after another, pushing Ranma back, despite the fact that she was now using the Living Force to heighten her speed. For as angry as he got, Sidious connection to the Dark Side swelled within him, pushing him harder and faster than nearly any Jedi could have gone.

Perhaps Shaak could have matched his skill, his speed. Perhaps Yoda could have matched his agility. Perhaps Master Windu could have fought him through the use of Vaapad. But that was all, and perhaps only Windu could have won. Even Dooku would have been overcome by the sheer ferocity and speed Sidious possessed, to say nothing of the attacks through the Force which lashed out in a series of Grabs, Crushes and pushes.

But now Ranma was anticipating those, pulsing out her own Living Force to disrupt anything that came near her, even as she began to move into a spiral. "Oh, I'm sorry if I kicked over your sandcastle, Sheevy. Maybe ya should have learned not to play at war with the lives of real people?"

"Enough with that name, blast you! I am Darth Sidious! I **am** the Dark Side!"

"Getting so angry at my name-calling of all things?" Ranma said gritting her teeth as she barely blocked a strike from Sidious, before breaking out of a Force Crush that would have

shattered her ribs with a pulse of Living Force. "Were you bullied by a girl when you were a kid?"

Sensing something coming towards her, Ranma ducked, forced to give up her spiral as she rolled forward. It was well she had, because one of the nearby ships with which hadn't taken off had suddenly lost one of its landing struts, torn off with a Force Crush and hurled at him like a spear.

In reply, Ranma lashed out with one of her own attacks, blue cerulean sphere of energy flashing towards Sidious, who batted it aside with his lightsaber, then gestured to the ground underneath. The panels of the walkway flew upwards, hurling themselves at Ranma from all around, forcing her to whirl and lash out with her own technique again. Yami-Sen-ken vorpal blades sliced into everything around him and Ranma laughed. "So close, Sheevy, you really can't play well with others, can you?"

With that, Ranma dove through one of the openings this created, disappearing under the Quiet Thief technique. She hoped that the amount of debris sent her way would obscure Ranma from Sidious's sight for a second.

When Ranma closed, Sidious turned, easily able to detect Ranma now that he knew Ranma was there. "You think hiding yourself from my simple sight is enough, whelp!?"

Sidious battered aside the redhead's attacks, returning one with his lightsaber, nearly taking Ranma's head off, causing a large gash through Ranma's shoulder down to her stomach, the heat of Sidious's blade overcoming Ranma's durability to a certain degree once more.

But as the redhead fell back, her wound healed. "Ghh, gonna have to do better than that old man. I understand there's surgery for that kind of thing."

Ranma's light Pike came up in a strike that took Sidious in the side. A Moko Takabisha to the face followed, causing Sidious to fall back with a cry although the blow did more damage to his eyes and open mouth than it did to his actual face.

Blinded for the moment, Sidious was forced to rely entirely on the Force. But that was no detriment to him. Much like Jedi, Sith trained in total sensory deprivation force their apprentices to reach out and use the Force. "I can feel you, you bastard!"

"Oh hell no, get your dirty mental hands off me asshole. Jeez, Sheevy, what would people think if they knew how dirty ya were," Ranma quipped.

With a bestial roar, Sidious crashed his lightsaber into Ranma's.

Again, the two of them began to fight one another in close combat, with Sidious pressing Ranma, or so it seemed. Instead, Ranma was once more moving into a spiral. *I can't*

*quite overcome the strength or speed advantage here, which means trickery.* As if to test that theory Ranma lashed out with a near point-blank Yama-Sen-Ken, but Sidious dodged through them somehow, lashing out with his lightsaber at the same time forcing Ranma to duck under the strike that would have taken her in the side of the head. The next few strikes came even faster, but Ranma was still moving through the spiral.

But just as he was about to finish the spiral, Sidious stopped, then backed away, lashing out with his lightsaber down and into Ranma's foot, causing Ranma to leap upward. In midair, she was pushed hard by a Force Push which sent her careening over the side of the walkway. "Did you think me a fool! I could sense your plan through the Dark Side! You are nothing to the power of the Force!"

A grapnel rope from his ki space bit into the side of the walkway, and Ranma flew through the air underneath the walkway. Coming up over the other side she came back into the attack, forcing Sidious to turn away once more from one of the last few starships on the landing pad. *Time to use another trick then.*

Sidious turned, his lightsaber sizzling out only to strike a portion of Ranma's light pike. To his shock, the plasma blade disrupted on impact, Ranma having turned his plight pike so that the secret cortosis segment could take the strike. In reply Ranma's own plasma blade stabbed his throat, hitting thousands of times in an eyeblink as Ranma shouted out "Amaguriken Enhanced!"

But Sidious was able to move himself almost as fast as Ranma's ki-assisted move could, and while the heat of the strike still spread through his neck and upper body, there wasn't enough to allow any of them to penetrate, although the desperate need to do so kept Sidious from using further Force powers. His own lightsaber reactivated after a second, and he attacked furiously once more.

Back and forth, up and over, around and down the two of them fought. Once more, Sidious reached out with the Dark Side, grabbing at anything he could hurling it at Ranma, trying to create a break to make for the ships. But Ranma knew that Sidious was still trying to escape.

Between one moment and the next, she lashed out with another series of a vorpal blade attacks. Not towards Sidious this time, as Sidious thought, hurling himself to the side through these strikes. Instead, those attacks were aimed at the ships behind where Sidious had been standing. All four of the remaining starships, too small freighters, one large freighter and one personalized yacht, were nearly sliced into pieces, which promptly began to explode as power couplings were violently severed.

"So sorry, Palpy, but I can't let you just leave the dance floor yet," Ranma snarled, before bringing up her light pike to block a torrent of Sith Lightning as Sidious screamed in fury.

Ranma staggered back at the impact of the lightning striking her light pike, but tried to redirect it back at Sidious, who shifted position as he moved around Ranma, keeping away from the redirected lightning, howling his wrath at the Chaotic Locus as all thought of fleeing left him. Now all that existed was to slay this one, this one being who had brought down his plans. "Always, always getting in the way of my plans, you, you little freak!"

"Yeah, it's like I don't like you or something," Ranma shouted over the sounds of the lightning hitting her light pike. "Ya can't complain like a little bitch when the side ya picked a fight with kicks your ass!"

With a snarl of fury, Sidious reached upwards with one hand, while his other hand kept the torrent of Sith Lightning arcing towards Ranma. Through the Force he reached out and grabbed at one of the nearby hab-spires, tearing at everything he could away from its façade. Ferrocete chunks the size of cars were pulled away and hurled down towards the two combatants, as Sidious continued to bellow the depth of his hate into Ranma's face.

Roaring in turn, Ranma reached deep into herself, pulling not only at her own Living Force, but the connection to the Force as the whole. With it empowering her, Ranma leaped upward suddenly, pulling out of range of Sidious's lightning, as she hammered the bits and pieces of ferrocete away with foot and fist, cut into them with her light pike, and redirected them down towards Sidious.

Sidious leaped, and for a moment, Ranma could not believe it. *Seriously!?*

"Hahaha, mistakes have been made!" Gleefully Ranma kicked off of one of the bits of falling masonry, and within a few seconds was attacking Sidious, bouncing around Sidious in midair, using the momentum of every parried strike, every blow attack or bit of redirected rubble to remain in the air above Sidious, moving around Sidious so randomly Sidious could no longer keep up with her with his Force Grabs or other moves.

Ranma's mastery of the Anything Goes Aerial Style gave her insight into fighting in midair no amount of Force Precognition or strength in the Force could give Sidious now with the Force in such disarray. Despite having studied Ataru, he had not made it his principal style, and even if he had, Sidious would never have been prepared to fight someone like Ranma in midair. Yoda himself, who had brought Ataru up to a level that was truly incredible to see would never have been able to fight Ranma in midair. The gender-changing martial artist was simply too fast, too wild and too quick to change his position.

Light pike strikes, punches and kicks finely started to get through Sidious's defense, and one particularly hard kick connect crashed into his knee, getting through his toughness training and breaking it, causing Sidious to howl in agony as he fell back to earth, pursued all the while by Ranma, despite Sidious's increasingly wild defense and Sith Lightning. The Sith Lightning was redirected to him at one point, although he cut off the technique too quickly for it to do much damage.

Still, it had heated up his body to a tremendous degree, and Sidious knew the danger of that.

On the ground once more, Sidious blocked out the agony of his battered knee with the Force, landing solidly on both feet and attacking once more with Sith Lightning. But Ranma redirected it again upward, even as his other hand flashed forward, launching another Moko Takabisha attack. Sidious rolled away, ending his own Sith Lightning assault, and Ranma was on him again.

When the fact his knee no longer worked properly caught up to Sidious, still more light pike strikes hit Sidious's upper chest and neck at enhanced Amaguriken speeds. Sidious could simply no longer keep up. His lightsaber was moving at a speed that only the best lightsaber duelists could have anticipated, and even they would never have seen the strikes coming physically, and the Dark Side was pressing out so hard that Ranma's mind should have shattered under his hatred, to say nothing of his Force techniques. But Ranma was now moving much faster thanks to Sidious's knee and pulsing out ki every few seconds, disrupting Sidious's Force attacks.

And even now, Ranma's taunts pricked Sidious.

"How's it feel knowing that everything you've done is crashing down around your ears?"

"Ooh, ya almost got me there, if I stayed put like a dummy ya coulda had me."

"Is that a vein pulsing in your forehead? Ooh, ya havin' a stroke? Sucks to be you, Sidious. Maybe if ya think ya happy thoughts ya can push through it?"

"Come on, man, are you even trying any longer? I swear my padawan could give me more of a fight."

No longer could his fury fuel his Sith powers, instead, his wrath turned inward, pushing Sidious further into becoming the same berserk, uncontrolled Sith warrior he had long derided. No longer could he even respond with words all that came out of his mouth was a roar.

And finally, finally one of his strikes got through cleanly. With Sidious's body heated up to the point where the toughness training was no longer a help, Ranma's strike chopped Sidious's arm off right below the shoulder. And then Ranma was turning his light pike's plasma blade dissipating from one end as the other side activated, stabbing forward. The seared flesh of her earlier strike parted once more as the plasma blade ran Sidious through right across the chest.

Sidious screamed, but even as could no longer concentrate on the Dark Side enough through his pain in order to direct it. His heart was pierced, killing him instantly.

But Ranma had no time to recover or gloat, if such a thing had would even have occurred to her.

Because as Sidious died, so too did his control of the accumulated power of the Dark Side explode out from him, racing to find another. Here at the epicenter of that, the power came into the physical plane as if it was an explosive front of frothing darkness, radiating out from Sidious at the moment of his death with enough force to rock the entire planet.

The impact sent Ranma flying as if she'd been struck by the best hook to the chin of a Titan hurling her away, crushing her bones and nearly stopping her heart from the agony. It shattering the walkway and the landing pad, pulping much of it into dust, sending the rest down to crash into the next level far below, which was equally harmed by the pulse as were the hab-spires around them to either side and behind.

The pain of that blow was too much even for Ranma, and unconsciousness claimed her even as she fell through the air along with the rest of the flotsam...

**OOOOOO**

Above Coruscant the battle continued, with the Lucrehulks' sheer bulk and shielding paired against the greater offensive firepower and growing numbers advantage of the Republic, as small local defense flotillas jumped in, rushing to join the fight. Each in turn was touched by Yoda and Mace's Battle Meditation and incorporated into Thrawn's command, with Aayla handling the communications for the first few minutes before Thrawn took over.

Numerous small ships exploded on all sides, and twenty minutes after their arrival, Tyrannus began to once more control his fleet directly. Thrawn noticed this shift in the overall battle at once and countered, dispersing his own units further, giving his commanders a little more leeway in where they could strike. This tactic caused a little more confusion in the enemy ranks even as the enemy's own organization began to ebb away again in turn.

But Tyrannus kept his battleships together, as more of his defenders were knocked out of the fight, destroyed or either retreating entirely away from the battle. Or occasionally shifting around it, entering orbit elsewhere under the friendly envelope of the remaining battlestations.

The battle however, shifted a third time around an hour after Tyrannus had begun to once more assumed command of the whole Confederacy fleet. Because that, was when Sidious died at Ranma's hands...

Tyrannus felt it the moment his Master died, the extremely loose bond between them as Master and apprentice snapping. But that was not all that he felt. For as Sidious passed, Sidious's place as the central figure in the Dark Side, the one who had been controlling the Veil



and had been taking in the Dark Side energies throughout the galaxy as they were created throughout the war and before also shifted. All of that energy rushed into Master Tyrannus.

The Weequay's eyes widened, and his head rocked back, gripping his chair with hands that had suddenly become like claws, his mind and body pummeled by the energies of the Dark Side entering him. His eyes turned yellow, then back to normal, then back to yellow again while his body shivered in place, his muscles spasming, his skin almost aflame.

If it had been just the emotions of the Dark Side hammering into Tyrannus with ever increasing force, perhaps the former Jedi Master Bulq would have been able to beat them off. But the raw power that Sidious had gathered into himself from the Dark Side for decades was too much for anyone Jedi or Sith to handle without preparation.

As the Dark Side flooded his system, Tyrannus was gripped by visions, the visions fracturing his mind like so many vibro-knives hurled at a watermelon. A planet far away, deep into the core of the galaxy, covered by the Dark Side. A Dark Side that was somehow... alive... and looking back out of the core of the galaxy, hatred for all life in its very being. Even Tyrannus, a trained Sith used to the power of the Dark Side, was terrified of that vision, grateful beyond words for the beings who had caged it there in the center of the galaxy.

Another planet, this one large and full of life, but gripped in some kind of crystal, its location out in Wild Space. There, another being of Dark Side energies resided. Next to a creature of such Light Side energies that Tyrannus was repulsed by the image despite being at the same time entranced by it. And, beyond that, a darkness.

These and more images buffeted Tyrannus's mind. Images of the war from one side of the galaxy to the other. Images of places where the Dark Side simply disappeared, sucked away in the maelstrom caused by Sidious's death and the slow eroding of the Great Plan before that. Never again would any Sith be able to create something like the veil of the Dark Side, its tethers snapping as the last remnants of it gave way. But the power the Veil had gathered was still there.

Images also slammed into his mind of what was going on Coruscant far below him, his Master's killer, the same Chaotic Locus that had caused them so much trouble since first appearing on the scene turning and grabbing his Master's foot dragging his body unceremoniously off of the roof and down into the Senate District. A vast construct of Dark Side energies held back by two Jedi and a padawan, whose destruction would have annihilated the Senate District directly above them along with the temple.

Tyrannus was almost tempted to reach out and do something about that, to funnel the Dark Side energies roiling within him into the bomb. But he lacked such fine control right now and even in the throes of his agony, Tyrannus knew that if he did so, the bomb would indeed go off, but with enough power to vaporize him and off everyone alive within his fleet in orbit along with those on the planet below. But that idea gave Tyrannus an outlet.

With a cry, Tyrannus brought his hands forward, and around him the officers and servicemen of his flagship saw his hands gleaming black for a moment, the black crackling around his hands like a living thing.

With his gesture, the Dark Side powers manifested outside of the ship, reaching forward. Sensor's specialists all around the battlefield watched in horror as some kind of energy, their gear could barely get a read on, was suddenly released like a targeted supernova. The attack buffeted ships aside, smashing capital ships one into the other like they were so many marbles. Dreadnaught or starfighter, it didn't matter, all were chaff in the wind.

The same burst of energy crushed several of the defensive installations outside the battle zone, into scattered bits and hurling the ships that had retreated among the defenders down into the planetary shield where many of them died in turn. The planetary shield cut out, even Coruscant's planetary electrical grid overcome by the battle previously and the dozens of physical impacts. Coruscant itself lost power, many of its generators exploding as they were overcome.

The Jedi fleet also found itself flung backwards, torn away from the Confederacy ships, some of them struck so hard that they crumpled like a tin can hit by a massive fist. Yoda and Mace had felt it coming, and they and the other Jedi aboard the fleet tried to form a gestalt, tried to ward off the corrupted power of the Dark Side but they were too late and the two Masters could not stop that blast of Dark Side energies. Instead, both of them collapsed, Mace's eyes rolling back in his head as Yoda slumped forward, barely able to keep himself conscious and that not for long.

But even as he started to regain control of himself, Tyrannus knew he had to retreat. Sidious was dead, and among the images the Dark Side shown him was another series of relief fleets coming in from other planets. Combined with the survivors of the Jedi-led fleet, they would have enough ships to overwhelm his ships, many of whom had also been caught up in the relief of Dark Side energies. While only a dozen Lucrehulks, two of his horded battleships and three of the Munificent's had been destroyed outright, the rest were badly battered. And the energy he had released was gone, the Veil was gone, and thus no way to build that level of power existed any longer.

"Tyrannus to all ships. Retreat, full retreat out of the gravity well. This battle is lost," he ground out between clenched teeth, so hard he was drawing blood. The pain allowed him to focus more, controlling the Dark Side energies within him.

Yet he could not deny that with said Sidious gone, the Great Plan was in ruins. The Confederacy could not defeat the Republic. They could shatter it, slaughter planets as they had done to Kuat, wage a war worse than the New Sith Wars, but at the same time, with Sidious dead, Tyrannus knew that the Confederacy would also splinter. Even its military would not march in lock step without the numerous hidden strings Sidious had been controlling. To say

nothing of the impact of Sidious being slain and the news of his being a Sith Lord spreading. Many of the Confederacy's Congress would feel betrayed, enraged at the Sith as a whole.

*But the Dark Side has given me a vision of what could be possible. That Dark Side entity, the one caged in the crystal box. If I can free it... then perhaps together we will be strong enough to once more cut the Jedi away from the Force as the Veil had done before the Locus appeared. With him, myself and Diabolus, my remaining Acolytes and I can browbeat the Confederacy into staying together. If we can, we can still win this war the old-fashioned way...*

**OOOOOOO**

From where he had been flung out of his seat and only to be saved from smashing his head into the bulkhead with bone cracking force by Aayla's quick reaction time, Thrawn watched the enemy fleet retreat, shaking his head faintly. "The Force... I had not calculated on something off the scale occurring. I take it that was unusual?"

Aayla laughed somewhat manically, shaking her head so much that her lekku flew this way and that as she helped Thrawn back to his seat, wincing all the while from where she had hammered her own thigh into a console as she tried to save him from having his neck broken. "You might say that. Force, I've never ever felt anything so powerful as that! Not even the strongest twenty Jedi working together could do something like that. Maybe push a fleet away from the planet sure, but crush ships, tossed them aside like toys? Never.

Yoda's voice croaked out from where he and Mace were lying insensate on the ground. "Palpatine, that is. Mantle of the Dark Side, passed to Tyrannus hands. This war, over it is not..." He intoned, for slumping into unconsciousness.

**OOOOOOO**

When he came to, Ranma found himself lying on a hospital bed, and the somewhat welcome voice of Yoda nearby. "Awake already, are you? Your healing ability, incredible it is. Only needed to pump you with enough nutrients we did, your healing did the rest."

"Yeah," Ranma rasped. "My ki healing is the first trick I learned, and I've had a long time to perfect it since." Yet despite that, Ranma knew he had been hurt. The Dark Side energies which had exploded out from Sidious had basically pulped his entire body, and it was only thanks to his toughness training that he hadn't died. "I'm not going to ask how badly I was hurt. Just how long was I out?"

"Hrhrhrhm, unconscious for three days you have been. Much you have missed."

"I don't doubt that." Ranma fell silent for a moment, feeling out his body with his mind, noting how weak he was, his reserves of life energy having been drained badly during the battle with Sidious and then healing him up afterwards. With that in mind, he made no move to get

up, instead turning his head to the side and opening his eyes to look at where Yoda's voice came from. The diminutive Grand Master of the Jedi order sat on a nearby table, his stick across his legs as he sat in a meditation pose. "Where's Shaak?"

"Lying on your other side she is. In a worse way she is." Yoda slowly shook his head, gesturing over Ranma's head with one of his hands. "Went through her own ordeal she did, above and beyond assaulting the Sith temple. Found a Thought Bomb she and the others had. Hrrhrhm thankfully, a weak one it was."

When Ranma gave him a look of confusion, the ancient Grand Master went on to explain what a Thought Bomb was, causing Ranma's eyes to widen in shock at the amount of destructive potential such a thing had. If a single Sith could empower a device like that which could destroy an entire Coruscant district and then some, the power of several dozen Darths and their acolytes, as Yoda explained performed the Thought Bomb ritual during the New Sith Wars, was horrifying to contemplate. "But they all survived?"

"K'Kruhk, gave the ultimate sacrifice he did," Yoda said, shaking his head from side to side. "Nearly paid it as well, Ti did. Would undoubtedly have done so, if growing she had stopped since meeting you."

Ranma turned his head slowly to look over at Shaak, and frowned at how frail she looked, how washed out she seemed, like Shaak was a shirt that had been bleached white, save for some of the previously white marks which looked almost bruised black. "I'll help her with healing up as soon as I am able," he promised himself aloud, before reluctantly turning his head back the other way. "You said I've missed a lot. Anything important to me, Shaak or our crew?"

Snorting in good humor, Yoda answered that there probably wasn't much specifically. Ranma after all wouldn't care about the fact that Fay and a group of six senators chosen at random from the Senate were now in command of the Republic at the moment as Fay led a referendum on the Chancellor's office, powers and how they were elected. Beyond that Mace, Rancisis and others were currently working with Pestage to discover all the hidden strings that the former Chancellor had been pulling from the shadows.

There had been no official response from the Confederacy's Separatist Council to the events here on Coruscant either. But it looked as if news had reached them as well, and there were both rumblings of discontent coming out of Confederacy space and demands to change their overall strategy. There was even talk about making certain no attacks like the one on Kuat happened again, which Yoda was pleased to hear, and growing cries for peace talks from both sides.

"Sharing everything we are discovering with the public we are. The Senate District, on lockdown it is. Cleared of all wrongdoing and allegiance to the Sith every senator must be. Removed twenty-nine already we have from their positions. Far, far more aides, implicated

they have been. In good hands the Senate is currently. Clean up the Senate Fay will, if it is possible at all."

"Really, I didn't think Fay would actually like being here. Doesn't she prefer to work on the planetary scale or smaller when it comes to working with governments?" Ranma asked.

"Yes. Hrrhrhm, a choice she did not have. Sent here by the Force she was. This task, Fay's it is."

Ranma nodded, and the two of them fell silent for a moment, before Ranma asked, "Soo... what now? By that I mean, what now for me and the crew of the Wild Blade? And did someone go back to Wayland to get our ship?"

"Hrrhrhm, Knight Fisto, young padawans Anakin, Ahsoka and Talli, back to Wayland they went for your ship." Yoda fell silent then, his ears twitching occasionally as he thought. "War, not over it is. But talks, begun they have. Certain factions on the Confederacy side, realized duped they have been. Yet Tyrannus the type to give up, he is not. The temperament to hide and rebuild, let someone else in the future try again, Tyranus also does not possess. Not seen for several days his ship has been. Where he went, only the vaguest ideas do we have. When ready, after him we would like you to go. Alone you would not be. Other fleets, headhunting they will be as well."

"But given our track record, you think Shaak me and the rest will have a better chance of finding him," Ranma mused, the question coming out rather more certain than that.

"Jedi Master Ood Bnar, arriving here shortly he will be. Taking over the position of Grand Master he will be. Stepping down I am. Joining this mission, I will be," Yoda said, causing Ranma to grumble a bit about not being asked whether or not they wanted him around, which Yoda responded to by poking Ranma in the leg with his stick. "Quibble you will not. Together, hunt down Tyranus we will. Defeat Tyranus, lacking a central figure of authority the Confederacy will be. Fracture they will continue to become."

Ranma nodded, then looked over at Shaak and then back to Yoda before he spoke, his voice coming out almost brusque and somewhat annoyed. "Fine. But after that, we're done right? You're not going to start sending us out on missions every time I turn around, right? I know Shaak is a Jedi, but we've been on constant combat missions for months. We need a real break, not just a pause between the violence."

Yoda merely nodded to Ranma's near demand, and Ranma looked back at Shaak once more. "In that case, you better start bringing me some more food. The sooner I'm up to normal, the sooner I can get Shaak on her feet and we can finally end this."

**End Chapter**

Well here you have it folks. I hope you all enjoyed this. I know it isn't as serious as my other work in this genre is, but I like to think that Sidious had just reached the edge of his tether, and Ranma being there at all was the equivalent of him sawing through the frayed rope with a dagger.