

I am not named Disney, Lucas or Takahashi.

Hello everybody! As you can see *Horse for the Force* won the large story poll for the first time in a while. Hope you all are staying well, warm (or cool depending) and safe in these odd times we live in now. FILFy will be out tomorrow, once I get it back from the beta-reader.

This has been edited by Hiryo and I via Grammarly. Which, of course, means there will be mistakes, but hopefully not enough to detract from your enjoyment of the chapter.

Chapter 25: Ranma-Style Peacekeeping/Subtlety

Master Fay opened her eyes as Aayla gently shook her to look up at the younger girl's face. *Then again*, Master Fay reflected with someone rueful amusement *that doesn't exactly narrow it down much*. The only Jedi who was a contemporary of Master Fay was Master Yoda. And yet, for whatever reason, the Fae had not aged a day since becoming a Jedi Master. Fay often wondered why the Force had apparently come to love her so much that it gifted her with this mixed curse and blessing. But most of the time, Fay simply thanked the Force for the time it gave her, in which to do more good work for the Force itself and the people of this galaxy.

"I take it we have arrived, Aayla," Fay said aloud, turning her thoughts away from the ruminations of the Force and its place in her heart to look at the young Jedi Knight.

"We are at the coordinates you gave me, Master Fay. And you were right. There is a planet here. I took the liberty of doing a complete scan before waking you up."

"I wasn't asleep, but thank you anyway," Fay chuckled, holding out a hand and allowing Aayla to pull her to her feet from where she had been meditating on her bunk. Master Fay couldn't remember a time when she had actually slept, as other people would understand the term. She meditated and drew strength from the Force, but sleep, dream? Let her mind shut down entirely? No.

"And what does the planet look like?" Fay inquired as she moved after Aayla towards her yacht's cockpit, once more shaking loose of her thoughts.

Aayla shrugged her shoulders. "Small, only about half the size of Coruscant." The capital planet was used as the measuring stick for all other planets, although few sentients remembered that the planet had grown as the ecumenopolis built upon itself. "It's highly livable, dead center of the life zone of the yellow star it is orbiting. Jungles, for the most part,

with a lot of water. It almost reminds me of the jungle moon, Yavin 4. No sign of civilization. But I have found signs of space-going visitors.

When Fay indicated she should continue, Aayla explained. "I've found signs of drop-off points, a few attempts at making shelter. Master Fay, this looks almost as if someone was well marooned here," Aayla said with a shrug. "The number of drop-offs, the food containers and everything else, but no visible sign of habitation or attempts to clear land? One person or a small group of people, maybe. Beyond that, I sense..."

Aayla paused, frowning. "There is something here. Someone maybe, I, I can't explain it. Unless he or she was a Jedi of extreme strength and not hiding his presence in the Force, I shouldn't be able to sense anything from orbit. But here, I do, if not in the same way I would a Force-sensitive. I... I sense potential, maybe?"

Master Fay nodded, touching the girl's cheek and smiling before turning back to stare at the image of the planet on the main screen. "Well done. That matches with what I am here to find. And you will find it is one person. We will find him... there," Fay announced, tapping a place on the image of the planet in front of him.

Aayla nodded, moving over to the pilot's seat and flying the yacht with the deft touch of a skilled pilot forward into the atmosphere, which Master Fay knew she was not. Indeed, Fay wasn't very good at all with electronics beyond simple communication devices and other things of that nature. Cooking, too, was something she only did haphazardly, and Fay had found herself thankful for the Force bringing her Kit and Aayla one after another. Kit couldn't cook, but he had been a good pilot.

Moments later, they touched down with a lightness that Master Fay appreciated, congratulating Aayla on it. "I know my yacht can be somewhat finicky when landing on a planetary surface."

Aayla, however, shook her head, the Twi'lek's face shifting into one of mild rebuke, "Master Fay, I didn't set us down lightly like that just because I wanted to. I set us down lightly because I'm afraid our landing pads are going to fall off. The hydraulics on them are shot to..." she paused, reforming what she was about to say. For some reason, she just could not curse in front of Fay. "They are in very bad shape," she said instead. "Something that you or Kit should've noticed."

"I believe Kit did say something about that, yes. Something the high moisture content of Jabiiim." Fay shrugged. "I had not thought it important."

Aayla rolled her eyes but then smiled faintly. For some reason, the fact that Fay was so absent-minded in a way made her feel better. The other woman was so, so beyond anything that most Jedi could achieve in what she could perceive and do with the Force, that to know she had a blind spot like this made her more personable, just like her inability to cook. "I'll fix it

if we're on this planet for long enough. We've got the parts in storage, so it should be easy enough, if somewhat time-consuming. I've only got one set of hands, after all."

"Thank you, but for now, could you perhaps prepare a meal? One compatible with any normal biology? And prepare a set of chairs and a table," Fay instructed. When Aayla looked at her, the elven Master chuckled. "We are here to talk, my dear. So we need to prepare the proper setting to do so."

Soon the preparations were finished, and the two women exited the ship. Master Fay looked around, nodding her head. Aayla had put them down directly where she had asked her to. This was a long way away from the nearest drop-off points, where a small waterfall became a pool of water, the yacht barely fitting in the open area around the pool. Fay could see footprints on the ground and see where several trees had been hacked down by crude tools to create a few walls deeper into the jungle.

She turned away from them, staring out into the forest, cocking her eyebrow and projecting her voice outward. "Do you think you could come out, please? We are merely here to talk. We are not here for violence."

In reply, a voice rumbled from the foliage, its owner so well-hidden that Aayla had trouble finding him even with the Force, although thankfully, his words could still be translated thanks to the Force by both women. "Interesting. I had not anticipated such a visit. Yet by the fact that you have discovered me hiding so easily, I must assume that you are Force users. Yet, I don't believe that either of you are among those I was expecting to arrive eventually. Certainly, you do not represent my people, our enemies or... others."

"You mean the Sith?" Aayla asked, the answer coming to her in a flash of Force Precognition, but she stayed her hand from reaching for her lightsaber. That did not mean that the man himself was a Sith after all. Indeed, his calm, almost amused manner seemed to indicate otherwise.

"He called himself a Sith Lord, yes. I had anticipated his interest in myself, but it appears as if you stole a march on him." The voice paused, then asked, "Did that translate?"

"It did. Force Translation is among the most useful techniques we Jedi have, and it would seem so," Master Fay said with a smile, then gestured, and several chairs floated out of the ship to land near the table Aayla had set out. "Would you please come out to talk with us now? I much prefer to speak face-to-face with the individual I am conversing with."

"I believe that Jedi understand honor, so if you two will give me your word that you mean no harm to me and that you will not use your Force powers on me, perhaps I will."

Fay paused, then shook her head. "My companion and I will promise the first instantly. As for the second, I am afraid we cannot promise that since we have already been doing so to

translate your words into Common in our minds. I will promise that we will not do anything more without your permission.”

The voice took a moment to respond, and when it did, it gave the impression that Fay had passed some kind of test. “I see. But you will promise not to use your Force powers to influence me?”

“That I will promise,” Fay answered.

“And your companion?”

“I mean no harm to use so long as you mean no harm to us,” Aayla answered instantly. “However, I will act to defend myself and master Fay if I must. But I will promise not to use the Force to influence your mind, only to translate your words and sense aggressive intent. You have my oath as a Jedi Knight on it.”

The voice chuckled. “Pragmatic. Excellent. I do also give my word that I will neither attack nor attempt to place you in a position to be harmed.”

When the voice ended, the man speaking walked out of the foliage, setting aside a spear, a bow and arrow and a long, serrated dagger of some kind of gray metal. But Aayla could barely bring herself to care about the weapons. She was studying the man.

He was a blue-skinned alien with eyes of an almost disturbing red. His build was strong but thin, toughened by his life on this planet, but Aayla sensed he was already in shape when he arrived, the shape of a soldier judging by the number of weapons and the way he watched the two Jedi. He currently had dark black hair falling to his shoulders in a shaggy wave, along with thin lips and some stubble. Yet for all that he looked the part of a marooned spacer, Aayla could see an almost frightening level of intelligence and self-control in that face.

“Excellent. Before we go any further, I believe introductions are in order. I am Master Fay, and this is Aayla Secura, Jedi Knight. And you are?”

“So, to what do I owe the pleasure, Madams Jedi?” the man asked, nodding his head to the two alien women.

As he did, Aayla felt as if the man was sizing her up, almost staring through her like a Jedi could. Not quite to that level, but close. *Intelligent like I thought, very much so.*

“I rather think that will be answered by your own response to my questions.” Fay gestured to the man to sit across from her at the table, waiting until he stood beside the table before going on. “You see, I am here chasing a Force Vision.”

The man's eyes narrowed, but that was the only sign of interest or concern. "Indeed. And what manner of Force Vision would bring you to this desolate backwater in the Outer Rim?"

"I have been in the Outer rim for hundreds of years. Yet I could ask what brought you to this 'desolate backwater' as you put it," Fay reposted, one eyebrow rising. And could you answer my first question? What is your name?"

The man looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, then quickly sat down, and if Aayla hadn't been watching him closely with her Force senses, she might've been surprised by how quickly and how decisively he moved once he made the decision to fully trust them.

"My name is Mitth'raw'nuruodo," he said at last. "I believe that you outlanders would shorten that name to Thrawn."

Fay smiled but then politely used the full name, the word rolling off her tongue easily, and from the shock on the man's face, he knew that she hadn't used the Force to make him hear his name like that, having watched her lips as she spoke. "When you get to be nine-hundred years old, learning new languages come easy. Yet, while I have traveled the galaxy for much of that time, and I have only met two or perhaps three Chiss."

Thrawn didn't react as he should have to the idea that Fay, who barely looked middle-aged if that, had been around for so long. He simply narrowed his eyes and stated, "The fact that you have met so many is a miracle. My people are very insular and do not travel far from home. Indeed, to do so is a taboo."

"And yet you already know about Jedi? How curious," Aayla remarked from where she was standing nearby, alternating her attention from the man and to a distant predator of some sort whose mind she could sense out there somewhere.

Thrawn sighed. "Why are you here? I do like word games, Jedi, but such does not seem in character for you."

"I am here to meet and talk to you, I believe," Master Fay announced simply, instead of asking why Thrawn thought he had an idea of her character already.

"I have met Jedi before, even had discourse with them. It did not end pleasantly," Thrawn retorted, looking away. "Although," he gestured at the food they had given him and the setup that Master Fay had made. "This goes to some lengths to offset that first impression."

"Thank you. Yet that first impression... the Outbound Flight Project, I presume?"

"Are you reading my mind, Jedi?" Thrawn asked coldly, "Have you already broken your word?"

“No, though I do not hold your concern against you,” Master Fay shook her head. “I tend not to do that unless I have to in the investigation of a crime or to discern guilt when speaking to a suspect. It was simply the most logical conclusion as I knew the project was supposed to be sent out in this direction.”

“And what do you sense from me when I think of the Outbound Flight Project, and what I had to do?” Thrawn cocked his head curiously.

With permission given, Fay looked over at Aayla, who nodded, using her Force-given empathy for a brief second before speaking. “You feel no guilt about what happened with the Outbound Flight Project. I sense a grim sense of duty achieved, and for some reason, a danger averted.”

Thrawn nodded. “You should know, there are enemies out beyond...”

Master Fay held up a hand. “I know of whom you speak.”

Thrawn stared at her, then his hands came together on the table in front of him, his fingers steepling together. “How? There have been no incursions reported beyond that of Chiss space. I would have heard of them. Unless much has changed since I was marooned here.”

“Where I met them is a secret, but I will tell you what I know of them. A group that uses biological constructs, who can travel through space on giant living ships. They use bio-weapons of various types for personal combat.”

“Them, yes. The Far Outsiders are one threat my people have seen, although not yet in any numbers. There are others. Insectoids who can build and create whole fleets faster than you could imagine. Giant monsters out of the deepest dark. Our people are insular and martial both by choice and to defend ourselves from such threats.”

Fay nodded. “And that is why you were forced to attack the Outbound Flight Project.”

“And yet you do not seem to be angered or annoyed by that. Rather, you seem almost academically interested instead of viscerally. Again, this does not match my interaction with the Jedi who led the project.”

“I imagine not,” Fay chuckled wanly. “I was not personally known to that group or vice versa. But from what I know of him, C’baoth had certain thoughts on how Jedi should rule rather than advise and was far more dismissive of those without Force powers than I would ever condone, and he loaded the project with those of similar mind. I believe rather that I am simply curious about how the conflict occurred. You do not strike me as someone to react in anger, nor to strike first if striking first was not the best means to victory.”

Thrawn stared back at Master Fay, then nodded his head slightly, conceding the point. "Is that the real reason why you have come, to discover what happened to your fellow Jedi?"

"No. While I will gladly listen to what you have to say on that score, I am here for a different reason." Fay breathed in, then took the plunge. "You see, I had a Force Vision. A vision of you. The Force showed me that you are a pivot point. The future could go one way or another because of your actions. One way, you do not interact with the rest of this galaxy for some time, and when you do, you are in the hands of the Sith. Doing so you bring war and destruction and death."

"And in the other?" Thrawn asked, his tone almost academic, rather than curious. Yet Aayla could see the tensing of his muscles, the way one hand moved toward his waist before stilling, as if in search of a weapon that was not there.

"That remains to be seen. After all," Fay's smile faded, "being here, I have changed that future, and why you chose to serve the Sith is still in question. Many do so out of fear, out of avarice, out of self-aggrandizing ambition, or hate. But despite having known you for but a few brief minutes, I cannot see avarice or arrogance being your driving force. Fear perhaps?"

"Fear would hold nothing to me. It is a momentary emotion, fleeting, illogical and un-artistic," Thrawn answered crisply, frowning as if insulted.

"Perhaps, a desire to be useful. Or perhaps, a belief in the Sith's cause, then?" Aayla guessed.

"And what cause could that be?" Thrawn asked, smiling slightly.

"Unification and order, perhaps. The Rule of One? The rule of the conqueror?"

"If the conqueror is good enough to take the lands intact and impose rules, an order that keeps the people safe. If he can create order out of chaos, then is the conqueror truly evil? Just a means to an end."

"The rights of the individual are superseded by the many? Or do you simply believe that a centralized authority, shall we say, is necessary?"

"I believe in order, and I believe that the Jedi Order and the Republic as they are do not serve the good of the galaxy as a whole. You are too busy caring for the individual, for this or that planet, to realize that strong order and sufficient strength of the centralized government would solve much of the problems."

"Indoctrination, brainwashing, mass murder, would you have problems with the use of those tools?"

“I would not take pleasure from any such,” Thrawn said after a moment. “But they are a means to an end.”

Aayla scowled that, but Master Fay smiled, leaning back. “I see that you have been told a somewhat skewed view of the Republic, one which interacting with C’baoth has solidified it in your mind. Are you open to debate on those points? Note that I am not asking you any questions about who gave you that view just yet.”

Thrawn chuckled, then nodded. “I am always willing to take in new information, yes.”

“In that case, can I ask how much of a student of history you are, Mitth'raw'nuruodo?”

“If by history, you mean the history of the Republic, I am afraid I have had little chance to study it. I have studied many species' art forms, and I believe myself to be a Master in recognizing different artforms. It is surprising what art can tell you of the individual or even the society the artist comes from,” Thrawn said, smiling thinly.

“True,” Master Fay nodded, leaning further back as she prepared for a debate. “However, would you say that without knowledge of the history of the people, that art could teach you everything about them?”

“Such a statement would be puerile and narrow-minded at best. At worst, it would show a gross arrogance in one’s thought processes. Much like you Jedi seem to believe that the Force gives you special insight.”

“We don’t believe that it gives us special insight, just a distinctly different insight,” Aayla interjected with a chuckle.

Thrawn looked at her, then back to Fay. “Before we go further, may I...”

“She is my bodyguard. I do not carry a lightsaber, as you might’ve noticed. I am not a combative sort of person. Not physically, anyway. Mentally, however, you will find me quite formidable.”

“That I can already believe,” Thrawn said dryly. “But to your point?”

“History is rife with conquests. Yet time and time again, it has been proven that a conqueror can only usually do only one thing very well: Impose order. Order does not equal advancement. Nor does it equate to stability.” From there, Fay cited several personal examples of when an individual warlord or tyrant had taken total control of a planet, only to not be able to sustain it. She followed this by other examples of extreme governmental control, equating it to a monster which devoured itself: the bigger the government, such as the Republic, the larger it had to become, the more control it had to have and the less able to deal with disasters.

“There must be a balance between government-imposed order and individualism. The Sith’s idea of order cannot be the answer.”

Through all this, Thrawn was cocking his head thoughtfully. Then he asked simply, “Why are you really here? You would not be talking to me if you simply wished to stop me from joining Sith. You could well have killed me, from orbit perhaps, or even from the air. Or perhaps even this one in single combat,” he added, gesturing to Aayla.

“This one’?” Aayla snorted in amusement, crossing her arms under her bust. She noticed the glance that earned her, and the flash of... not quite desire but something along those lines. It was very obvious that this man had not been around other people for quite some time, perhaps a few years or more, but that to him, self-control was second nature to a near-Jedi degree. “I am not an assassin, nor am I a Consular like Master Fay. I’m a Guardian. I guard. If guarding the galaxy meant that you have to be removed, I would do so. But I would not take pleasure from such,” she said, using the same words that he had used earlier. “It would simply be a means to an end.”

“Touché,” Thrawn chuckled, holding up a hand to indicate a touch, looking at her with more interest now, then over to Master Fay. “Still, you have yet to answer my question.”

“I thought that obvious Mitth'raw'nuruodo of the Chiss. I am here because the Force dictated, I should be. I’m here to meet with you, to convince you that the future the Sith tried to convince you they were working towards is a lie. If possible, I am here to recruit you.”

Thrawn nodded his head as if he had expected that, then leaned forward, taking a bite out of the sandwich that Aayla had put on the table while Fay had been speaking. He put it down, then steepled his fingers once more. “Convince me then. I believe that order is paramount. The Republic, as it stands, is not...”

OOOOOO

The clones arrived in a large armada of troop transport ships. Each of them was nearly as large as the smaller Trade Federation carriers, but if Ranma had ever been told their designation, he couldn’t remember. Currently, Ranma was standing at the back of the receiving dais, watching as the clones paraded before them then out into the capital city. In front of him, Shaak stood with the Green Council's surviving members, the Corellian Dictat, Garm and the various leaders from the other planets. Watching what he could of the leader’s faces, Ranma reflected, was more interesting than watching the clones march forward in their perfectly drilled formations.

This didn't stop him from making snarky comments out the side of his mouth to the Mandalorians around him. Even Bo-Katan was standing at the back, declining the invitation. "So, this is the clone army. And isn't that just a lot of tanks, guns and armor they've got? Makes me wonder where they were when they were, you know, needed here."

"And don't they look pretty, all in a row like so many toy soldiers," Bo-Katan taunted, her words carrying from her helmet to Ranma and a few others around her.

One or two of the locals looked annoyed, but the Mandalorians all chuckled, and most of the other Corellians also smirked at the joke. This wasn't because they didn't understand why the panoply before them was important for their people's morale or that they disdained the aid these troops implied. But the Corellians were extremely independent-minded, Human, Drall or Selonian. It was a cultural thing across the entire system. The Dictat, a 20-something human woman, and the other leaders knew they needed the clone army. Their defenses had been hammered by the Confederacy's attack. But they did not want the clones around full time.

Indeed, recruitment was still growing across the Five Brothers. People were signing up in astronomical numbers, and that did not include the millions of Corellian ex-pats trickling back into their native system from across the Republic. The Dictat had astonishingly issued a blanket amnesty, sending it out on every channel of the Hypercom. Anyone guilty of crimes against Corellia or the rest of the Republic who came forward to join the Corellian Navy for the duration of the war would be cleared of all previous crimes bar rape or premeditated murder. And since smuggling seemed to be a pastime among Corellian ex-pats, this was a big thing.

Ranma didn't know what to think about that one. In his time with Shaak, they had run into far too many groups of pirates, mercenaries and scum to think that the idea of giving any of them a get-out-of-jail-free card was a good idea. But if someone did come forward, and was willing to put on the uniform, follow the military's rules and so forth, then maybe they were worth a second chance. Regardless, if it worked, Corellia would go from having mangled defenses and a somewhat denuded sector fleet to having a large, if highly irregular, defensive armada on top of a rebuilt and rearmed sector fleet.

"I wonder what kind of training they got," Ranma muttered, shaking his head as he watched the next clone brigade slip into the parade, moving in front of them through CorSec Prime's parade ground. "And I swear to God, if the Jedi Order doesn't move on to treating them like slave soldiers, I am going to bust a brain cell!"

"And you don't have many of those to spare," Anakin mocked from nearby.

Ranma waved one hand airily. "I'll give it a six out of ten kid, the setup was just too big a target for that kind of jibe to be worth more than that."

"If you all could be quiet, I would appreciate it. This is a solemn occasion," said one of the green Jedi from nearby, a member of a four-eyed, four-armed serpentine species Ranma

hadn't seen before. But then he added, "However I have to admit to some concerns about the clone army as well, which we Green Jedi all share. Hence our agreement to agree with that demand you sent the High Council, Ranma. Regardless of who ordered this clone army into gestation, someone decided to do so knowing they would be used just like the Confederacy uses their droids: disposable, expendable, replaceable troops. Only the clones are living breathing creatures, rather than bits of metal with a limited amount of intelligence."

"HK, you want to field that one?" Ranma chortled, looking over to where his droid stood directly behind and to one side of him, looming over several of the locals. That this made them visibly uncomfortable was something both Ranma and HK somewhat enjoyed.

"Dismissive retort: why would I master? I quite agree with the Jedi meatbag. Both sides of this conflict have decided that quantity has a quality all of its own. Proudful statement: It will fall to us and those like us, if there indeed any like you or I in the whole of the Republic, to disprove that concept."

"True that." Ranma looked away from the soldiers to look at Shaak's profile, finding that view much more palatable. The sight of all those soldiers drove home to the fact that this war was **monstrous** in scale. There would be so much death and destruction across the whole Republic, and Ranma couldn't stop it. *And even if we remove the Sith somehow, this war is going to keep on going. That's fucking depressing.*

Ranma didn't let that thought get him down for long as he continued his reply to HK's words. "No matter how big this war gets, no matter how many battlefields there are, good fighters like us can still make a major difference like we did here in Corellia. We've done the same elsewhere, and we'll continue to do so. Whatever they throw at us."

The fact that Ranma said 'they' rather than the Confederacy was not lost on any of the Jedi there within hearing range, yet nonetheless, they found themselves nodding along with Ranma's words. It was in keeping with the Jedi ethos that individuals could make a difference to the many. Although, only Guardians had ever trained to make a difference in combat like the Jedi were facing now across the whole of the Republic.

The parade of clone troopers went on for at least two hours, as division-sized formations came down from their landing ships. Moving from CorSec Prime, the Planetary Defense Force's main base near Corel, they marched through the city one by one and then were transported elsewhere on Corellia. The fact that the same thing was happening on to other planets in the system and that two more convoys of similar size would follow was amazing. Especially when considered against the backdrop of the total war effort and the fact that elsewhere armies millions strong were being sent to other hotspots throughout the Republic.

Later that day, Ranma and Shaak, along with Master Fisto and Master Tiin, who declined, were invited to meet the Clone General, one of the clones specially educated to lead

armies while being indoctrinated in the cloning vats. Again, Ranma wasn't certain how he felt about that, but no one else seemed to have a problem with that aspect of the clone's education. Rather, it was the indoctrination they had an issue with.

He was there with a Jedi Master named Halsey. He was a male Roonan, a species Ranma hadn't seen before, humanoid with four fingers, which wasn't unusual, but the folds and creases on their face and the wide, shining eyes made Ranma think they looked almost bug-like or perhaps aquatic in nature. He wasn't certain. Halsey at least carried himself like a warrior and had joined the newly-returned Master Windu in a mission to Kamino, where the clones had been created.

As they entered, the Clone Commander, wearing the same armor as all the others, marked a yellow slash of paint on his shoulders, turned to them. He looked to be a thirty-something man, with short-cropped curly brown hair, dark brown eyes, and a harshly tanned face set in grim lines.

Looking at him, you'd hardly know he's only what, ten years old or something? And has spent most of his life stuck in a glass tank, Ranma thought, shaking his head. Something about cloning was still just bothering the heck out of him, above and beyond the indoctrination aspect or the fact it represented mass slavery in Ranma's mind.

Shaak and Ranma were joined by Bo-Katan, Pol Skirata and Janice. Janice didn't really have a rank among the Reborn per se, but as one of the Night Owls and as someone who had gone through Ranma's training, Janice had a level of personal authority and respect among the Mandalorians that was second only to Bo-Katan herself.

As they entered, Garm nodded to them, gesturing to the side where Master Halsey and the Clone General were already examining a 3D map of the star system. On that map were detailed notes of the various planets' defenses and the work being done to further bring ships out of mothballs across the system.

The outer edge of the star system had been nearly denuded of both the mothballed ships and the various asteroid mining and small space stations that dotted the outer edge of any heavily industrialized star system, but closer to the sun, there were still several hundred ships waiting to be brought online. Work was proceeding apace on that and repairing the various defenses of the planets that had seen direct conflict with the Confederacy forces. The amount of industrial capacity and trained spacers Corellia had available was just crazy, Ranma reflected.

Yet Ranma had barely a second to glance of the holo-sphere before one of the Mandalorians with Bo-Katan pointed at the clone and shouted, "What dishonor is this! How dare the Republic clone Jango Fett!?"

“What?” Bo-Katan asked, shooting her advisor a look. She had never met the former True Mandalorian turned bounty hunter, although, of course, she had heard about his exploits against the original Death Watch: how he had wiped them out, attacking one base after another until finally killing the last of them.

Or so he thought. Obviously, the Death Watch had come back since Bo-Katan had been a part of it. At the time, she had believed the Death Watch the last true vestiges of Mandalorian culture, but that was before meeting Ranma and having her eyes opened to how destructive the Death Watch’s ways were. “Are you sure?”

“I am positive,” Pol growled, pointing at the Clone General, who now looked poised to go for his gun, no surprise on his grim face. “That is the face of Jango Fett. He and I met on several occasions when I was younger, and he worked extensively with Kal Skirata, a founding of our clan. What in the kriff he is doing cloned, I have no idea.”

“So you knew the Prime and Training Sergeant Kal?” The clone shrugged his shoulders lethargically, although Ranma wasn’t fooled. The guy was still poised to go for his gun in an instant. “I suppose that makes some sense, as you all are calling yourselves Mandalorians.”

“Calling ourselves Mandalorians’?” Bo repeated dangerously, holding up two fingers in a Mando’ade signal to wait to her fellows. That it was one used in combat situations was not lost on Ranma or the Jedi, who tensed.

The clone shrugged once more. “Jango Fett, the Prime, was the last Mand’alor. And you didn’t hunt him down and challenge him for the title. So by the rules of the Resol’nare, you and your movement are both chakaaryc (rotten/dishonored). And you personally were also part of the rejuvenated Death Watch, adding to the ignominy.”

A thin smile flitted across Bo-Katan’s face, visible since the Reborn had removed their helmets upon entering the command center, which came under the heading of an allied clan in their culture. “I was part of the Death Watch. I have never hidden that, di’kut. I also helped kill it, leading a revolution against Pre Vizsla and killing him with my bare hands. Two, I did, in fact, search for Jango Fett, sending word through the Bounty Hunter’s guild for him when I began my movement. He didn’t respond. Nor has he been seen since. So, he probably died in some ditch somewhere like all Bounty Hunters do eventually following their contemptuous trade.”

While the first point seemed to calm the Clone General down, the second one struck home, and he scowled angrily. “The Prime was a warrior without peer! If you think he could die like that...”

“Then where is he?” Bo interrupted hotly. “We’ve had feelers out searching for him for years now. Nothing has shown up about him!”

The clone grunted, looking away. "We don't know. The Prime was part of our training cadre before and after we were gestated. Indeed, he created most of our in-creche training. But about a year ago, he was called away. We haven't seen or heard of him since. We know he hasn't taken up his bounty hunting, though. And he brought his son with him."

"Son?"

"A clone, one of our brothers, that he took out of the creche as a babe and started training instantly. He wasn't subjected to the in-creche learning process or sped up aging," the Clone General replied, still scowling. "We have no idea where they went."

There were some frowns at that, before Shaak, who had been informed of the message given to the Jedi Council by the Chancellor, murmured, "He must have joined Master Dyas in leading the Sith off. I think we have to assume that he and Master Dyas are both dead."

While the Clone General just grunted as if someone had announced the sky was blue with all the fanfare of someone revealing a great truth, Bo-Katan visibly set that to one side, glaring at the Clone General. "This is not something we Reborn can overlook. Not just the fact that one of our own was involved in this cloning. Presumably for money." The sneer she added to that word made her opinion of that clear. "But the fact that they exist at all. One of the underlying principles of the Resol'nare is individuality, and being cloned as Jango has in such numbers spits on that! If Jango was here, I would tell him that to his face, that he had disgraced the name of Mandalore."

"Who is this 'Jango'? You all are talking about him like he's someone important," Ranma asked, interrupting the confrontation, as he realized, *Ah, this is why I felt a shiver down my spine when we were all talking about who the clones could've been based on. Oh crap, am I going to have to play peacemaker!? We're doomed.*

Pol Skirata and Bo related the story of Jango to Ranma and the others, most of whom also hadn't heard of him. How he had been part of True Mandalorians, how they had been in what amounted to a small personal war with the Death Watch and then had been tricked into fighting the Jedi. The Jedi under Count Dooku had basically wiped out the True Mandalorian, although they had lost many of their number doing it. Realizing both sides of the conflict had been tricked into fighting by the death. Jango had gone on a one-man crusade and wiped the Death Watch out, although he'd left enough resources and families alive that the Death Watch was able to rebuild itself after a few years under Clan Vizsla's leadership. Which had ended when Bo-Katan had killed the last chief of that clan.

"That is correct," the clone said simply. "The Prime was sought after by Master Dyas, to become the template of the clone army he commissioned for the war he could see coming."

"So wait, this Jango guy didn't try to rebuild the True Mandos, didn't come back and help your people, not even trying to supplant the New Mandalorians? Instead, he just... went

his own way and became a Bounty Hunter?" Ranma had quite a bit of contempt for bounty hunters considering how many he'd been forced to kill over the years when they came to claim his head and for their attack on Shaak on Mandalore years ago. "Doesn't sound as if he's really all that to me, certainly not enough to lose your cool over, Bo."

This attempt to play peacemaker failed. Although Bo-Katan did laugh somewhat harshly at that, it seemed to strike the clone to the quick, and he glared at Ranma. The clones were briefed on Ranma, but that briefing had been put together by people who didn't know the reality of the stories surrounding Ranma and discounted everything that couldn't be explained away by a previous understanding of the Force. Therefore, they all assumed that he was like an extremely competent Guardian type Jedi and didn't know about the various other abilities he brought to the table. "Jango was the perfect warrior! Competent, calculating, intelligent, insanely skilled, the height of physical ability. And because of that and his training, we are perfect soldiers."

"Perfect soldiers, right, little windup toys, that can be stacked against droids of similar intelligence," Bo-Katan shot back, barely keeping control of her temper. She had no idea if Jango really had agreed to allow himself to be cloned simply for money, but if he had, then he was not the Jango that legend made him out to be and that annoyed her all the more. It was like meeting your childhood hero and finding not only was he human, but he was an incredibly flawed one.

Part and parcel of being a Mandalorian was individuality. No Mandalorian was like another, and outside of training to work together, no one Mandalorian would try to force another into a specific kind of mold. Individuality, the ability to train those who came after, or Ba'jur (education/training) to join together with another and pass on both of your trades to the next generation in the Aliit (clan). Those were two of the main tenants of the Resol'nare. The idea of simply cloning yourself was to take away that individuality. And to not then at the least train your clones, all of them, in Ba'jur and the other tenants, was a slap to the face of Mandalorian tradition.

The clone sneered at her. "If you have a problem with our training, take it up with the Republic. If you have a problem with us being clones, find Jango. But I refuse to let you Tame Mandalorians act as if you are better than us. Our training and abilities far surpass yours thanks to Jango and the rest of our trainers. The fragile, self-destructive Resol'nare was but a starting point in our training. We are the perfect soldiers for the Republic. You so-called Reborn are simply an anachronism of the past."

"Tame!" Janice shouted, stepping forward. "I'll show you tame!" Something about that word seemed to infuriate her.

"He does seem to think he's better than you, doesn't he," Ranma drawled, scratching at his pigtail thoughtfully, an idea percolating in his brain.

“That statement cannot be allowed to go without challenge. If you have anything of Jango in you, you know that, don’t you?” Bo-Katan growled, one hand pushing Janice back firmly as she moved forward to glare at the clone from barely a foot away. The clone was tall and broader in the shoulders than Bo, but Bo-Katan Kryze knew exactly how little that mattered and was more than willing to prove it.

“Ladies, gentlemen, this is not the place for this kind of conflict!” Master Halsey interjected at last. When everyone looked at him, the Roonan sighed, an oddly flute-like noise coming from his alien face. “We of the Jedi Order were not aware of who the prime clone was until we arrived on Kamino. And on behalf of the Jedi Order, I apologize for breaking the social taboos cloning apparently does in your culture. I can only say once more that the Jedi Order itself did not know about the creation of the clone army. That lies at the feet of Jango and Master Dyas. I realize that ignorance is no excuse, but it is the only one we can offer at this time.”

“Bo-Katan, surely this can wait?” Shaak added, looking at her friend. “I understand that you are concerned about this matter. We, too, shared concerns about the clones. But the fact remains, they were created, they are here, and we have an enemy at the gate. As much as it pains me to say, we must be ready to use all the means at our disposal against an enemy that would wipe out planets like they did at Kuat and Duro.”

The mention of those two attacks brought a momentary halt to the argument. News had spread throughout the Republic by this point that the Confederacy had launched several massive fleets at Kuat, the attack ending with a bombardment of the planet from orbit and the utter destruction of the space station rings that had made Kuat so important to the entire Republic. The loss of life had been incredible, just like with Duro. But unlike with Duro, where the loss of so many dead was felt keenly only in the Corellia sector, the loss of Kuat’s infrastructure hurt the entire Republic. It would set back the Republic’s ability to build new ships for years, if not decades.

To say nothing about the rising horror at the loss of life. With Duro, Shaak had relayed that much of the Republic had seen it as a natural fault of the Corellian Sector removing itself from the Republic as it had. But Kuat had been one of the most important systems in the Republic, and the surviving members of its founding families were using all their considerable monetary assets to scream of its loss throughout the Republic.

And, of course, the fact that Corellia still had about a quarter of its ship-building ability after the battle here meant the system had become even more important than it had been previously. Hence the massive amount of reinforcements sent to the system.

“And this ‘training of theirs?’ Pol questioned, conceding the point on their needing the clones but unwilling to absolve the Republic of the insult they had unwittingly paid the Mandalorians. “How exactly are they trained? Because from what little I know about the in-creche training of clones, it smacks too much of indoctrination to me.”

“Yeah, that was a sticking point with me too,” Ranma admitted. “Shaak and I already took up that matter with the Jedi Order. I wasn’t happy about the whole cloning thing at all, threatened to stop fighting for the Republic at all in fact since it smacks too much of growing slaves to fit your needs.”

Why this made everyone there jolt in shock bar the Togrutan Jedi, the Clone General didn’t know, but it did, and he watched the man gesture to him.

“We laid out what we think should happen: that the clones should serve within the army for four years or fifteen battles, whichever comes first, before being removed from the frontline for another year, before being given training in whatever non-military field they want. That their indoctrinated loyalty needs to be shifted into true loyalty.”

“That... that makes sense. And I will confess to some misgivings shared amongst myself and the other trained generals about how we would be treated in the future,” the Clone General answered. “All of our training and abilities assumed that we would be used in battle, but even the strongest spirit can break in war. And after the war ends, well, what use would the Republic have for cloned soldiers?”

“Exactly. But whether or not you were cloned, you are alive. You need to be treated as living, intelligent people rather than the droids you fight.” Ranma’s words seemed to calm down both sides of the conflict, and for a moment, Garm and the others thought maybe they had headed off a major political and possibly military crisis. But then, to the barely suppressed groan of Shaak, Ranma turned around and ruined the process he’d made by saying, “Of course, that addresses the future of the clones and the whole slavery bit. Their current training, their thoughts towards the Reborn and this idiot’s words to Bo are between them.”

Before anyone else could speak, Bo-Katan swiftly interjected. “Agreed. If the Republic agrees to Ranma’s ideas or something similar, that will square things between the Reborn and the Republic. But these clones **are** still a direct violation of the tenants, and this one personally insulted me, the Resol’nare and the Reborn,” Bo-Katan scowled, still staring up at the general, violence flashing in her eyes. “As Mandalore, I cannot allow this man’s challenge to the honor of my people to stand.”

“And that is why our training is better,” the General replied simply. “Only the objective matters. Honor is simply a tool.”

Hearing such words from the face of Jango Fett, who was something of a paragon of what it meant to be Mandalorian, seemed to make the Mandalorians even angrier, but Ranma stepped in before anything else could happen, and Shaak realized he’d planned for this response. “Exactly. But would these challenges normally be to the death, or the humiliation?”

“Normally to the death, but I suppose I could be persuaded to not take it that far,” Bo-Katan stated, sneering at the clone as she too realized that Ranma had a plan.

“Good. In that case, why don’t we make a contest of it? A series of martial contests pitting you against him and some of your Reborn against the clones? You’ll be able to see what they know, they can prove they are worthy of being related to Jango, no matter how um, defused, I guess, that connection is. And you can show the fact that when it comes to warriors, the Mandalorians are still far superior,” Ranma smirked at the clone, the same kind of smirk he always used to rile up his opponents.

That smirk worked its magic once more, and the Clone General rose to the challenge. “I have been trained in the creche and then out of the creche for years. I have all of the training Jango imparted and the cadre of combat specialists that he personally put together the Republic wide. You honestly think that the tricks your armor affords you would be able to let you stand against me?”

The man wasn’t trying to sound arrogant, or at least, that was what the Jedi sensed. He was simply stating facts. But under the current circumstances, that sounded immensely arrogant regardless and to Shaak spoke of a rather large disconnect from the reality of how Ranma’s interaction with the Reborn had changed them. Even a normal Mandalorian was an extremely competent warrior. Bo-Katan was well above that level. Shaak was certain nothing the clones threw at her would faze the Mandalore.

“True. There would need to be a handicap involved,” Ranma mused aloud, looking at the general and then at Bo-Katan.

“If she thinks she needs one, although I would have thought that a true Mandalore would be above such tricks,” the General retorted.

“I’m sorry, was I talking to you?” Ranma asked, looking at him quizzically then over at Bo-Katan, further angering the clone. “How about a squad of twelve against you in a simulated battle decided by knockout, Bo? Would trouncing that number be enough for you to overlook this idiot’s earlier words about their supposed superiority and that dig against the Resol’nare?”

The Clone General looked skeptical at that, then shrugged as Bo-Katan answered enthusiastically, saying that contest and other similar ones would serve to assuage the Reborn’s anger. If the Mandalorian wanted to prove her own arrogance beyond a shadow of a doubt and then get a beat down for her troubles, that was no skin off his nose.

Halsey and many of the other Jedi looked extremely skeptical at this, but when they voiced their concerns, Shaak shook her head, backing up her husband on this point, understanding that this was what Ranma had intended all along. “Remember gentlemen that the Mandalorians are a **warrior** culture,” she emphasized. “Conflicts of this nature abound within the Reborn. And the general’s words were impolitic at best. If he thinks he and his fellow clones are better than the Reborn, then he must prove it. Afterward, come what may, the matter will be settled as far as the Mandalorians are concerned.”

“How is Kryze fighting twelve against one going to prove that?” the Clone General retorted. “While I am fine with the other contests, that aspect sounds more like a farce to me.”

“I know, I should allow you to bring an entire brigade, but we do want to get this over with quickly, I suppose,” Bo-Katan taunted, putting on her helmet and clicking it in place. Her voice came out far tinier after that of course, almost inhuman as her visor locked on the Clone General like a turret. “Or are you unwilling to put your body where your mouth has led?”

Moments later, Bo-Katan faced off against Blackout and eleven of his men at the nearest training ground.

It took the Mandalorians and soldiers about twenty minutes to prepare everything, while the word spread among the Reborn about what the clones were and what was going on now. The reception was mixed, but nearly everyone agreed the general’s words about the Resol’nare and against Bo-Katan needed to be redressed. Beyond that, there was a certain amount of pity for the clones in how they were created and programmed within the cloning vats, but it was the general’s assumption of superiority that really stuck in the minds of the Mandos. So the list of Mandalorians who wanted to sign up to knock that chip off the clones’ collective shoulder was quite long.

Most of the challenges would be small, one-on-one hand-to-hand competitions, a shooting competition and so forth. Others would be larger, four versus four mock combat, for example, then as many as full companies fighting it out in specific combat scenarios chosen by the Corellians. But before all of that would be the direct challenge between Bo-Katan and the Clone General, whose name was Blackout.

Not being one to ignore an enemy’s mistake for something as ephemeral and stupid as a personal honor code. Blackout took Bo-Katan up on her offer of stacking the deck against her. He picked out the best Special OPS squad he had on hand, a twelve-man squad drilled to go behind enemy lines and assassinate important enemy officers. While not the equivalent of the Advanced Recon Commandoes still being trained on Kamino, they were easily the best commando-style troopers in his command and were armed with much of the equipment already okayed for the ARC troopers: jetpacks, blasters, of course, a few sniper rifles, two grenade launchers and vibro-knives.

With all of that and his own tactical training, Blackout was certain that this would be easy, even if he wasn’t as at home with the jetpack as his troops. *It would also allow Bo-Katan to save face*, he thought in amusement. *Which is probably why that Jedi advanced it, subtle. This way, not even the Mandalore’s own people will mind fault her for losing against such odds. The Mandalore’s ‘honor’ is saved, and we Republic Troopers prove ourselves.*

He raced from cover to cover through the small area of the capital city that had been designated as the combat zone, four hab-spires that had been deemed too badly damaged internally to be worth repairing. The area’s border showed up in his heads-up display as a wide

band of red. As he entered the area, he saw hundreds of Mandalorians had come to watch, following the activity on their own helmets, silent and watching from all the nearby rooftops. That was a little off-putting but not a lot. This was just another training exercise for him.

For about ten minutes after the two sides had entered, none of his troops reported any sign of the enemy. Frowning, he paused their movement through the interior of one of the buildings, then ordered them to double back, moving two floors up to an area of the building that allowed them more room to maneuver with their jetpacks. "Spread out and use your drones. If Kryze wants to play hide-and-seek, let's flush her out."

With the general staying put, using several tiny drones to scout through the buildings above and to either side of them, a fire team continued down through the building, while another waited to back them up, and a third moved to guard the roof. One enemy or no, they weren't taking any chances. *Even if each drone nearly costs as much as the rest of a Clone Trooper's gear*, Blackout thought ruefully.

Even with the electronic drones, it was the team moving down through the spire the clones were currently investigating that found their enemy first. From below Blackout came the sound of blaster fire, barely heard over the men's noise moving around him. An instant later, one of his men radioed, "Contact. 02049 is down, mission kill."

The general instantly moved, barking commands to the squad that had stayed with him. The five – clone troopers used fire teams of four – used their jets to fly from one portion of the smashed spire down towards the floor where the general's HUD showed that the advance team had run into Kryze. As he landed, Blackout noticed that his heads-up display had been updated, and the green dot marking the man who had radioed in Bo-Katan's position, 02050, had turned red mission kill. The other two dots of fireteam alpha were moving back up the spire.

As the two dead scout troopers moved past them looking rather hangdog, the general flew backward and away from that contact point, his guards following as he chose a rallying point nearby. "Sending coordinates, converge on this location," he radioed calmly. "She's using knowledge of the terrain against us, regroup on me, and we'll force her to come to us. Grenades, four rounds, two shrapnel, one explosive."

The grenadier among the fire team instantly obeyed, jetting away to land nearby on another spire while his teammates provided cover just in case. The next instant, the corridor's interior walls where Bo had ambushed their fellows exploded, collapsing and cutting off Katan from moving further down in that spire.

While their blasters were set to stun and their vibro-knives programmed to not vibrate enough to penetrate armor, the rest of their gear was fully online. Both Mandos and Clones played for keeps.

With that done, the general left a drone there moving around the rubble of the interior, while one of his clones installed a trap in several of the nearby.

However, before the other fire team could reach them, Bo-Katan had already moved away. She leaped over from that building to another, racing through it via her jetpack at speed no running woman could match, using her jets adroitly despite the lack of room to maneuver, trusting to the building to block the sound from escaping. This worked, and when she blasted out into the open air and into a fireteam of clones who had just been about to use their jetpacks to alight to another position.

Her blaster rang out, killing one, and the small mini-missiles in Bo-Katan's other vambrace locked on another, signaling a mission kill. The two remaining clones flew off in different directions, firing to bracket Bo-Katan in their fire. But she danced dodged around them, using her jetpack far more adroitly than the two of them could. For a moment it almost resembled a dogfight with human-shaped starfighters, all three of them ducking and dodging in midair. Then Bo-Katan activated a flashbang in her hands, blinding the other two, having kept her own eyes closed.

Like most people with jetpacks, the clone troopers had been trained to believe that speed and height were the most important factors when facing another jetpack user. And most of the time, they were. But not against someone who knew what you were going to be doing before you did.

Instead of trying to follow them up into the sky, Bo-Katan dropped, landing lightly on an extremely damaged road between the spires below, lining up her shots up towards them. One could dodge even so, but the other fell, his system telling him he had been killed.

The one who had dodged was able to throw a grenade in her direction, and by this point, the general had been able to bring the rest of his squadmates and the survivors of her first attack to the point of contact. The battlefield wasn't all that large, and the squad had been staying in relatively close contact before they'd run into her. Now it was Bo-Katan's turn to fall back once more, using her jetpack to blast backward into a building, before cutting through the floor of the first room she'd entered, ducking deep down into the building and out of sight.

Not bad, Bo-Katan thought. These clones are okay, but I don't think they did enough training in city-scape combat. The jetpacks were a nice touch. I didn't expect them or that Blackout would have so many armed with grenade launchers. But even if I prefer my mini-missiles, the clones aren't the only ones who can play with grenades.

A flashbang tossed behind her blinded any attempt to follow her, and two minutes later, she was a distance from that point of contact, cutting out her jetpack and entering another building from where she had begun just now. There she began to move up through the building, going for the silent approach once more.

“She’s gone to ground, stay together, not just radio contact but in sight of one another. We’ll enter the building here,” the general declared, pointing at the same building on his map, directing the remaining half of the squad forward as the Jedi proctors moved forward to gather up the unconscious bodies of Bo-Katan’s last two victims. Those men would be out of action for a while. Even in armor, falling from such a height broke bones and caused concussions.

That didn’t matter to the general at present. What did matter was that he had lost five people in two short engagements. It was evident to the general that he needed to change his thinking on this. Kryze wasn’t fighting as he had anticipated, all movement, misdirection and full-on aggressiveness. Instead, she was mixing that style with a more passive skillset, and Kryze’s use of her jetpack was simply far better than any of his own.

“Sir, I don’t think we should enter the building at all,” the scout squad leader suggested. “We should just bring the entire thing down. This place was cited for demolition anyway.”

Blackout nodded, scowling in reluctance. Yet the man had a point. “Very well. Bring the building down on top of her.”

While their fellows guarded them, the two from fireteam alpha began to place a series of demo charges a mix of thermal grenades and regular explosives along the roof. This squad were all experts at demolitions and set these to destroy the roof and keep going. The roof's weight would crash down into the next floor and so forth, causing a cascade effect.

Down below, Bo-Katan watched the activity on the roof carefully via a small video recorder, shaking her head at Blackout’s actions. She had left sensor drones on each of the buildings and a few more points behind her as she moved through the area. *He has good instincts, but he isn’t paranoid enough, or he would be running ECM right now. We had stipulated that every one of us could use our normal gear. And my normal gear has several of these things, even if I rarely need to use my own these days.*

She grinned, cracking her back explosively, as she hefted her blaster and prepared to move. This fight had been intensely therapeutic so far. Even amid the battle against the droids, Bo-Katan was forced to be aware of the Mandalorian forces' overall picture. Here though, it was just her against overwhelming odds... Well, supposedly anyway. And that was the kind of thing any Mandalorian lived for. *And I haven’t even needed to lean on Ranma’s training yet.*

Bo waited where she was until the explosives went off. Then gripping her rifle and still grinning viciously, Bo-Katan Kryze slowly moved from the position she had been in among what looked like a family room to the doorway leading out into the rest of the building. *Time to start the next act of this fight.*

Above on the nearby roof, the general nodded in satisfaction. He and the survivor of the first fireteam Bo had targeted had left the rooftop and now situated themselves on a nearby one, guarding against an attack coming from below, the two of them using their jet to move

around the rest of the team. Yet something was still niggling at his senses. He looked over at his surviving sensor specialist from fireteam Seta. "We saw no sign of her exiting the building?"

"No, sir. Mind you, the ferrocrete of the city is playing havoc with our sensors, so she might have been able to if she had retreated right away before my fireteam could take the high ground."

The general frowned, wondering why Kryze hadn't done that. She hadn't even attacked while they had been preparing the demo charges on the roof. No, he decided, that was simply his paranoia talking. Bo-Katan, no doubt, did have a plan, but it wouldn't work. Not with the battlefield's limitations being just this group of buildings and the surrounding air between them. If she cheated, his force would still win, although frankly, Blackout didn't think they would get that lucky. No, Kryze would come out swinging. The only question was how.

A second later, the explosions began. At first, nothing seems to go wrong. The explosions went off perfectly, carrying the roof down into the next highest level, then crashing that down into third in quick succession. However, on the tenth floor down from the roof, things started to go wrong. Smoke grenades situated at several of the building's windows went off as the explosions the clones had caused reached that level, sending up a smog that blocked all of their sensors.

And from below that flow fog, Bo-Katan flew up towards the General. She seemed to know precisely where they were, opening fire as she flew up towards their position, and darting his head around quickly, Blackout realized that she must have had them under surveillance too. *When did she set that up?!* He thought, then blinked as he realized where they were standing in relation to where they had begun the battle. *This is the building she was in when she took out 02049 and 02050. She didn't attack them because they were my forward scouts. Kryze attacked them as a distraction, so we didn't examine the rooftops too closely!*

The general responded quickly, pulling his troops back away from the edge of the building bar his two surviving grenadiers, who launched timed grenades down into the smog from where the blaster bolts had come from. One of his men went down, slumping unconscious from a low-powered blaster bolt that caught him in the shoulder. And then Bo-Katan was on the rooftop, dodging through their fire with preternatural quickness.

"It's almost like fighting a Jedi and one of the good ones too!" the general growled, his own blaster rifle raised, firing off expertly kind well-aimed shots, only to see them blocked by the woman forearm or simply dodged. "Spread and envelop!" he shouted while reading a quick message about how both Kryze's gauntlets and vambraces were made of beskar, the super-dense armor that had helped make the Mandalorians such a nightmare for even the Jedi to fight.

After that order, the squad quickly used their own jets to spread out once more. But two more of them fell to Bo's blaster bolts as they did. She then closed with one of them, crashing

into the man, her dagger out and stabbing even as Bo's other hand dropped her blaster and grabbed his hand before the clone could pull out his own vibroknife. She stabbed it twice unpowered into the man's chest and neck. She didn't use enough force to get through his armor, but even so, the man was killed in terms of this exercise. Then she twisted, hurling him towards the general.

The general used his jetpack to leap up over the man, landing in a crouch and blasting away at her. But Bo-Katan's jetpack cut out before he could hit her, causing her to fall like a rock. Bo-Katan then grabbed the edge of the rooftop, flipping herself up and over it with an adroitness that few non-Jedi could match, her other hand filling with her back up a handgun, which blasted out, catching the general in the side and the side of the head.

This left one grenadier, a sensor specialist and the second fireteam's survivor of the twelve-man specialist squad that Blackout had led into this fight. The grenadier peppered the rooftop with explosives watching as Bo-Katan retreated to another building, following him with his weapon and destroying large portions of the building's façade. When the weapon clicked empty, he grunted, reaching for his bandoleer before two bolts caught him right in the chest. "KRIF!!!"

Then Bo-Katan was once more in the air, and the last two of them danced and dived around her, handguns blasting. The clones were good, Bo-Katan thought, but they weren't up to the standards of the Night Owls, let alone herself. Both of them fell quickly to her blaster bolts. The next blast took one of the two men right in the face, and he slumped, staring as Bo-Katan descended to the ground, before reaching up to remove the damaged helmet and shake his head in shock, as the other 'killed' clones all gathered around.

Landing Bo-Katan nearby, smirking at them all unseen under the traditional Mandalore helmet. "Well, that was fun. Next."

Throughout the rest of the day, contests continued between the clones and the Mandalorians. The clones didn't seem to take them seriously until news of that first horrendous loss got back to them. Worse for the clones, their losses continued. Janice challenged an entire team to a close combat martial arts contest with knives and staff only and **utterly** trounced them. Six of them were taken down by a non-Jedi woman in less than a minute.

Some of the other contests didn't go as horribly for the clones as that one. When a few randomly chosen Mandalorians went up against equally randomly chosen clones, the contest was much less one-sided. But it quickly became clear that even so, the Mandalorians were the better warriors. In combats or contests like this, individual prowess and true experience rather than simple training and numbers meant that the Mandalorians had all the advantages.

While this soothed the Reborn's anger, this stung the clones' pride quite a bit. Like their Prime, the clones had believed that the Mandalorians had lost their fire, that if more of them had a true martial fervor, they would've joined the True Mandalorians, that the New

Mandalorians would never have been able to take power as they had under Duchess Satine. The general had also known that Bo-Katan was Satine's sister, which had added a bit to his contempt of her.

However, it was quite obvious that their assumptions were very wrong. But at least the clones proved that they were able to look past previous prejudices.

On the other side of the ledger, the Mandalorians were still not exactly happy about the clones having been so cloned from one of their own, but with their superiority proven, the Mandalorians calmed down slightly. They were still very angry, and clan Skirata was mortified that one of their own, indeed someone who had been considered for clan head, had been part of teaching this watered-down version of teaching the Resol'nare. Moreover, there was no way that the clones could be anything but an assault on the individuality that was one of the unspoken tenants of the Resol'nare. But it was felt that the clones at least had the physical and mental skills to build upon. They could perhaps eventually become people rather than troopers, which would be a step toward becoming warriors in their own right, if not Mandalorians.

"We still don't like them, and I don't think many of us will be willing to work with these clones closely, but we won't pull out from the war in anger about it," Bo-Katan reported, as she kicked up her feet onto a table across from Ranma, Shaak, Benjamin and his Diktat.

While the Diktat pouted outrageously at Bo, who she had befriended somewhat over the past few days, until she removed her feet from the table, Shaak was philosophical about it, shrugging her shoulders. "Honestly, considering how this day began, I consider the fact that you aren't pulling out of it a major win."

"Besides, it's not as if you would be working with them closely anyway. You Reborn are pure commandos and specialists or should be. Taking land, maybe, holding it? Being put in any kind of defensive role? Providing the majority of soldiers to any single battlefield? That's not you, I don't think so. You don't have the numbers and your training is way better than regular ground pounders. Comparing the two of you is like comparing special forces to common Army grunts." He shook his head. "But I think we're done talking about the clones for now?"

"We're done talking about the clones, aye," Bo smirked at Ranma. "But my Mandos decided to run with the idea of those contests. We've turned them into competitions to see which of our younger members will join up with you to replace those lost following you around."

"You are still wishing to send only the best of your younger warriors with us?" Shaak winced. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Yes. Janice and I have talked about it, and while the deaths of Jethro, Thomas and Natasha are saddening, the fact they died in battle means they did so as a Mandalorian should. Their clans will mourn them but honor their memory. And Janice has also informed me of how

good they had become, and how Dralshy'a and Kad Solus are. If they, and this next batch, can learn your techniques, then sending our young to learn from you rather than in battle with the rest of my Reborn is a good idea."

Grunting, Ranma nodded. When Bo put it like that, it did make sense, and he knew for a fact that the younger you started training to reach for your ki, the easier it was to achieve. "So much for having room to spare on the *Wild Blade* again, darn it. Still, I'll come over with you. I've got a few endurance exercises that can help us decide between the winners of the other contests."

"That sounds horrifying," Janice quipped, causing Shaak to laughingly agree.

Ranma asked his wife if she wanted to join them, but Shaak indicated a desire to stay and talk with Garm and the Diktat for a bit, and Ranma and the two Mandos left. When the three of them were alone, Shaak began without any preamble. "Lady Diktat, General. As you might have noticed, the Mandalorians and Jedi share the use of a certain class of ship, the Katana-class heavy cruisers. There is a reason for this, and it is one that I am now allowed to share with you both, in return for Corellia's aid in utilizing the secret to its fullest extent."

She waited until both leaders nodded then went on. "Have either of you heard the legend of the Katana Fleet disaster?"

Corellia, after all, had the industrial capacity to bring that fleet to combat readiness. Not in drips and drabs as most of the Jedi's allies could, but a dozen ships at a time. *It is past time to get those ships into circulation*, Shaak thought, as the discussion continued.

When Bo had said the Mandos had decided to continue the competitions, she had been somewhat understating matters. Certainly, the youngest of the Reborn in the Corellian system were indeed having their own series of competitions to see who would get pride of place beside Ranma, but other competitions were going on at the same time, scattered across the base the Mandos had taken over and out into the countryside beyond. Figuring out how these contests were being organized was annoying, but eventually, Ranma figured it out and put in place his own competition: an endurance run around the fortress with backpacks laden with half again the weight of a normal Mando's gear.

Ranma made a point of hefting four such packs to his shoulders, then making three more disappear into his ki-space before looking at the hundred participants around him, young men and women who had already won at least a few of the other contests going on all around them. "Now, if you lot want to learn how to do that, impress me here, and I'll put in a good word with Bo for ya."

"That's the Mandalore to you, you kriffer," muttered one voice among the helmeted crowd, a girl's voice from the sound of it while the rest cheered.

"I like that attitude. Let's see how long you can keep it." Without further ado, Ranma turned and raced off.

Several hours later, Ranma, who hadn't even worked up a sweat, led the group's broken, dispirited remnants back into the base. Janice broke off from conducting a few close-combat bouts to come over and stare as Ranma laid down several of the young aspirants who he'd had to carry back. "There are more that will need rescue, I take it?"

"Yep. They all did way better than most. Your endurance training is already pretty darn good. But I think..." Ranma paused, turning to look out past the outer gate of the base as he heard the tramp of feet coming towards them. "Huh. I could have sworn they'd all passed out."

From behind Ranma, two Mandalorians came, stumbling along, one supporting the other occasionally. That alone wasn't anything new. Ranma had seen it on the run from most of the Reborn, helping one another being part of Mandalorian training. But the fact these two had removed their helmets and kept going was pretty darn impressive, even if the sight of them gasping with their tongues lolling out was hilarious. "Okay, so I was wrong. We do seem to have a winner. Two winners in point of fact."

Janice however was staring at the young girl of the pair. She was noticeably shorter than the young man beside her, but not overmuch in Ranma's opinion. However, it was evident that Janice recognized her. "Keala!? Oh Kriff, Bo is not going to be happy."

Keala Kryze, Bo-Katan's cousin, stumbled to a halt in front of Ranma, twisting off her pack and moving to the side where she promptly began to throw up. The young man with her soon did the same, then slumped against the wall, chest heaving, tongue still lolling out as his body trembled. While Keala just laid there for a moment, he ground out, "Endurance run finished, you sadistic kriffer!"

"Now that, right there, is the kind of attitude and perseverance I want to see!" Ranma laughed. "Welcome aboard you two."

"You get to explain to Bo why her cousin is joining our merry band of crazies then," Janice grumbled.

"Oh no I don't. I'm going to leave that up to the girl in question. Unless you can look me in the eye and say Bo gave ya permission to try out for this?" Ranma asked, moving over and handing the two of them water bottles.

"She knew," Keala pouted around the water bottle. "I dropped with the rest of the Night Owls, killed a few droids, even took out a tank! I'm a blooded Reborn now. She said if I was crazy enough to try out, she'd understand."

“Good enough for me,” Ranma nodded, as Janice breathed a sigh of relief. “And you kiddo, what’s your name?”

“Fabian, Fabian of Clan Tak,” the other winner replied.

“Well Fabian Tak and Keala Kryze, welcome aboard. Hope you like it loud and nasty, because that’s about all you’re going to see with me and Shaak.” With that Ranma helped them both to their feet, forcing them to start doing some cool-down exercises lest they cramp up. “And after that, let’s go grab your gear and head on up.”

Doubting very much he would find anymore recruits with the willpower of these two quickly, Ranma retreated to orbit with them, letting Bo and Janice choose the last inductee. There he met with Shaak, Ahsoka and HK in the Wild Blade. Kit and Anakin were still staying on the planet.

Ahsoka looked up from where Shaak was showing her an unarmed technique to take in the sight of the two Mandos, both of whom looked nearly her own age. That was nice, but since they were coming in with Ranma, Ahsoka decided to see how they could handle some Ranma-style taunting. “Oh no, not more Mandos. I like Janice and all, but they clank so much when they move around! How do you all stand wearing all that metal I’ll never know.”

“Don’t knock it till you try it babe,” Keala shot back. “Until it’s saved your life in battle you can never know what armor really is for.”

“Me I try not to get hit in the first place,” Ahsoka taunted, before patting her lightsaber, “and if I can’t dodge, I’ve got this.”

“Hah! Try to block more than four dozen heavy blasters from multiple directions and no cover,” Fabian interjected. “A lightsaber’s flashy, but armor beats it hands down.”

Where their little argument would have ended up was made mute as a rumble reverberated around the sitting area. As it subsided, Ahsoka started to giggle, while Shaak smiled, and the two young Mandos looked as if they would die of embarrassment. “Food please?” Keala whimpered.

“You do know you’ll have to take off your helmet first, right?” Ahsoka just couldn’t stop herself from taunting.

Deciding to leave the youngsters Ranma to it, Ranma went into the kitchen, calling out to Shaak, “So do we have an updated timeframe on when we’re leaving for Wayland?”

To Ranma’s chagrin, they wouldn’t leave for Wayland that day. Even with reinforcements here, there still needed to be some preparation done before Corellia could send aid to the mysterious planet, and the Dictat and Garm had decided they needed to. Bo-Katan

wanted to send at least two of her Katana-class ships with them, as well as a wing of Mandalorian starfighters. The Sekotan Coralskippers would also be coming with them, how many Coral skippers remained, under Master Tiin. The green Jedi wanted to put a team together to help with Wayland's computer systems. They would be led by one of the Jedi that Ranma and Shaak had come to know, Master Halcyon.

Anakin and Kit would also be coming with them. Kit had decided to stay with Ranma and Shaak for now, despite Master Yoda wanting him and Anakin to head to Zonama Sekot. Kit felt that Wayland was too important for them to leave. He would do so only after Wayland had been kept in their hands long enough for them to get the one bit of information they needed: The location and hopefully the identity of the Sith Lord hiding in the shadows of Darth Tyrannus. Anakin, too, would be a major help controlling the Sekotan Coralskippers.

After dinner, such talks ended, and work was assigned. The two new youngsters were given the job of preparing to design their new armor. Bo-Katan had decreed that both of them and the other survivors of the first batch of trainees would be given beskar metal to forge into their new armor. But they would have to forge their own armor with it, as was the way of beskar'gam. The two could start that process now with the design phase.

For her part, Ahsoka was given several meditation exercises to work on. In this case, concentrating on multiple things at once. Two lightsaber training spheres rotated around her as Ahsoka stood in the center of the training area aboard the *Wild Blade*, balancing four tiny balls that looked like ball-bearings in her hands. She had to levitated them a few inches from her palms, while dancing around the tiny stinging bolts of energy that the two circling droids sent her way.

This left Shaak and Ranma to cuddle on the sofa, watching and occasionally calling out corrections to Ahsoka's stance, or her attention on the Force as they leaned against one another, while listening with interest to the conversation the two, now sans their helmets Mandos were having about this or that armor design. As they did, talk turned to the conversation from earlier in the day.

"I think we were kind of harsh on the clones," Ranma reflected. "I'll admit that that Clone General's attitude was really arrogant, maybe a bit of Jango's personality lingering on? But it's not like they could help being made. I'm glad that Master Yoda got back to us and told us that they were already pushing for more rights for the clones in the future."

"I am happy on that score as well, though I will admit that yes, they certainly didn't seem to wish to defuse matters. They had a bone to grind with the Reborn. I sensed that despite their words of contempt the clones wished to prove the Reborn's betters. But then when they could not, the clones seemed to take some strange satisfaction from it. Still, we seem to have burst that particular pustule thanks to your understanding the warrior ethos. Why, it's almost as if you were one of the brutes yourself," Shaak teased.

Ranma smiled at that and Shaak asked if Bo-Katan would be forced to remain here or return to the Mandalorian sector herself. "After all, she has to rebuild the numbers they'd lost in the fleet action and see to inducting the Corellians and others who are interested in joining the Mandalorians."

Ranma however laughed at that, shaking his head. "No chance! Bo's is not a strategist, love. She might be the leader of the war reborn, but that doesn't mean Bo going to want to go back to simply preparing the war machine as it were rather than leading the men at the front."

Conceding the point, Shaak idly wondered, "I wonder how many new inductees into the Mandalorian Way they are gathering down there? And what will become of such recruitment over time."

OOOOOO

Dark Acolyte Sev'rance Tann sighed in pleasure as she continued to watch the intense exercises and contests going on below. Several thousand young Mandalorians were sparring in fifteen-man groups of free-for-all combat, while even more of their elders and fellows watched from all around, shouting encouragement, cheering, or just making noise. There were even scattered groups of clones, although none were taking part in these contests.

Slipping past the few Mandalorians that were on guard had been child's play to the Dark Acolyte. Every Sith was a master of using the Force to cloak themselves, a holdover, though Sev'rance didn't know it, of the days of the Rule of Two, which had ended when the invasion of Naboo ended with Maul's death. After that, the red-eyed woman had hidden in the center of the military base that the Mandalorians had taken over for their stay on Corellia Prime, watching all of the contests one after another. The sheer emotion from the Mandalorians was intoxicating and became more so when the music started to play. Some kind of martial air in their own language, which over the intercom she couldn't translate with her Force powers. Regardless it added to the emotional torrent around her.

Where was all this emotion before? I've been in crowds before, I've even been to rallies and speeches. But I've never felt anything like this. Perhaps, perhaps the emotions then didn't register as much, given my connection to the Dark Side? Could my feeling so much hate and anger within me have blinded me to the power of my other emotions? Regardless, Sev'rance was more convinced than ever now that emotions were power, not just the Dark Side emotions that most Sith would have assumed. This whole martial fervor, this lust for combat, violence and proving yourself against your opponent, that worked just as well as fear and anger to fuel Sev'rance and bring her a sense of near ecstasy.

This revelation was most decidedly a wake-up call, and Sev'rance decided then and there to pursue this.

Before, Sev'rance had joined the Dark Side due to admiration for Master Bulq, desire for more strength, and, eventually, the belief that the Sith were certain to win. But with the breaking of the Veil, which allowed her to think about emotions and power and the connection therein more clearly, her loyalty to master Tyrannus was gone.

Sev'rance snuck closer, listening in on a few conversations as she let the feelings wash over her, keeping a mental clamp on her stealth techniques with difficulty. In this manner she learned about the reasons behind these contests and that a large group of the Mandalorians serving as crew for their heavy cruisers would be leaving Corellia soon. In fact, most would be leaving. Most would be heading back to their own sector to rest and recuperate. Others would stay and use the local facilities to repair their ships while also recruiting new inductees into the Mandalorian Way among the Corellians.

But the two least-damaged capital ships and several squadrons worth of starfighters, along with two companies worth of troops were going to be going to someplace else. Led by Bo-Katan herself, they would join the *Wild Blade*, a ship that Sev'rance and all Dark Acolytes had heard of before. A ship synonymous with carnage brought to the enemies of the Jedi Order and the one who Tyrannus called the Chaotic Locus.

That decided it for Sev'rance. She had no desire to stay here or see what the Mandalorians were away from the battlefield. And if they were going with the Chaotic Locus, who had been the center of last night's festivities for some reason, that was all the better. *Now, how to board their ships without being spotted... that's going to be tricky...*

OOOOOO

In Corellia, ships continued to come into the system in ones and twos as lots and lots of Corellians the galaxy wide came home to help their home system. Not all of them were criminals either. Many were businessmen, independent traders, pilots, engineers, workers, soldiers or scientists. Wherever they roamed, Corellians had a fierce loyalty to their home system, even if they hadn't actually been born there, rather raised in that culture elsewhere. Whole families, some of them quite large ones, who had migrated away from Corellia decades ago were coming back now, eager to help their home system recover and grow even stronger than it had been.

One of these was a ship Ranma and Shaak vaguely recognized. Staring at it as it came down to rest in the space station near the *Wild Blade*, something this ship had apparently requested, Ranma cocked his head to one side. "I've seen that ship somewhere before, haven't I?"

“That would be the Starwayman, the ship which helped us escape from Tatooine,” Shaak supplied. “The captain’s name is Booster. He was a Corellian, I recall.”

Nearby, Anakin nodded firmly. “I remember him. He helped all of the other slaves belonging to Jabba and Gardulla escape. It will be good to see him, although I wonder if he has news of my mother...”

His voice trailed off as the man in question appeared. Booster was followed by Anakin’s mother, a thin, short woman with dark brown hair. A woman who was quite visibly pregnant at the moment. “Wh, what the kriff!” Anakin shouted, all of his Jedi training deserting him in the face of this shocking revelation.

Walking towards them, Shmi saw her son’s face, and laughed, linking her arm with Booster’s. “Hello Anakin, how are you doing? It’s been a while since we were able to talk.”

“Yes, it has been, about a year and a half, maybe as much as two? But that’s not my fault, I mean Master Giiett wanted to limit those within the Order who knew I kept in contact with you most of the time. And when I was on missions with Master Giiett, we were in communication blackout, and then we were on Ryloth, and well if anyone knew what we’ve been doing there, we would’ve faced a lot more opposition to meet ended up doing, a and...” Anakin paused in his dithering, trying to push through the shock which had grown in him at the site of his mother pregnant. **Pregnant!** “But that’s neither here nor there! Mom, what are you doing?!”

“Well what did you expect? I’m not a nun or a Jedi, dear. And you know that I took up with Booster a few years after we were freed from Tatooine. This,” she tapped her belly with a laugh, “is only the end product of that, you know.”

Anakin blushed hotly, looking away, and sensing his embarrassment with her mother-senses, rusty thought they were, Shmi leaped on it. “Oh, is there something my son should tell me about? Have you met a young lady? I didn’t think that that was allowed for the Jedi.”

“Most of us are not allowed to form such attachments. We must first prove we are strong enough in will and determination to remain within the Light to be worthy of it. Although we are allowed to seek physical companionship, and despite any protestations to the contrary he might make, Anakin is nowhere near a saint in that area,” Kit answered, moving forward and bowing from the waist. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced, Miss Skywalker. My name is Kit Fisto. I am Anakin’s new Master, something he would be telling you about if his manners, as well as his wits, had not abandoned him. Really Anakin, as a Jedi, you should be able to roll with any of the little surprises life throws at you.”

Anakin grumbled at that, but Shmi’s humor faded instantly, as Booster stiffened next to her, about to hold out his hand to Ranma and Shaak, instead shifting his attention to Kit. “What? What happened to Master Giiett?”

“Master Giiett passed into the Force in our mission before the battle in Corellia. We found an enemy installation of vital importance to the enemy, but it’s defenses were incredibly formidable,” Anakin said, mindful of the need to keep the fact that the Sith were out there a secret. For now, anyway. He didn’t think that secret would be kept within the Jedi for very long. In fact, he wasn’t certain why it was being kept at all now, but that was a decision the High Council had to make in conjunction with the Senate and the Chancellor.

“I am sorry to hear that. Micah was a good man, and I think good for you in general, Anakin,” Shmi commiserated, looking at her son in sympathy before trying to brighten the atmosphere, somewhat thrown off by the look of grim determination and odd sense of peacefulness on Anakin’s face. “Will you and your new Master be staying here in Corellia? With the blanket pardon being handed out, Booster and I are going to be settling down here, I think.”

Everyone looked at Booster, and Ranma smirked. “I thought we handed out a pardon to you before. Did you actually have to use it and then get into so much trouble again that you need another one?”

Booster grunted, looking a little uncomfortable. “Would you believe that I got into a drunken brawl and then a shootout with the local constabulary on one of our stops? I can’t even remember most of it, but that was the last time I got drunk. Shmi has seen to that for certain.”

“And you’re looking much healthier and slimmer for it,” Shmi opined, looking somewhat smug. “Anyway, we were forced to use that blanket pardon for him and his crew afterwards, rather a step down for Booster Tarik, notorious smuggler. Especially since one of the locals was actually able to down him with a single stun bolt, after he had previously wrecked the entire bar. Most of his crew are still not letting him live that one down.”

“No more should they!” Ranma laughed, as did Anakin and Kit.

However, after a moment, Kit shook his head. “I am afraid that we will not be staying here for very long. We need to make certain that our latest gain remains in our hands, and by this time, there is no doubt that the Confederacy will already have discovered its loss. Anakin and I will be heading there along with Ranma, Shaak and our allies soon enough, although we will stay here for the rest of today. We’re waiting for the final repairs on a few of the Mandalorian ships.” He smiled, then gesturing to Anakin. “And yes, that means that you can spend time with your son today.”

Like Micah before him, Kit didn’t particularly like the fact Anakin had such divided loyalties. But he understood Anakin was very much a man of strong emotions and connections. Denying them would be hurtful at best, and Kit was also not one to fight a battle already lost.

That was what Anakin did with the rest of his day, spending time with his mother and with Booster, getting to know the man better than he had previously through his various

communication with Shmi over the years, since Anakin had become a Jedi. With some annoyance, Anakin realized his mother was no longer just his mom, but someone else's wife. Yet, at the same time, Booster was a decent man. Kind of formidable in his own way, for a non-Jedi. And it was obvious he doted on Shmi, which was a point in his favor with Anakin. That, and the fact he planned to live here in Corellia, about as far away from the harsh existence Shmi had known for most of her life as a slave as could be imagined.

Later that day, as Anakin dropped his mother and Booster off at their ship, he received a call from the station's intercom asking him to come to the nearest Hypercom center. Apparently, a call had come in for him from Coruscant. Opening the Hypercom communique, Anakin was surprised to see the Chancellor and allowed a smile to appear on his face. "Chancellor, I heard that you were recovering from a poisoning attempt. It's good to see you up and about!"

"Thank you, Anakin. It has been an experience, recovering from my poisoning and playing catch up after that event. My people did as well as they could, but there are just some things, decisions, discussions, and meetings, that I should really have made myself, and double-checking on such has redoubled my normal workload in a time when I could ill-afford it. Unfortunately, I do not have as much time to talk to you as I would like, my young friend. But I wanted to get your impression on fighting with Mandalorians, which is a very hot-button issue in the Senate, unfortunately. Getting the opinion of a Jedi with no previous connection to them or the High Council will give me great insight into playing that particular issue. And..."

The Chancellor's face turned grave as he shook his head. "I wished to give my condolences to you on the passing of your master. The Jedi Order passed that on to me upon my recovery when your current master's name came up concerning yourself and the battle of Corellia." The older man smiled then. "Where I hear you played a significant role, again. Well done!"

"I did my part I suppose. Leading a starfighter wing like that was incredible!" Anakin gushed, almost revealing the fact those ships were alive before reining in his enthusiasm, nodding his head gravely. "But yes, Master Giiett died when we stormed a... enemy fortress recently."

"Confederacy or Sith?" Sheev asked shrewdly. "I have been allowed in on that secret as well. Indeed, I imparted some revelations on the score myself, barely a few hours before the poisoning attempt. Let me tell you, that fact certainly gave me particularly heinous nightmares to work through during my convalescence. To hear of the fact that you have struck such blow would do me good. A thousand years has passed since the New Sith Wars, yet even so, that is far too short a time for the memory of that time or the horrors propagated on both sides of that conflict to have faded."

Put that way and knowing that the Chancellor knew at least about the Sith, Anakin simply nodded his head firmly. "We did strike a massive blow against them, Chancellor, never

fear. Although I will say that certain personal revelations which have come out of that have been... odd. I'm afraid that sharing them with you would not be a fast process and would include a lot of background on the Force you don't have."

Sheev nodded at that and didn't ask for any more information, noting, "I know all too well you're being vague on purpose, my young friend." Instead, he simply asked how Micah had died.

When Anakin was done explaining how that had happened, Sheev sighed, shaking his head sadly. "In our scattered interactions, I have always found Micah to be a rock of good sense, humor, and forethought. Even among Jedi, he was one of the best, especially considering he never took himself too seriously or the universe. It is astonishing how important the ability to laugh can be when times are hard. Knowing that he was cut down like that makes me extremely angry. I cannot imagine what you are dealing with, Anakin. I understand that anger can be dangerous to the Jedi, although I have never quite understood the fundamental difference between Light and Dark save in the methods both sides used. How can a single emotion corrupt you so when all emotions are an equal part of life? Indeed, there is something to be said for the power of righteous fury."

"I was extremely angry at the time, Chancellor," Anakin admitted. "I even was beginning to hate the Sith, perhaps even the Force for letting it occur. But my new master and I spoke about it and about certain personal revelations. Finally, I realized that if I gave in to my anger, the Dark Side would win. Anger is corrosive, uncontrollable if you give into it. But while my anger is part of me, I will not let it control me. I am a Jedi, and I will stand against the Dark Side."

"Yes, you are," the Chancellor said, and the man's pride in Anakin came through, causing Anakin to smile wider and straighten his shoulders. Then the Chancellor sighed, shaking his head. "But tell me about working with the Mandalorians. As I said, I need a first-hand account of how they comported themselves during and after the battle to give to the Senate. In this manner, I can circumvent quite a lot of the concerns there, with the added benefit of the Corellia sector coming back into the fold."

That conversation went on for around thirty more minutes by the clock, before the Chancellor, once more congratulating Anakin on his part in the battle and telling him that the Chancellor was proud of him, cut the intercom. Staring at the screen, Anakin could only shake his head. *I hope talking to me brought him some small measure of respite from his work. There is a man with the weight of the galaxy on his shoulders.*

OOOOOO

On Coruscant, Sidious gripped the edge of his table, grinding his teeth in pure rage. Throughout the conversation, Sidious had been subtly using the Force and his own senses to see how Anakin was handling the death of his master, the death of the man who pretty much became a father figure to him. But due to the Aquilian Jedi's influence and whatever he had found on Wayland, Sidious was grimly certain that Anakin had found something, had helped Anakin firm up his resolve against the Dark Side to a level that the Chancellor would have a devil of a time breaking through. *Now only his pride and some arrogance remain as a lever, and that isn't enough!*

Anakin, the so-called vengeance that Plagueis had created, had broken free of the Dark Side's influence. And Sidious had far too many other matters to juggle to try and correct that. *I will have to cut my losses. Curse the Chaotic Locus to the deepest darkest depths of space! Still, if he is on Wayland, perhaps the Confederacy fleet will be able to remove him from play, along with the Locus. Yet, I cannot allow that hope to blind me. My preparations to escape, if needed, must continue,* Sidious thought grimly even as he clicked on the intercom to tell his secretary to send in the next group of people he needed to talk to. Sith Lord or Chancellor, his work was never truly done.

OOOOOOO

As the first wave of clones arrived in Corellia, the second battle of Wayland was beginning.

The fleet that the Confederacy had moved into position to attack the planet was small and somewhat ramshackle. It was built around seven Munificent-class ships and six troop transport ships loaded with two full armies of droids, complete with heavy weapons teams, skimmers, hover tanks and portable shield generators. Accompanying the fleet were two small carriers added on at the last minute. But both of them were carrying only a third of their normal complement of Vulture fighters.

While Vulture fighters were very easy to build in the scattered hundred-plus factories of the Confederacy in the area near Wayland, they didn't have quite the number that they normally would elsewhere. And the orders to attack this out-of-the-way planet in the Outer Rim had been non-discretionary: attack **NOW**, with no time allowed for buildup.

Not that the Vultures would be needed, Commodore Nictor, a Muun, thought to himself as he leaned back in his chair and watched this fleet's ships settle into orbit over the planet. *This planet doesn't have any orbital defenses and certainly doesn't seem industrialized enough to have offensive weapons. Unless that's changed in the last two minutes. "Sensors, anything new?"*

“Well, we’re finally getting something from down there, sir, said his sensor specialists, looking aggrieved. “Whoever built this place was making damned certain that it couldn’t be found from space, that’s for sure. But there’s possibly been some recent damage that’s harmed the station’s ability to internalize its heat signature. Barely, but we can pick it up now.”

“What are we here for again?” the captain asked, looking over at the Commodore. He was a Muun like the Commodore.

“A secret Jedi weapons facility,” Nictor replied dryly.

The man looked at him blankly for a moment, and the Commodore shrugged uncomfortably. “I don’t believe it any more than you do, but then again, it’s been demonstrably proven that the Jedi were planning for war and are just as obviously still on the side of the Republican tyrants. I wouldn’t put anything past them,” he repeated the party line with some fervor. In the past few weeks, several captains and commodores had been removed to question how the war was being fought, and Nictor didn’t want to follow them.

He looked back over the sensors tech specialist ordering, “Continue Sensors.”

“One continent, mountainous, **very** mountainous, but also very much of a jungle environment. No signs of technological civilization except on a few out islands near the equator. Even there, they looked massively overgrown. If there was ever a civilization here, be it locally grown or a colony, it’s gone now. Scattered heat sources here, here and here. The one on its own is almost definitely a dummy installation.”

“Localize the largest heat source,” Nictor ordered, frowning in thought. “And then ready the landing force. We’re supposed to try to take this place intact if we can, and that’s what we’ll do.” At his orders, the troop transports broke off from the orbiting fleet, heading down. As they hit atmosphere, they spread out just in case the locals were feeling sneaky and were hiding their teeth.

A moment later, this was proven to be a good idea as fire began to streak up towards them from the mountain that was their target. Capital grade proton torpedoes launched from various other places, although their launchers were soon destroyed by the ships in orbit, while a shield suddenly appeared around the mountain.

“FUCKING KRIFF!” the sensor specialist cursed, then apologized. “Sorry sir, that heat source, the energy source causing it is a lot bigger than I thought. That shield is a planetary generator installatiONN!”

“Evasive!” the Captain said as a turbolaser battery from below crashed into their shielding, displacing even more energy than the spine-mounted turbolaser cannons and nearly throwing the sensor specialist out of his chair.

The Munificent in orbit were the primary target of the mountain's weapons, and four of them died quickly, their captains not having brought their shields up to full power after they had seen the planet hadn't had any defenders. Why they had varied, but regardless, again the rule of the heavy cruisers was proven: once their shields were gone, it didn't take much to turn the Munificent class into a death trap.

Seeing this Nictor cursed. "Pull back! Get us into higher orbit! All ships full evasive!"

Then the ion cannons hit. Each of them was planetary installation sized weapons, fit to knock out the shields of a Lucrehulk if paired together. Even separated between the remaining cruisers, they nearly overwhelmed the remaining heavy cruiser's shields, completely disrupting their ability to coordinate. Two ships collided, exploding in space, while the commodore's ship survived for just a second longer before the ion cannons completely disrupted the ship's electronics. Only a single carrier escaped, fleeing out-system.

At the same time this destruction had been going on, the Vulture wings descended like a cloud towards the fortress below. The Vultures had been the reason why the defensive torpedoes hadn't been able to get out of the atmosphere, but they had been less effective against the energy weapons, which had simply punched through any that got in their way, losing only scant amounts of their energy. Now falling back on their local tactical nets, the Vultures attacked the mountain, hammering the shield.

The anti-starfighter defenses of the planet swiftly pushed out from behind its protective hatches, going to rapid-fire. Quad lasers, turbo lasers, even occasionally ion cannons flashed out, not just from the single central mountain that was their target but elsewhere.

But the amount of Vultures and the concentration on the orbiting ships did seem to cost the defenders: the troop transports, although having spread out, were mostly able to land. Three were lost when the fortress opened up, but the rest were able to shift their landing targets fast enough to instead crash down into the jungle elsewhere. They were scattered, but intact and soon droids, tanks and mobile shield generators rolled out of the transport's capacious innards.

OOOOOO

Hidden in the depths of the jungle several dozen miles from the base of the hidden ex-Sith fortress, Obi-Wan stood, one hand resting lightly on the hilt of his lightsaber as he watched the Nova Guard's local commander, who was in direct communication with the mountain. He nodded in the Jedi's direction, and Obi-Wan nodded back, gesturing around him. "We have

incoming,” he said in a near whisper, “wait until they have landed, and the shields have deactivated.”

So busy with flying and defending themselves and taking the mountain directly, the Vultures had not spread themselves far enough to truly cover the landing zones enough. Now the Nova Guard took advantage of this, and concussion missiles raced from the jungles up to meet the few incoming Vultures. Vultures had okay shielding for starfighters, but they couldn't stop paired concussion missiles, and every one of them in Obi-Wan's sight fell flaming to the ground even as the troop transports began to lay down a withering hail of fire.

But the same high iron content which defeated most ship's scanners at a distance made the trees of this planet somewhat resistant to laser fire as well, and the teams who fired the concussion missiles were already moving by the time their weapons had cleared the foliage. None of them were hit in turn in Obi-Wan's area command zone, and the squads assigned to the anti-air assault reformed quickly.

Obi-Wan had been somewhat surprised that the Nova Guard didn't use four-man fireteams like most species did. They used base three with each team of three paired with another into a squad, and each 'fist' would have a heavy weapons team, with each fist expected to act independently. These could range from a concussion missile launcher and a heavy repeating blaster to two of either or a portable turbolaser gun for anti-vehicle warfare. Their mobility through the forest was also extremely good, not as good as it would've been Mandalorians, but they made up for that lack with the heavier weapons they utilized.

The enemy droids were finding this out to their cost as they attempted to move in a combat column through the jungle towards their target. The droids were the same model that had been used on Corellia, the B-2 combat droid. Compared to the B-1s used in the siege of Naboo, the B-2 type had a far better command and control network, along with their onboard 'Artificial Stupid'. They moved out from their landing bit bases in good order despite taking fire, Infantry first firing back into the woods at their attackers, while the tanks and heavy weapons remained behind, for now, trying to clear a zone of the forest, which was not easy.

But as they pushed forward, the droids' mental shortcomings came into play. While under fire, two droids moved forward, one covering the other with blaster fire. The one moving forward moved around a tree and heard a 'tink' sound underneath it. Looking down, the bird-headed droid saw something small and silvery beneath the foliage. "Warning, explosives deteC!!!"

There was a shattering "Kaboom!" and it and its squadmates all disappeared in a ball of fire.

Several others were running into similar traps, cruder than that one. These ranged from mostly dead drops, trees coming at them at speed and other such items. However, as the droids began to slow down even further, the sporadic attacks from the forest all around them

were joined by heavier attacks randomly, the Nova Guard using hit and fade tactics to excellent effect thanks to their knowledge of the terrain. The droids were good, well-programmed, and knew how to use cover, although that seemed to be a secondary addition to their original programming, second to taking the fight to the enemy. But they couldn't traverse the forest as quickly or well as the Nova Guard could.

However, interspersed among the regular droids were others. The Magna Guard that Obi-Wan and the other attackers who had taken Wayland away from the Sith had seen previously had been added to every droid Army group as Special Forces units to hopefully combat the Jedi. And behind them, the heavy weapons units among the attackers, the tanks and others, opened fire randomly into the woods to attack the Nova Guard.

The Nova Guard responded to this by breaking contact instantly, moving back through the woods. With their direct-fire weaponry, the tanks were soon taken out of the battle simply thanks to the terrain and were forced to shift objectives back to clearing more of the area around the landing zone. The Magna Guard kept pushing forward, remonstrating audibly with the slower B-2 droids. "Faster, faster you cretins, close with the enemy! They are but creatures of flesh and blood. They can be overcome!"

When they were spotted by a few of the defenders, Obi-Wan moved forward from his command post, about two hundred meters back from the current engagement area. This was why he and K'Kruhk were at the front lines, to deal with the Magna Guard or any Sith-related surprises that might be with the attacking army. As he moved forward, reports about the Magna Guard kept coming in, and using the map he had memorized of this portion of the forest, Obi-Wan started to give orders. "Squads two and three break contact. The Magna Guard are trying to flank you. Squad Five and Six await orders. Squad seven move up to join five and six."

With these orders, the attacking column's right side was left without any direct opponents, but the terrain was against the regular droids being able to take advantage of that. The Magna Guard, on the other hand, pushed forward hard, eager to flank the defenders. But this left them open to being taken in the flank in turn without backup.

"Squad nine, you seem to be in a position to enfilade the lot of them from the side. Do so." Squad nine had been set to move forward and attack the flank of the enemy when they got to a certain point but now moved slightly back and shifted their targets to a different area than they had been concentrating on previously, the Nova Guard moving with alacrity.

Although Obi-Wan wasn't one of their own commanding officers, he was a Jedi and had proven himself in battle. Moreover, he had then proven his common sense by turning over total command of the battle to Marshall Yurrick, taking a captain's spot rather than anything higher.

The Magna Guard closed through the forest quickly, as Obi-Wan knew they would be able to, moving much more adroitly over the uneven terrain than the rest of the droid army

could. However, they still lost members to several traps, and then, when they reached the flank of the defenders, squad nine waited until they were rushing forward through the woods, all of their attention trained on the squads dug into various foxholes in the forest floor, firing towards the B-2 droids.

Squad nine opened up, followed by squad seven, hidden behind and slightly inward of where the Magna Guard had spotted the other squads. Heavy blaster fire bracketed them from their left side and directly ahead of them, and most of them died quickly under that withering hail of fire and grenades. The survivors were trying to fall back, but then Obi-Wan leaped out of where he had been hiding, activating his lightsaber. The Magna Guards who survived raced in his direction, shifting direction from the foxhole where squad five had set up.

They might've reached that foxhole if not for the fact that their programming forced them to assume that the Jedi was the greater threat. Two more died before they even reached him, and Obi-Wan dueled with the last, before it too fell from blaster fire from behind, two of whose bolts Obi-Wan bounced directly into the droid from point-blank range when otherwise they would have missed.

"Company one reporting. Magna Guard threat has been dealt with, but we were forced to fall back faster than anticipated. Do we have a breakout in any other direction?" With the squads' concentration here, that was a distinct possibility since his company had been assigned the initial contact point. *Then too, the droids could have pulled back and tried to move on an oblique angle through the woodland from their landing zone instead of directly towards the fortress.*

"Negative," came the reply instantly from the other three companies that had moved in on this particular landing zone. "The droids are still simply moving in column formation heading towards the mountain."

"Roger that," the battalion's colonel interrupted. "Company two, company five, move around and prepare to backup company one. Companies three and four await orders to attack the landing zone from behind. Let's see how much of a rush they are in."

Over the next few hours, the landing zones' droids began to push towards the mountain slowly. **Very** slowly. This was the worst kind of terrain for droids like the B-2 or their larger brethren, and the commanding officers of the droids knew it. To that end, they slowed their forward progress down further to cut down the jungle as they went. It was felt this kind of tactic would work eventually. Two Army groups worth of droids were certainly enough to push forward towards the mountain.

But the Nova Guard were dug in heavily. Indeed, they were holding up the enemy with what amounted to about two battalions, leaving the rest of their forces in reserve.

And as the battle spread, the battle in the sky began to end. Several of the Vultures had made landfall, turning into giant walkers, but most had been destroyed for little return. The mountain had lost many of its distant robotic launchers, but the mountain itself had not been damaged at all. And when the vulture's tactical net – the vultures didn't have any equivalent of droid generals – realized they were doing nothing, they had broken up, some trying to escape to space, others landing.

And at the same time that the fight on the ground started to stabilize, the troop transports that the Nova Guard had brought with them rocketed up towards space. One Munificent class and a small carrier had been knocked out entirely via ion cannons. Two full brigades of Nova Guard were on those ships, intent on taking both ships and then, if possible, immediately chasing after the enemy carrier that had yet to jump for hyperspace.

From where he was watching all this in the command center, Yurrick wasn't very optimistic about that. The enemy would have to be a complete idiot not to booby-trap their systems when they realized they were being boarded, so any system they started up would need to be cleaned before it could be used. But even so, having those two ships could come in handy later on.

Shaking his head, Yurrick turned his attention to the land battle. "Power down the shield, ready artillery weapons." He scanned the screen for a moment, seeing where his forces were as bright green dots, countering the enemy's red, which were far more numerous in nature. "Contact the Seventh Battalion's spotter team."

Artillery meant indirect fire weapons. In this case, concussion-missile munitions fired from long-range bombardment cannons from the fortress. There was a line of thought that believed that direct fire artillery was better, but the Nova Guard had always espoused a mixed bag, and Yurrick was no exception to that rule. *Besides, the weapons are here. Why wouldn't I use them?*

The first capital-ship-sized concussion-style munition crashed into the landing zone where master K'Kruhk was pushing into the enemy column from one side. Here the local commander had pulled further and further back, using only single fireteams until the locals had entered a ravine in the jungle, where his men had the height advantage and less scrub to fire through. The droids had pushed in hard, only to be stopped there by only a single company, while, and the other companies of his command had moved to attack the landing zone.

The artillery round crashed into the transporter's shield, knocking them out in one go. Two more landed, crashing down and further shattering the shields. When the last shield fizzled out, K'Kruhk was ready. "First brigade, at them."

The next second, his command and the rest rushed forward, covering the open ground that the droids had created quickly enough that they only lost a few people to defensive fire before they were in among the tanks and other hover-type units that couldn't push forward

into the tree-line. There, K'Kruhk cut into one vehicle, slicing its side open, before tossing a grenade up into the cupola of another tank. As the grenade exploded, he spotted a group of Magna Guards.

Unlike with Obi-wan, the Magna Guard had remained with the vehicle-type droids instead of moving forward to engage the defenders since the attack on this front seemed to be going well. He could see only four of them, but they cut down two of the Nova Guard before being stopped by another pair of Nova Guard unincumbered by heavy weapons. The pair instantly pulled out their own staffs, fighting back against the four droids, then K'Kruhk was there, lightsaber crashing into the hasty defense of one of the droids, leaping to the side then stabbing forward, his stab being blocked by the same droid.

The Magna Guard was shot dead by one of his companions as he engaged it with his lightsaber, the vibro-blades buzzing and whirring as they impacted the lightsaber's plasma beam. The vibrating blades created a vibration field that was enough to keep the lightsaber's plasma from impacting the physical blade. But that was the only area of the light pikes that were immune, and the next second, a second Magna Guard fell back as his the vibro-staff was cut in half, followed by a roundhouse blow from K'Kruhk's sword, which cut the droid in half.

K'Kruhk grunted as a vibroblade from another attacker hit his shoulder. Still, it was a glancing blow as he was already moving to dodge. A Force Push took that droid in the center of the chest, tossing it off-balance as he engaged the last droid with his lightsaber. The second droid didn't get the opportunity to get its feet under it again. A grenade exploded right behind it, tossing it forward and destroying much of its back and legs. Dodging around the droid's collapsing body, K'Kruhk used its falling body as a distraction before cutting off both hands from the last droid, then stabbing it through the chest with his lightsaber. A quick stomp from one of his large feet crushed the skull of the last Magna Guard.

All around him, the regular droids tried to fight back, but the Nova Guard were in among them too quickly, the droids not having pushed out a defensive perimeter, just charging towards their objective. In the middle of the battle, K'Kruhk wondered why before deciding that the droids seemed to be having trouble shifting from what they had been told their objective would be like. *Perhaps that is a weakness in their strategic algorithms.*

As he moved deeper into the enemy landing zone, K'Kruhk hesitated to call it a camp since nothing permanent or even semi-so had been set up, he saw more Magna Guard scattered around. But while he dealt with a few, many of the Nova Guard was armed with polearms which matched those of the Magna Guard, while others laid down a withering hail of heavy weapons fire and lobed grenades wherever their own people wasn't. With the Nova Guard coming in from three different directions and their shields down, the landing zone was soon overrun despite the Magna Guard's best efforts to provide some close-defense. By the time the B-2 droids that had moved into the jungle, returned, K'Kruhk and the Nova Guard were gone, fading back into the jungle.

Elsewhere this operation was done as effectively if not as adroitly. At the next artillery-targeted landing zone, the local droid commander had yet to fully mobilize their infantry away from the landing zone. Instead, he was concentrating on clearing ground for the tanks and vehicles. When the Fifth battalion companies attacked them, the fight there continued for several minutes until Yurrick ordered some of his reserves into play in the form of Fourth Division, overwhelming the droids quickly and thus keeping casualties among the defenders' light.

At two other landing zones, the droids had landed close enough to coordinate and pushed out successfully, creating large enough bulwarks of downed trees and open ground to spread their tanks and transports out between them. They began losing their vehicles and transports to the artillery from the mountain, but the B-2 droids from both had merged into one overwhelming assault, pushing through the first two companies of Nova Guard that had moved to engage them. They fell back in disarray, completely surprised by the Magna Guards, who had moved forward well beyond the B-2 droids, killing more Nova Guard here than Yurrick lost in the rest of the battle.

But then the newly minted Captain Cro – the Nova Guard didn't have the equivalent of a lieutenant rank - met the advance with a series of trenches and dugout zones, foxholes, mortar pits, and everything else that he is extremely devious mind could contrive. Finding trenches dug here and there throughout the forest was a shock to the droids, and Cro killed two Magna Guard himself before Dralshy'a cut down another. They and Cro's reinforced company were forced to give ground numerous times, switching from one trench to another, while troops laid down gunfire to force the droids to keep their heads down.

Cro gave up land, even trenches occasionally, most of which were booby-trapped before he pulled back, and retained most of his troops as more defenders were pushed up from the reserve. At the same time, the other battalions moved in behind them. Not a day after the attack had started, the last droids were reported as down.

Hearing this, Yurrick grunted in approval, "Message to the brigade commanders. Well done."

Unfortunately for Yurrick's plans for the captured ships, his people only had a single day to go over their systems to attempt to clear them of viruses before another enemy fleet arrived. This fleet was also much larger than the first, a lot more. And it was much more cautious, as well. Instead of burning straight for the planet, they took their time, sending out vultures first from nearly at the edge of the system. Those vultures destroyed the two captured ships, although all that did was deny them as salvage to either side since Yurrick had made certain his people could run for the surface the moment the enemy was spotted.

After that, Yurrick, Obi-Wan, and K'Kruhk watched as those Vultures were recalled and replaced with four dozen patrol craft and still more Vultures racing toward the planet. "Fire on the gunboats as best we can. Those are scout ships, or I will eat my helmet."

The patrol boats were indeed fitted with special sensor gear. Not that they had any real trouble finding the mountain fortress due to the damage that it had taken during the Jedi assault. The previously covered heat vent was very obvious, as were the new defenses around it. But the gunboats spotted several of the secret weapons installations and covered a large portion of the planet before they approached the fortress. And while most of those gunboats didn't survive to send off their data despite the Vultures trying to give them cover fire, enough did to give the enemy a good idea at the fortress and the defenses now built onto its surface. The defensive works in the forest were much better hidden, of course.

And in turn, the fortress had some extremely impressive sensors, a full planetary sized suite to go with its shields and everything else. Now ignoring the blips of the badly mauled wing of Vultures and their gunboats, Yurrick stared hard at the screen, his forefingers tapping a staccato rhythm on his command chair. That is a large fleet. Indeed, a very large one, if probably ramshackle in terms of the ships all working together. Not that we could take advantage of that ourselves. Now, are they overconfident enough to go straight for the bombardment option, or..."

A moment later, the images on the screen shifted, and he frowned. "Damn. I do so dislike intelligent enemies, especially when I lack strategic maneuverability."

The two Jedi both nodded as they watched the screen silently as the enemy fleet came on, not making directly for the fortress. Instead, it was moving to come in over the horizon.

OOOOOOO

Sith were never known to being very good at working together, a fact which had plagued them since the very creation of the Sith eons ago. Their arrogance and hatred towards one another stopped Sith warriors from forming the Force Gestalt that came so easily to Jedi when they worked together. Indeed, pitting their followers against one another, constantly sharpening against one another, and constantly divided was a tried and tested method for Sith Lords to control those under them.

Yet, it was part of Darth Tyranus' personality that he also taught control to those who followed him. Tyranus had embraced that aspect of Sidious's personal Code to an incredible degree. With the Acolytes, that aspect shifted, controlling their aggressive tendencies towards one another so that in combat, they could indeed work together when the need arose almost as well as Jedi. Tyranus had also emphasized the need to work together on this mission, and Trenox and Saato had done so from the very beginning.

First, Trenox had shadowed the first fleet sent to Wayland, not interacting with it, just watching from a ship much like that of the late Maul's as it attacked the system, watching to see if it succeeded or not. How horribly the Commodore failed was telling, and Trenox had reported back to Saato. Now, together they brought in the majority of the troops they could scrap together. Indeed, in so doing, they postponed an attack on the nearby Mandalore Sector, redirecting much of the ships that would have been assigned to that burning out expedition.

This wasn't a massive force in terms of the fleets moving around in the Core Worlds or even further out in the Mid Rim, but it was quite large for the Outer Rim. Ten the Lucrehulks, thirty-nine Munificent class heavy cruisers, nearly a thousand gunboats, specially designed ships based on attacking land targets, twelve Captor-class carriers, and an equal number of dedicated land troop transport ships, holding the equivalent of six droid armies. Enough troops to take most mid rim worlds, most core world worlds, in point of fact.

Yet with all that firepower, Trenox had been very clear when putting together the fleet and was clearer now. "We would lose ships and possibly not even succeed if we went for a full orbital bombardment. Doing so would put us in range of their weapons for long periods, and that is not acceptable."

Now in-system, Saato argued back heatedly, saying, "Any sacrifice is worth it. We cannot let that depository of Sith knowledge remain in the hands of the Jedi!"

"If it succeeds, then yes, the losses would be more than acceptable!" Trenox shot back angrily. "If we win, we will be lauded by master Tyranus. If we lose, however..." He trailed off, and Saato scowled but nodded.

And so, instead of coming directly against the fortress Wayland, the fleet moved so that it was coming at the mountain from around the globe, in enveloping maneuver staying out of the direct line of fire from the fortress and vice-versa. In this manner, they came under fire from several scattered missile silos, destroying each in turn without losing even one Vulture. Then the troop carriers were already launching the specialized Multi-troop transport vessels, and the vulture fighters were swarming in the air so much it looks like carrion crows after a battlefield.

However, as the MTTs landed, they came under indirect fire from the fortress. Old-fashioned solid shot artillery launched from the fortress landed, overpowering shields and eventually ruining several landing zones.

"Damn it, if that continues, we will lose too much of the army before they can get moving," Saato growled. "Move the fleet around the planet, troop transports first. Their job is done, after all. Fire on the Fortress as we bear. With the shield up, they won't be able to use those artillery weapons."

The fleet responded quickly, and the mountain's shields flickered on, followed by their energy weapons. Artillery shells moved too fast to pass through an energy shield. Of course, the enemy could still, and did, launch portion torpedoes that only started to accelerate after they slowly passed through the shield at certain especially weakened points, but the torpedoes were easy picking for the Vultures, who in turn started to die to the fortress's quad laser fire.

The capital ships also started taking hits, and Saato watched for a moment before looking at Trenox in the pickup to one side of the main screen. Trenox nodded to her and reaffirmed his stance, his words being punctuated by a Munificent class pulling up out of formation, its shields flickering badly along the belly as it rolled to bring its other shields to bear. "Land assault is still the best way. They cannot have enough troops to stand against that number of droids. Six army's worth of droids would be enough to take even a heavy industrialized world, let alone a world which has only recently changed hands."

Saato scowled but nodded, and the orders went out, pulling the fleet up and away from the planet. A group of six ships stayed behind for a moment, bombarding the fortress, but they would rotate out momentarily after they took a few hits. Once that was done, Saato turned away from the tactical screen abruptly, staring straight into the pickup. "We need to set a timeframe," she declared. "Who knows what the Jedi have done down there already. "But Lord Tyranus' orders were clear. If we cannot reclaim it, we must destroy Wayland. A day and a half, two at best from now before we make that decision."

Trenox scowled. He didn't like Saato, that went without saying. They were Sith, soft emotions had no place within them, only hate, rage, and ambition. But she had a point, and eventually, he nodded. The idea of the hated Jedi, their former brethren so enslaved to the light having access to the treasures within the Sith Order's home, was revolting. "Agreed. But to that end, we will need to husband most of our supplies of chaff to defend our ships if the time comes."

"That is what Vultures are for," Saato said, her lips twitching in a parody of a smile.

OOOOOO

Once more in his command center, Yurrick frowned, his hand holding it staccato rhythm, looking not at the tactical screen showing his troops' movement on the ground but the sensor screen, showing the enemy ship moving to be just outside of weapons range. "This is not going to be pleasant," he said to himself, shaking his head. He looked over at one of his officers, his logistics officer. "Open the stores," he ordered briskly. "I want our complement of jet bikes and speeders out there reassigned back to their parent brigades. Further, I want every speeder,

hoverbike and anything else which can move in the forest out there, distributed evenly among the brigades.”

Normally, the Nova Guard's brigades were what was called a combined arms unit: with infantry, vehicles and artillery all combined. However, concerned about energy signatures giving away the location of the heavy units in among the jungle and thinking they wouldn't be of much use in that environment, Yurrick had pulled the speeders and hover tanks back, embedding the hover tanks in a close-in defense of the mountain while spreading the solid-shot artillery widely along with the direct-fire type.

Now he looked at the tactical screen and its accompanying real-time videos from all over the mountain, smiling grimly. Yurrick had allowed his troops to be idle since they had arrived, pushing out defensive lines, tunnels and traps as far as they could. But against the weight of droid metal coming towards them, he wasn't all that certain he could hold. Yet beyond that, there was still the fleet in orbit. The fact it wasn't pulling back further or moving to put the curve of the planet once more between the fortress and them was telling.

“Furthermore, I want a signal created, want to go out to every command, brigade on down to fire teams, everyone needs to be aware of this new signal.

“A new signal, Sir? Yes sir. What is it going to be about, Sir?” his communications specialist said, saluting quickly. He was one of the youngest in the command center and was quite skittish because of this.

“Let us call it the Bug-out Boogey,” Yurrick chuckled. For a moment, his command center was silent, then someone barked a laugh, and he smiled thinly. “You believe me to be joking, I assure you I am not. I want our troops ready to pull back, drop everything and run the kriff back here as fast as possible as soon as that signal is given.”

“What do you expect them to do? Obi-Wan asked quizzically. He had been trained for combat, of course, but that was a far cry from being trained for war, especially in a leadership role.

“It's a classic example of strategic thinking. If you cannot reclaim a strategic position after your enemy has claimed it, you destroy it. This is especially true when considering something like the information in this mountain. They have brought along too many ships, too many Vultures and are being too methodical about this. They have the firepower, should they use it correctly, to eventually batter through our shielding.” Yurrick shrugged. “But orbital bombardments are not precision instruments. I would rather like our troops to be under whatever cover we can provide them rather than out there with their rears in the wind.”

K'Kruhk stood up at that, shaking his head. “I will meet with as many of the locals as I can. The local clans must move as far away from here as possible. We cannot let them be wiped

out, not after we have already been forced to relocate them to create our defenses as we have.”

Yurrick waved him off in unconcern, staring at the tactical screen as the battle on the land took shape, barking out orders as the Third battle for Wayland started in earnest.

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With the assault on Wayland, the need for keeping it secret had somewhat faded, and Ranma and Shaak were forced to put off their own return to Wayland. Instead, they reached out to several nearby sectors, using Shaak’s position as a Jedi, to ask for military aid. They also asked for more Corellian assistance and got it. Corellia would put several flotillas worth of their Gozanti-class light cruisers to the effort. At this point, the Corellian Navy didn’t need those ships. What they needed were heavier ships to defend the system.

Those Flotillas and the two Mandalorian Katana-class ships left more than a day after Ranma and Shaak had wanted to. Nor did they go directly to Wayland. Instead, they moved to a nearby system named Denova, a planet that had been utterly abandoned by the Republic after its baradium resources had run out during the New Sith Wars.

Over the next day the reinforcements came in trickles, a few ships here, a few dozen starfighters here. This served to remind Ranma that most of the Republic weren’t really militaristic as most of the planet he’d been on were. Only a few systems in the Ojoster sector barely had a system defense fleet to their name, and why would they? Every planet in the sector was unimportant in the great scheme of things, not making enough to sell, nor having enough resources to interest anyone. Those planets were simply sources of manpower at best.

More distant allies, however, sent more. Balmorra sent forty-two of their homemade patrol craft, the Eliminator class, and a wing of prototype bombers, slow-moving but heavy-hitting starfighters called Y-wings. The Mandalorians sent three more wings of starfighters, although the type of starfighters varied wildly from nearly new Aethersprites to ancient designs Ranma had never seen before and the more numerous Flashfist type. And four more Katana-class cruisers came in, examples of single ships moved out to various planets the Jedi had good relations with who now repaid that friendship.

Eventually, they had enough forces that Ranma thought they should attack, but Shaak shook his head when he opined on this point. “I do not think so. Before we left Corellia, the Order sent me a request to wait until a final group of reinforcements arrived. Something from ZS, in fact.” That was the term used when the Jedi had to discuss anything to do with Zonama Sekot over the Hypercom, which they did only rarely.

“More starfighters?” Ranma asked dubiously. “We’ve got enough of those out there already. Heck, we added, what, ten more wings to our starfighters? At least a hundred of which are being piloted by Green Jedi.”

“Something like that.” Shaak shook her head with a sigh. “All those Jedi pulled from thousands of different projects, for this one battle. It’s a sign that we are taking it seriously on the one hand. Yet on the other, I cannot imagine the disruption that is causing throughout the nearby sectors, which have not allied with the Confederacy.”

Ranma nodded at that, agreeing with her but not knowing what to say to that. Instead, he shook his head, standing up quickly. “I’m going to put Janice, Ahsoka and the newbies through a few training exercises.”

Several hours or one humiliating training exercise for Keala and her fellow new students later, Ranma was back in the Wild Blade’s cockpit, anxiety on his features. As good as they were, the Nova Guard could still be overcome. “Come on, Shaak, we need to get going!”

But Shaak still said they had to wait, despite her own growing misgivings. “We will wait for another four hours. If the reinforcements do not arrive, then I will give the order to attack. For now, let us go get something to eat.”

Near the end of the meal, as the two of them were going over some new information they had just gotten from Wayland, Tune called them from the cockpit. “Master, Mistress, we have an incoming hyperdrive jump. A big one.”

A moment later, Ranma and Shaak looking at the screen, and Shaak hummed in interest. She was much more at home with reading hyperspace jump signals than Ranma was and could see a lot more information than he could. “Ranma, that signal is about three times the size a single Lucrehulk would make, maybe as much as four.”

Blinking, Ranma said slowly, “Okay, I didn’t know the Republic had anything that large. Does that mean we should have the fleet go to battle stations?”

Shaak waved her hand this way and that, signaling doubt. “Kuat’s Mandator class were pretty large. But this is something else altogether.”

The ship came out of hyperspace near the fleet, shouting its IFF code as the Ardent Defender, and when the screen picked up a visual of it, Shaak and Ranma breathed in deeply. “Wow!” Ahsoka muttered behind them, while the others who had followed them up into the bridge also exclaimed in shock.

The ship in question was almost eight kilometers long, larger than two Lucrehulks set end to end. It looked almost like a dolphin at the front, a sort of bulbous nose, moving forward something like the Wild Blade, only without the dangerously pugnacious air that the Wild Blade

possessed. The ship seemed to have forward-moving wings, or fins, along its length, top and belly. At the back, it had a wide series of cylinders comprising its engines, which in turn were defended by backward-facing tentacles. The thing literally bristled with weapons and shielding.

“It’s alive,” Shaak breathed, shocked. It’s like the Wild Blade and the Sekotan starfighters, a cyborg creature. “This is our reinforcements from Zonama Sekot.”

“Some reinforcement! I didn’t think that Zonama Sekot was building capital ships, let alone something like that!” Ranma muttered while he felt a sudden whisper of something from the Wild Blade’s gestalt. It was wary now, like a predator when a much bigger one was around, yet also almost inquisitive, wondering about the new ship on its scanners.

“It surprises me as well, Ranma. But it behooves us to reach out to them before someone decided to fire on them, IFF or no.”

Instantly, the call was connected, and a voice came through over the vox. “This is Captain Morgan, of the Zonama Sekot defense force. With me is Master T’ra Saa. The Ardent Defender is at your command Master Ti, and yours too, Ranma.” The voice changed from formal to humorous at that point, “Even though Sekot says to tell you, he still thinks you’re a dick.”

Ranma began to laugh, and Shaak joined them, followed by Kit Fisto onboard the Mandalorian flagship, while the others all looked on in confusion.

About forty minutes later, Ranma and Shaak had gathered the disparate leaders of their groups on the new ship. With Shaak taking command of the smaller additions to their fleet, this left them with Shaak, Ranma, Bo-Katan – who was accompanied by Janice - Kit Fisto, Captain Morgan, two Corellians who looked so alike they had to be twins and Master Tiin.

After they were all sitting down in his conference room, Master Saa and captain explained how its creation had come about, as a part of Master Krell’s push to making the Mon Calamari and Sekotans work together as best and as economical as they could. Morgan, one of the turncoats from the battle over Zonama Sekot, hadn’t changed much since they had seen him. He had added an inch or two to his waist and a ring on his finger, but that was about all.

Master Saa had changed since Shaak Ti had seen her in the Temple. She looked older, more somber, a hidden sadness in her eyes.

As Morgan explained what his ship was capable of, Ranma compared it to a super-carrier back on earth: a ship made to lead a fleet, to be the biggest, baddest thing in space. And at the moment, it was indeed that. “With the expanded space techniques, our ship has space for four thousand Coralskipper-class starfighters. Beyond that, we have more proton torpedo and concussion missile launchers than you would think even with our size, Force-reinforced hulls and a whole lot more.”

Banks upon banks of heavy turbolasers. Even more magma cannons. Fewer ion cannons than a ship its size should have, but those it did have were situated in six main banks, where they could hit a single target each. The ship used the Mon Calamari system of shielding, six inter-layered shields. Thousands of quad lasers to defend against starfighters.

Saa smiled grimly at the shocked looks around him. "The Chu'unthor II-class is meant to fight its weight in enemy capital ships and overcome them. It's the first of its kind, and building the next will take several more months, but even alone, this baby will make a difference."

Shaak Ti looked around in wonder. "It feels more intelligent, more self-aware than the gestalt of the Wild Blade. Is that accurate?" she asked.

"Indeed it is," Saa chuckled, her somber mien leaving her for a moment. "Very intelligent and learning all the time. Bonding with it has been a most interesting time."

"Regardless, despite the magnificence of the ship, and I am not denying it, we cannot take it into a conventional battle against the forces arrayed over that planet." Tiin shook his head slowly but firmly, looking around at the others. Barely an hour before the Ardent Defender had arrived, a new information packet had arrived from Wayland, detailing the fleet currently attacking the planet. "That fleet is too large for us to attack. Not with any chance of winning, not as we are now. We must send for further backup."

"In a conventional battle maybe, but space battles are only conventional if both sides are being led by idiots," Ranma retorted, frowning as he looked at the information and thought about all he had been told about space warfare in this universe. And he remembered a trick that had brought the Wild Blade out of hyperspace at one point: an asteroid placed in a hyperspace Lane previously clear of such debris.

Looking at her husband, Shaak smiled faintly, and reached underneath the table to take it one of his hands squeezing it gently. "What is your devious mind telling you, Darling?"

At the use of the word darling, the other Jedi there shivered a little, shaking their heads. That kind of lovey-dovey talk was so strange to them. Ranma however smirked and shook his head. "No. Love, fine. Beloved definitely. Darling, no. Too girly, and before you say anything, I'd like to stay male right now thanks. My time in that form's close to adding up again."

Shaak winced and made no move to pick up her glass of water as she would have normally at such an opening. "All right pigtailed one. But answer my question, please."

Chuckling, Ranma squeezed his wife's hand back, then looked around at the others, his smirk widening. "Conventional warfare is so blasé isn't it? I think this is the perfect opportunity to break another so-called conventional rule: that capital ships in motion can't be successfully boarded."

“Wait, what?” more than one voice asked.

“Hear me out. We have a major advantage in assault forces, troops that can move, fight and think for themselves, the closest they have are those vibro-pike wielding droids. So we need to maximize our advantages against their disadvantages, that’s a basic rule of martial arts. And that means boarding their ships.” Ranma looked over at Master Saa. “Does this ship have the ability to make new starfighters? And if so, can it make something bigger?”

Shaak’s eyes widened. “Yes, because the Sekotan ships are living ships they are hard for droid-controlled scanners to localize. And if it’s an entirely new ship, it won’t be in their friend-or-foe programming. But boarding would mean getting past the outer shield.”

“Shields can be knocked down in specific zones,” Saa mused. When everyone looked at her, she shrugged. “Droidekas. If you can hold them still and don’t have to deal with their guns, you can puncture their shields better than you can slash through them. Similarly, with enough magma cannons, we may be able to perhaps drill through the shield at one point. Not for long, the shield’s energy matrix will reform quickly, but perhaps enough.”

For a moment, everyone was silent as Morgan checked the *Ardent Defender’s* onboard resources, and Ranma had Tune calculate how long the shield of a Lucrehulk would go down if hit by an ever-increasing number of magma cannons at a specific point. Eventually, Tune replied, “With a minimum of eighteen starfighter-sized magma cannons, it is possible to drill through a Lucrehulk’s shields for enough time for a single starfighter to get through. But the starfighter in question would be out of power and adrift.”

Eventually, working with Tune and a few of the Sekotans who had come along for just this purpose, they were able to confirm that a boarding ship could be created. It would take all the resources available to make even six such vessels, but they could each contain at least ten people or more depending on if they wanted all of them to be the same size. Power would be a problem, and it would definitely be a one-way trip, but it was possible with Sekotan technology and the bio-reactors.

Bo-Katan began grinning as the design started to come into being in front of them. “That’s fine, though. One boarding action per ship means we can take out six ships. One led by me, one led by Shaak, one led by Janice, and one led by Ranma. The other two can be led by Jedi. “If you think I’m missing out on this, you need your head examined.”

Eventually, it was decided that Ranma would assault one ship on his own. Given his abilities and speed, that was seen as doable. Shaak and HK would attack a second. Doing this would let them add more space and bio-reactors to the other ships. Bo-Katan would lead a force of Reborn along with her Bes’uliik. Janice would lead another group of Reborn, although it would not include Keala Kryze or the other two new trainees. They were not ready for the kind of madness that a boarding action could become. Two teams of Green Jedi would man the other two boarding vessels.

Hearing all this, Tiin shook his head. "That is fine, but we still have to deal with the Munificent-class ships. There are more than enough of those ships to wreck our plans."

"But we have the defenses on the planet, and we don't care they run. Without those Lucrehulks, we're in for an even fight. The best odds we're going to get," Ranma retorted. "We get in close, hyperjump right into the planet's gravity well, start a fight, and after those six ships are taken, we can turn their guns on their fellows."

While Master Tiin continued to argue with Ranma on whether his insane plan would work, Shaak looked thoughtfully at the hologram. Like in the battle for Corellia, she was in charge of this one, despite Master Saa and Master Tiin both being senior – in the case of Master Saa immensely so -than her.

"I propose an assault in three waves," she said, her calm, thoughtful tone cutting through the argument and causing everyone to turn to her, and she smiled thinly. "First will be the starfighters and the Katana-class ships of our fleet." She began to play with numbers, pulling up unit's designations, starfighter designation squadron designations, and then looked over at Master Tiin and Kit. "That aspect of the fight will hit these carriers, along with the Munificents by them, which are moving toward the outer edge of the system. They're so far away from the planet and the sun that we can use real-time data to simply jump on them straight out of hyperspace. That kind of surprise will offset the size of the assault."

Master Tiin nodded in agreement. That portion of the enemy fleet wasn't the problem after all. It was the portion directly over the planet that was the problem. But Kit added an addendum. "I would volunteer Anakin to lead a Sekotan starfighter wing in that assault. The Coralskippers have proven that they can outduel Vultures, and Anakin has more than proven that he is more than capable of handling them in numbers."

Nodding at that, Shaak continued, using a finger to draw a course through the hologram of the Wayland system that Saa had shifted with the boarding ship's design. "The second wave will consist of the Corellian light cruisers, the Wild Blade and the gunboats. They will come in like this."

Tiin looked at it thoughtfully, then nodded. "A long-range firing pass? You realize that the Munificent will be able to cut that course and force an engagement."

"I do. Furthermore, I believe that the entire force over Wayland will break orbit to engage this force." She looked over at Ranma, who began to laugh. This was echoed a moment later by HK's near-sinister robotic laughter from the corner he had been standing in.

Everyone looked at the two of them, and Ranma, still chuckling, explained. "Um, we found out something on Corellia. The Confederacy's droids are programmed to go after me if they don't have any overriding local control. The Confederacy has put me on their most wanted

list, so the Sith or whoever is over there will want the Wild Blade dead. They'll come at us with everything they have."

"Exactly. The third wave will consist of the Ardent Defender and the four remaining Katana class heavy cruisers. Which will hyperjump directly into the planet, as Ranma said. Between the planet, the Defender, and the rest of the fleet coming in from various angles, we will be able to win the day."

I'm not certain that the living hyperdrive's Ardent Defender is up to that," Saa warned.

"They will be," Ranma said firmly. "It will hurt afterward, but nothing that can't be healed or repaired. The surprise will be major, though, especially if we come in behind the fleet sending ships out to try and pin down the strafing run. The Munificent will be caught completely out of position, leaving behind the Lucrehulks who will be trying to kill the Wild Blade."

"They are right. It's doable odds. Especially if we can figure out beforehand which ships over there are the command ships and send your insane freaking boarding actions at them. Without a strong, commanding presence, the enemy captains will dither and be unable to act. So long as you're able to take those ships quickly, that is. If not, even the Ardent Defender will be overmatched."

"This is just crazy enough that it might work," Master Tiin grumped. "But keeping Wayland in our hands is worth any sacrifice. I agree."

While not really agreeing with that statement, Ranma grinned at him. "If it's crazy and it works, it's not crazy."

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In the Wayland system, the two Acolytes who had been sent on this mission glared at one another through their communication equipment. Their two Lucrehulks were well away from the planet, along with the other eight Lucrehulks they had in this system. In contrast, the Munificents were currently rotated in and out of the planet, using their heavy turbolasers to bombard the planet in a rotation area aspect, but several had been lost to return fire from the planet. The Lucrehulks also had taken heavy fire. One of them was now experiencing issues with its shields after taking several ion cannon strikes. Even for the Lucrehulks, planetary based ion cannons, which could be four or five times that one found on a dreadnaught-sized ship, were no joke.

It had been clear from the get-go that any orbital bombardment would be paid for in blood. The only reason the Sith had done so was to force the enemy's planetary shield back a few times so they could bombard the area around the mountain to help their troops. But those troops were not making any headway. The jungle, the mountainous terrain, the fact the Nova Guard were defensive experts and seemed to have an abundance of explosives and a continent to play with, all of this worked to make the planet hell on the droids.

It should have taken the droid army around a day to travel from their staging ground to the mountain. Now, because of the Nova Guard and the other local factors, including the native species coming out to attack them occasionally, the droids had barely made half that distance after two days of near-constant combat.

Although Trenox didn't like it, this had swayed him to Saato's point of view. "You were right," he snarled, shaking his head staring at the former Dathomiri Witch through the screen. "I had hoped to reclaim this planet and its stored knowledge of the Dark Side. Doing so would have elevated us to positions alongside Ventress. But we cannot allow the planet to remain in Jedi hands any longer. We will move the fleet in and bombard it from orbit. We will take losses doing so, but it must be done."

Saato nodded in reply, magnanimous in her victory. She had wanted to start bombarding the moment the fleet entered orbit when she saw the strength of the planetary shields, and her sensor specialist had informed her of how dense the forest was and what it was doing to their sensors. With that and the battle against the two ships from the previous fleet sent into the system, it was obvious the Jedi had somehow shifted enough troops to heavily fortify this place, though the nature of those troops did not become apparent until a few hours after the troops had landed.

As for the shield and the mountain fortress, that was somewhat obvious. Shrink the shield's size while still using a planetary-sized generator to create it, and you got a much stronger shield. That was what was occurring down below. It would take the fleet practically a whole day to pummel the shields down while they would be taking shots from the enemy's own weapons. They were certain to incur severe losses, even if they used the Vultures along with the hoarded chaff to block the enemy's sensors.

But what did that matter? Most of the Confederacy fleets were made of droids, after all. *And perhaps the droids still fighting their way across that devil landscape below will be able to break through once we start destroying large swaths of the forest. After all, bombardment isn't exactly a precision operation.* Again, the idea of keeping an orbital bombardment going while your own troops were on the ground pressing forward wasn't something that any Republic Admiral would be willing to condone. Even clones wouldn't be treated so cavalierly. But the Confederacy used droids, and droids, by their very definition, were expendable.

Upon their orders, the last Munificents in orbit retreating to rejoin their fellows, allowing their shields to recharge from having taken several hard knocks from the planet's

defenses. Then, with the Lucrehulks in the lead and launching all of their husbanded Vultures, the fleet moved into orbit over the mountain and began a systematic bombardment. The Vultures, more than one hundred wings of them, flew down into the atmosphere, clouding the sensors of the mountain below with both specially prepared chaff and their own bodies. Normally this would have also impacted the fleet's sensors, but since they knew where the mountain was and it wasn't going to move, that didn't matter here.

In reply, the defenders who had previously been willing to spread their fire started to concentrate it, blasting through chaff and droids. The chaff wafted back or was replaced quickly, but the Vultures died in groups of ten or twelve every few minutes as the planetary defenses fired.

Most of their shots missed, but even so, too many shots were hitting. Both Dark Side users were now certain there were Jedi down there, helping to aim the shots where they sense the minds of the living crewmembers of the capital ships in orbit. This began to take a toll on the shielding of the fleet.

The Sith started to rotate the ships up and out from the planet, putting their sister ships in between them as they went. But the damage to the shielding wasn't enough. This would be too slow unless the Dark Acolytes wanted to bring in more ships to do it.

The two of them were debating on which Confederacy Fleet base to call for more ships, there being no other fleets their size operating in this sector when they were interrupted. One of their sensors specialists shouted a warning, followed by the sensor specialist of the other flagship within a second. "Lord/Lady!" they shouted nearly as one, "We have incoming hyperjump signals!"

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The attackers timed it perfectly. The carriers and the battered Munificents, which had been rotated away from the planet after taking too much damage to remain in the battle line, had just sent the majority of their Vultures in the system to replace those already lost in the attack. This barely let the smaller carriers and the damaged ships with a single wing for a combat air patrol when Master Tiin and his attack came out of hyperspace almost directly upon them. Eight wings of starfighters accompanied by the two Mandalorian Katana-class heavy cruisers jumped the ten carriers and seven Munificent class ships and their single wing of starfighters.

Seeing the real-time data flowing across his screen, even as he powered his living spaceship forward, Master Tiin instantly assigned targets for everyone. The two Katana-class

ships moved to engage the Munificent, weapons already blasting out as those ships tried to come to general quarters and engage in turn. Their shields were up, but the two Mandalorian vessels bracketed on with their fire as they passed it, crashing its shields and turning the ship into a piece of contorted junk before the other ships began to truly engage them in turn. By which time, most starfighters had moved to engage them in turn, bar one wing of Balmorran-made bombers, who swept towards the carriers, and the Sekotan starfighters, who dove on the Vultures under Anakin's command.

Even as he led his own squadron of Sekotan starfighters in on one of the carriers along with the Balmorrans, Tiin could only shake his head in bemused wonder at Anakin's connection with the Force. Tiin could barely control a single squadron of starfighters via the Sekotan drone system. And his commands were simple, move here or hit that. In contrast, Anakin could fight an entire wing of the Sekotan Coralskippers and do so with artistry, making each of them move and fight like a well-drilled and extremely well-trained wing of elite starfighter pilots.

The Munificent class ships fought back, moving into formation to cover one another's blind spots against the heavy starfighter attack. This worked quickly since that class had quite a lot of anti-starfighter weaponry, taking a toll on his people, including the Sekotan Coralskippers and the Jedi. One of Tiin's fellows died in the next few seconds, but another successfully ejected, and Tiin directed a Coralskipper drone to him. The next second, five more local starfighters died.

Most of the starfighters with Tiin were not built to fight enemy capital ships, but there were many of them, and these Munificent class already had damage. A quadrant of damaged weapons here, a sector of shielding here whose blister had been destroyed during their attack on Wayland. With Master Tiin directing them, the starfighters homed in on those places, while the Munificent class concentrated on destroying the heavy cruisers.

In turn, the heavy cruisers rotated, not just on their own axis but around one another. They flew so close it was insane, but then, Tiin reflected, he had always felt the Mandalorians, even the Reborn, were a few pales short of a full bucket. This tactic was working very well, coupled with the fact the Munificents had to defend one another's blind spots. With that, they couldn't move in turn to try to surround the attacking heavy cruisers, who moved around the outside of their formation, which looked somewhat like a big spiky ball.

The carriers who hadn't been fast enough to get into formation died quickly, one after another exploding under the Jedi's assault, and as the last easy target died, Master Tiin led his own squadron in against an attack on the Munificent class ships. "Padawan Skywalker, check fire when you're done with that wing of starfighters. The rest of this flotilla's fighter complement might be sent back towards us, and I want at least one wing formed and ready to interdict them."

"Roger that Master Tiin," the young human voxed back, his voice distant with the effort of controlling so many Sekotan starfighters. But even so, Tiin could sense his joy, Anakin's fierce

delight in the battle and shook his head. A Guardian to his core, Tiin had never enjoyed combat for its own sake, only as the best way he could serve the Force. Skywalker enjoyed it for its own sake like Ranma did.

Ducking and dodging through their fire, the Iktotchi lined up his plasma cannon on the front of one of the enemy ships, blasting out a burst of fire that crashed into their shielding. Alone it would have done nothing. Even an entire squadron's worth wouldn't have done much. But as he dodged away as the end of the ship attempted to use his mean twin heavy turbolasers as some kind of area denial weapon, the Balmorran Y-wing starfighters came in crashing through at the same point, armed with proton torpedoes.

The shielding at that sector went down, and then, the Balmorran bombers opened fire. They had taken losses, but now all of them homed in on the same target, and the Munificent died, the shielding at that point being too heavily damaged, and the captain not quick enough to rotate the ship, having concentrated too much on the heavy cruisers.

Like so many sparrows wearing away a group of hawks with the aid of two falcons, the starfighters continued to swoop and dive all across the flotilla of already damaged ships. The damage on those ships was starting to add up quickly. And as this was going on, Master Tiin looked at the main display screen, smiling thinly. It was time for the second act of this battle.

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While somewhat leery of this attack given the timing of their decision earlier that day, the Dark Acolytes were still feeling confident. The starfighter-heavy attack on the Munificent class and ten carriers behind them was not a threat. True, enemy starfighter wings would hurt certainly, and the Katana-class were extremely durable for their size. But in comparison to the fleet around Wayland, they were badly overmatched.

Of course, this had to be obvious to the enemy too, and launching such a spoiling campaign rather than a real attempt to relieve Wayland made no sense, not when it was the heart of the Sith's hidden order for several hundred years and what that meant. So even as the bombardment continued, the two Dark Acolytes leaned back in meditation, trying to reach through the Force to understand the purpose behind their enemy's actions. One thing that both of them knew was that the Republic, and more importantly the Jedi, would not be a party to simply throwing troops away in some vainglorious face-saving gesture.

"We must prepare for another wave," Saato said simply after a few seconds. The two of them were now in constant communication, even though neither of them liked one another.

This whole campaign was a time to work together, and their ability to do so was a testament to Sora Bulq's training and the very different emphasis he put on them as he trained them.

"Agreed. The question then becomes, will the Republic try to reinforce the planet, or attack us?" Trenox mused before shaking his head. "We should prepare for the second possibility. Unless they can drive off our fleet, we remain a threat to the planet, regardless of any reinforcements."

Orders went out, and the fleet around Wayland shifted. The Munificent class moved up and away from the planet, while the Lucrehulks remained in position, for now, continuing the bombardment. They started to spread out into a wing-shaped formation, moving up and back from the orbit of the planet, stretching sort of back towards the battle going on in the outer system.

The starfighters that had been coming in from the carriers and their battered guards had halted mid-flight, moving to turn around, but they had barely begun that motion when the Sith countered their order. Those ships in the outer edge of the system were already dead. But the fleet over Wayland had already lost a large portion of their own Vulture wings and needed them to make up their losses. Even now, with the Sith unwilling to break off from the planet just yet, those losses continued, throwing up chaff to try and blind the planet's defenders.

After some discussion it was decided these new Vultures would be split into two, with the majority of them centered with the Lucrehulks and the rest spread out across the formation's wings with the few frigates that the Confederacy used joining them. Those ships had not been in large supply before the war, relegated to convoy protection duty or scouting runs.

The Acolytes had kept them back away from the planet, believing as many did that, they were nearly useless in battle. But, after watching the destruction of the carriers and the continued wearing down of the Munificent class by the enemy starfighters and heavy cruisers, both Dark Acolytes realized that might have been in error. The Vultures were supposed to give the Confederacy starfighter supremacy, in numbers if nothing else and the Lucrehulks and Munificents should have been immune to small-craft attacks. But that was rapidly proving to not be the case.

As the fleet reformed, another hyperspace footprint appeared, much deeper in-system and from a completely different direction than the previous assault. This footprint was also spread out, indicating more ships, and after a second, the red blips of several hundred patrol craft, gunboats and larger ships came through, racing towards the Confederacy fleet. "Sensors has it as three-hundred plus gunboats, various types, mostly local built. Five wings of hyperspace-capable Starfighters, mostly reading as Aethersprites. Forty-two larger ships designated Gozanti-class light cruisers," the Sensor specialist on Saato's bridge announced. "And um, they are, are accompanied by um... the, the Wild Blade."

Saato's eyes lit up at that, her yellow eyes flashing with anger and growing fury at the name of a ship that every Dark Acolyte said been warned about by this point. Whatever reputation it had begun to gain among the Confederacy was nothing compared to the reputation it had among the Sith. "Prepare the fleet to move! We will wait until it has intersected the fleet, then envelope it from all sides!"

"Lady Admiral, they, this new force is turning aside, they aren't going to try to gain the planetary orbit. They are turning and are going to hit one aspect of the wing of our formation."

"Bring the other wing around!" Saato snarled. "End the bombardment and move the Lucrehulks toward this new fleet! We **will** destroy that ship!" Wayland wasn't going anywhere, after all. And killing the Locus would be enough to earn them the position that had already been unfairly given to Ventress in every Acolyte's opinion.

OOOOOO

Despite being larger than the gunboats and patrol craft with them, the Corellian light cruisers, more destroyers than anything else in Ranma's opinion, leaped ahead of the others. The Corellians believed in almost the same kind of military philosophy Ranma followed: speed overall and batter to dodge than be hit.

That was on full display now. The Gozanti class light cruisers raced forward straight towards the nearest enemy formation. "Should we go with them, Master Fisto?" Ahsoka asked, not looking up from her controls. With Ranma, Janice, and her Master in the special boarding pods that had left Master Fisto in charge of the Wild Blade and this aspect of the battle.

"Yes, move with the Corellian ships. That will paint a larger target on our back once the Sith become aware of our presence, but that just means our aspect of this mission will go more smoothly," Kit said, and Ahsoka noticed he was smiling even now, the image visible on the screen in front of her. "And make certain that our analysis of their communication network is sent to the boarding pods. It would be foolish to send them after the wrong Lucrehulks, after all.

Thanks to how closely they were in communication, the vessels on which the two Sith were were very easy to spot via analysis of the enemy fleet's communication system. They hadn't bothered using any ECM just yet, although that was changing as Kit watched. What was more, all the Lucrehulks, the last ships in orbit over the mountain, were pulling up and away from their previous positions, but the defenders were not having any of that.

In the previously hidden fortress, Obi-Wan and K'Kruhk looked at one another, then turned to where the Nova Guard's gunnery officers were targeting the mountain's weapons. "Our allies have arrived. All weapons go rapid-fire! You will take your targeting information from the two of us." With the amount of chaff in the air, the planet was almost entirely blind.

"Follow the Jedi's orders," Yurrick agreed firmly. He had held that ability in reserve since it drained the shields of some power, the same generators powering the shields powering the various weapons' cooling systems. But with the bombardment called off, this wasn't as dangerous as it would have been otherwise. "Open the mountain, keep everything as cool as possible. Pull back the first and second brigades to provide close-in cover against any infiltration attempts."

The massive turbolaser cannons and ion cannons of the mountain instantly obeyed, firing out a near endless stream of varicolored energy.

And soon, the fleet retreating from orbit began to take losses. One unlucky Munificent class, close in on the wing that wasn't the target of the Wild Blade and its allies firing run was just a little too close to the planet's atmosphere, exploded as for ion cannon bolts struck its shield followed by an equal in the amount of turbolaser fire. A Lucrehulk staggered, its shields collapsing slowly, but was able to pull away, while another's shields flickered long enough for its engines to be struck, slowing it down considerably before following the other ships, limping but still combat-worthy as its shields reformed.

Simultaneously, the first groups of ships to come into the range of the opposing fleet opened fire. This meant the Munificents with their long-range spinal mounted turbolasers. The Corellians, in the lead of the Republic assault, began to dive and shift this way and that to throw off their enemy's fire, holding their own fire for now. Meanwhile, behind them, the patrol craft and gunboats started to reply, hammering into the scattered Vulture fighter wings squadrons coming towards them, pulled from the planetary assault rather than the more distant enemy capital ships.

The Wild Blade, too, opened fire under Kit's direction. Kit and one of the new Mandalorian trainees, a young man named Jak of Clan Toban, handled the weapons. Ahsoka was doing the piloting, and Fabian waited on the defense for now while Keala handled communications. This was easily the toughest combat environment Ahsoka had ever piloted through, but Kit felt the young padawan was doing a decent enough job, dodging at least two-thirds, maybe more of the fire coming towards their ship.

To the shock of the other two people in the cockpit, it appeared as the young cousin of Bo-Katan, who Ahsoka had somewhat bonded with over the past few days, couldn't stop herself from muttering, "She's doing it with her eyes closed! Jedi! If I ever get used to that, I will know I'm insane!"

“Don’t knock it till you try it, babe!” Ahsoka quipped back, opening her eyes and then winking over at Keala, the same action and term she had when first showing up at the *Wild Blade*’s hatch. For a moment. The two of them laughed, a high-pitched giggle that did nothing to soothe the nerves of the two men in the cockpit with them, but before Kit could take them to task, both shook their heads and were back to business.

Such was the *Wild Blade*’s speed and the Corellians that they hit the enemy formation moments later, while Vultures were still dying behind them, the wall of Munificents and the scattered diamond formations of the Corellians interpenetrating.

And they were not stopping. Instead of slowing down to face the Confederacy ships in the slow-moving, static engagement typical of capital ship actions, the Corellian kept going, penetrating through the enemy line, swerving into and through it, now opening fire with their broadside weapons to either side. The Corellian ships were not really armed or armored to face off against enemy ships of a similar weight class. Even if they had been, they were smaller than even the Munificent class. Moreover, much of their weight was in their massive engines.

But they did have numerous banks of proton torpedo launchers to go along with their turbolaser batteries and quad laser. And they had an extremely good combat doctrine. Each group of four zipped around, under and above a single enemy ship, engaging it from all sides for a few seconds before moving on, followed by the next four. They didn’t score any outright kills, but the Corellians generally hammered the targeted Confederacy wing, shields flaring here and there throughout the enemy formation.

On the portion of the attack closest to Wayland, however, the *Wild Blade* broke off. It wasn’t here to hit and run. It was here to deliver its new payload. So it turned to one side, Kit using its weapons to target a Lucrehulk to which had damaged shielding. “If you could join with us, divisions five and ten, I believe we can take it out of the battle or at the very least knock that ship’s shields down again,” Kit ordered over the vox, while Ahsoka dodged and zoomed the *Wild Blade* through ever-increasing amounts of enemy fire.

As the two four-ship divisions responded, Ahsoka lined up the front of the *Wild Blade* with the target ship, and Kit started to hammer it with the plasma and ion cannon of the *Wild Blade*. The principal of power to a point worked once more, and the already battered shielding of the Lucrehulk in question started to fade, just as two of the Corellian squads of destroyers also flashed past. Juking and diving through the enemy formation, they locked on that one ship and launched proton torpedoes, their ships flashing to either side one after another as the ships rolled while still maintaining their forward momentum.

While two of them exploded under the Lucrehulk’s fire, the proton torpedoes crashed into the ship’s shielding as it tried to rotate to bring a new quadrant of shielding to bear against the *Wild Blade*. But capital ships the size of the Lucrehulk weren’t quick enough to do so effectively. They were designed instead to simply be armored goliaths. This ship had also faced

the impact of the planet's weapons, and portions of the shields went down, followed by still more.

Then a lucky blow got in from one of the Corellian ships as it zoomed past the Confederacy vessel. The engines ruptured, and the Lucrehulk slowly started to lose altitude, no longer maintaining its forward momentum. Soon it was caught by the gravity of the planet and pulled further out of position and away from its sister ships, who did not stop moving forward towards the Wild Blade.

Instantly, Ahsoka shifted targets to another ship, and then they were in the center of the enemy formation – or rather the enemy formation was attempting to form around them, and Kit turned to Tine. “Send the final telemetry and then open the bay doors!”

Inside the expanded space that normally housed the Wild Blade's accompanying starfighters rested the six preprepared organic boarding ships. Now they fell out of the ship as it twisted away.

A nearby Corellian ship exploded, followed by several more patrol craft as they too reached the now jumbled enemy formation. A strafing run like this was extremely dangerous against an enemy who could concentrate so much firepower, and while it was working, more ships speeding through the enemy formation and getting out the other side. If any ship lost speed, they were done for. And even those who could pass through the enemy formation were going to run into the other wing of Munificent class ships which had kept their wide line formation as the Lucrehulks became snarled in with the first wing.

But Wild Blade had shielding to spare and twisted around under and up at Ahsoka's hand. A second later putting her ship between a Lucrehulk and another Corellian ship, which just spun out of formation as its shields went down under enemy fire.

This attempted moment of heroism failed as the ship took fire from another Lucrehulk, but Ahsoka couldn't concentrate on that, couldn't concentrate on feeling the death of the crew of that ship through the Force as she relied on its expanded senses, as she brought the Wild Blade in against another Lucrehulk, letting Kit hammer it hard before Ahsoka flashed away, taking hits in turn. Those started to cause their shields to slowly fade from green to toward yellow. But that was a slow process, and Ahsoka ignored it, for now, moving on to another Lucrehulk.

Nearly all of the surviving Lucrehulks were now firing towards the Wild Blade since the Corellians had passed through their formation, and the gunboats and patrol craft were scant threats against larger ships. But more than that, every Dark Acolyte was under orders to do whatever they could to destroy that ship and its occupants and now allowed that possibility to impact their tactics.

So chaotic was the battle by this point that none of the enemy ships had noticed the six boarding pods the *Wild Blade* had launched before reaching attack range. In among the ongoing battle and scattered debris, each of them slowly came awake using a minimal bit of power to move towards their assigned targets. They didn't even use thrusters, just escaped gas, shifting this way and that, until they lined up what amounted to ramming attacks on their assigned ships.

A second later, the first of these ships crashed into the outer shielding of the Lucrehulk that was its target. And then the surprises began. The moment before impact, the aperture at the front of the living vessel opened, and several starfighter-sized magma cannons opened up on that specific point of the enemy ship's shielding. The shielding right in front of it went down. For only a second, but that was enough for the boarding ship to slip through.

Even then, if the Lucrehulks had been manned by people rather than mostly droids, they might well have been able to redirect defensive fire to the boarding ships. But these boarding ships were not in the droid's programming. They were not listed as enemies, and until they had punctured the ship's shielding, they hadn't even had energy signatures beyond that of a survival pod. Even that energy signature disappeared momentarily as the boarding ship sped through the shielding towards the Lucrehulk in question before crashing into the side of the vessel.

Inside, Bo-Katan grunted as the impact registered from where she was stuck to the back of her Besu'liik, tied down by crash webbing. Underneath her, her Besu'liik shifted in annoyance as a fireteam of Night Owls and the Fire Hawks, their male equivalent, also groaned in their crash webbing. That had not been pleasant at all

A beeping tone on her helmet's heads-up-display told her that the landing craft had smashed into the side of the ship. A second later, the plasma cutters at the front burned themselves out, finishing cutting into the vessel.

Instantly the Reborn warrior nearest the entranceway hopped out of their crash webbing and moved in either direction, ready to lay down fire. But the enemy ship's security division hadn't realized they'd been boarded just yet, and the rest of them came out quickly. Once she was out, Bo-Katan looked around and then ordered one of her Night Owls to find a computer screen. "We need to figure out where we are.

Spreading in either direction, the Mandos were able to find one quickly, at which point Bo discovered where on the ship they were, a fact that caused her to smile grimly. They had apparently come in from below the ship somehow, Bo put that down to the vagaries of the battlefield, near-halfway along one half of the C-shaped main body of the Lucrehulk. To the right were the engine room and the neck-like portion of the ship connected to the central command globe.

Directing her troops in that direction, they quickly ran into trouble. Droids appeared down the corridor, firing as they came shouting out, "Intruders, intruders! Exterminate!"

The first few of the Reborn in that direction took to the air of the corridor while the others behind them started to fire back, two of them carrying riot shields, which they slammed down into the floor of the hallway. A second later, Bo-Katan riding her Besu'liik, leaped over them, firing her heavy rifle while the Besu'liik in turn also laid down heavy fire.

With no cover, the droids fell in droves. But more were behind them and behind them still came more.

Behind Bo, the Night Owls and the Fire Hawks split in two, cutting into the side of the corridor they were following, while two more flew up to the surface of the roof, cutting through there.

Smiling grimly, Bo-Katan continued to fire into the droids, her Besu'liik doing the same. It was taking hits, but the heavy armor, upgraded to beskar plate in many places, took the fire easily, as did her own armor occasionally when she was struck. "Fall back and spread out," she ordered.

With that order, the rest of the Night Owls and the Fire Hawks followed their fellows, pulling back and letting Bo-Katan carry the battle straight into the droid formation, which she did with a certain amount of glee. Her Besu'liik reared, crushing droids left and right, and she leaped off it, activating the Dark Saber and slicing through several droids, while her regular blaster, not connected to the Besu'liik' power grid, fired from her other hand. For a moment, she was a whirlwind of destruction, unable to concentrate on anything but the enemies all around her and her Besu'liik friend, as more and more B-2 droids fired or closed with her.

A moment later, the corridor was clear, but she could hear more droids clanking towards them in the distance. "Spread out by squads," she said calmly, pulling yourself back into the saddle, patting the robotic beast's head affectionately. "Targets are the engines and the command ball, of course. You know what to do, Reborn."

"Wreck and kill at will!" came the shout back as the fireteams spread out in every direction, moving through the innards of the ship by the simple expedient of cutting their way through, wherever they could moving this way and that while the majority of the ships security droids at first started to concentrate on Bo, then tried to pin them down in turn. They would find this... quite difficult.

OOOOOO

Around the same time that Bo-Katan was finishing off that first group of droids, the next three boarding ships crashed into their targets one after another with similar results. And later, the two boarding ships containing two teams of six Green Jedi each would do the same.

This was not a surprise. Without living people on the guns in any one sector of the Lucrehulks, the ships thus targeted had to rely on the programming of the droids, or the overall controllers of those droids in the distant command ball seeing the odd new ships on their scanners. So the enemy was slow to awaken to the threat of these boarding parties, not even the Sith realizing how that first boarding party had arrived before the others had hit their targets.

However, the report of those boarding parties had gone out, and the security of the other Lucrehulks was prepared even if they had no idea how it had occurred, spreading out throughout the whole ship from their central security center. And these were Lucrehulks. That meant there were a **lot** of droids. The B-2 variety of combat droids could basically be called a large suitcase in its storage form, and each Lucrehulk contained within it at least a heavy regiment of such droids for internal security. While no one had predicted being boarded mid-combat like this, being boarded when you were at-station was a possibility, so these droids had remained aboard while the rest of the Confederacy land forces in the system had been sent down to the planet.

Janice found this out quickly as she led her own assault, music thumping in her ears. This had caught on after Ranma had used music during the battle in Corellia, and now she had it blaring both through their headset and speakers.

Moments after spreading out and destroying a few droids in the area Janice and her team faced security droids coming at them from either side. But Janice wasn't willing to be slowed and activated her jetpacks. She flashed forward, firing twin blasters as she came, getting in close among the droids before dropping her weapons and pulling out two vibroblades, which looked more like short swords in her hands than knives, the same size as a Jedi shoto. At the other end of the hallway, her troops concentrated fire on her orders, leaving this area to Janice entirely. She still lost one man, but then, the attack was over.

"On me," she ordered, frowning as she looked at a map of the area on a screen to one side. Her ship had crashed towards the front of the C-shape of the Lucrehulk, and that put her well out of position to attack anything truly vital. "Dammit!" she muttered, slamming a fist against the wall. "And they know we're coming, which means defense in depth. Hmmm... I don't want us to spread out yet adi'kas (boys/girls) but let's see if we can convince them we did..."

Soon cuts were made in the hallway they had found themselves in, leading up down and to the side. Janice decided to head up and then forward again around the C-shape since that was the only direction they could go and hope to find anything vital. She broke off one fireteam to cut their way to the ship's outer hull and start destroying weapons stations, but the rest

stayed with her. And after several twists and turns through the metal and cut out sections of the ship's interior bulkheads later, they ran into the hard opposition Janice had heretofore been able to avoid.

After not finding them for ten minutes, the droids had essentially pulled back throughout that half of the ship into an area where the various hallways and floors from that end of the C merged into one large thoroughfare. As the Mandalorians came out from the one hallway, they found themselves coming out on the second floor of this hallway and instantly started to take fire from directly across, below and above.

Grinning viciously inside her helmet, Janice once more activated her jetpack, charging forward up into the air as she fired down, before crashing into a group on the floor above them, a vibroblade in one hand as she cut and battered the droids to either side. The B-2 droids seemed surprised to not be able to overpower her since even B-2 droids were stronger than the average human. But Janice wasn't average. She hadn't been average before even coming into Ranma's sphere, and after that, she had quickly become one of the deadliest warriors in space. "Let's kick ass and take names, Reborn!"

The other Mandalorians followed her example behind her, spreading out. The beat of the music they were all listening to hammered through their headsets and external speakers, confusing the droids somewhat, but they were facing a large portion of the regiment of B-2 droids available for security on the ship. More and more of them started to press in from the various hallways even as the droids already within the area died under the Mandos' fire.

Janice tried her best to direct this or that Mandalorian to help one another, using her heads-up display to see where they were, but she couldn't watch everything around her equally. And while spreading out as they did had allowed the Mandos to escape the kill zone that had been the entrance to the hallway they came from, it also splintered their unity. Mandos started to go down, first one, then another, while two more fell back wounded.

Then something new was added to the battle.

From back down the corridor the Reborn had come from, a Force user's Stealth technique faded out. A second later, a woman dressed in black with blue skin walked out into the open hall, activating a dull red lightsaber. An instant later, she leaped down, and before any of the Reborn could react, swept her sword through several of the droids that had been about to pin a wounded Mandalorian down. A Force Push captured several of the others on the floor of the area, hurling them into one of the corridors. "Hmmp, like so many ninepins, droids. Pathetic."

Deciding not to look at the gift of a dagger too closely just yet, Janice twisted around, and many missiles flashed out from both of her forearms, crashing into the roof of one of the hallways from which the droids were funneling into the hall. "Grenades on that hallway,

Mandos!" she ordered, tagging the hall where the droids had been hurled by the new Force user.

The Reborn who could, three of them, responded twisting around, tossing grenades in that direction, although one of them fell to enemy fire as he did. That hallway exploded in shrapnel and flame blocking the entrance.

Janice had already blocked the one she had been targeting, which only left three more through which other droids could appear. And as she watched, the Sith took a position in one, her lightsaber flashing to bounce incoming blaster-fire back down the passageway.

Wondering what the hell was going on, Janice leaped across, activating her jetpack again, before twisting around and launching her last few missiles at one of the other entrances, ordering another Mando near her to do the same. The missiles detonated on either side and above the hallway, filling it with rubble. The droids could still fire over it, but she ordered the Reborn down and away, and the battle continued as they took the battle down to the droids on the floor of the large meeting hall entering from the last two halls.

Taking one of those and closing it off cost Janice another Reborn, the lack of cover and space costing them. But then she and the others could concentrate fire on the last one. The droids hadn't been able to shift their reinforcements into that corridor just yet from the other passages and couldn't bring enough fire to bear to dislodge them.

When Janice realized this, she ordered her Reborn forward, then looked over at the Sith warrior who had joined them. The Mandalorians each nodded to her but didn't acknowledge the Sith more than that as they raced forward, some of them activating their jetpacks and bouncing along the corridor to provide harder targets.

Janice stayed back, looking at the Sith. She was a svelte, athletic woman, like all Jedi and Mandalorians were, with an apparently small chest confined under black body armor that covered her from the neck to foot and a black cloak billowing behind her, complete with hood. She was a blue-skinned humanoid, with compelling red eyes, black hair and full dark purple lips.

The skin's blue color was somewhat alluring, Janice acknowledged, a color that she had only seen before on Aayla, the Rutian Twi'lek Jedi. "I'd say thanks but considering that we Mandalorians are allied with the Jedi this time around rather than the Sith, I have to question why you're helping us. And where the kriff you came from!" Janice growled.

"Let us just say for now, since we are after all in the middle of a battle, that I have recently discovered that perhaps the Dark Side isn't enough. That while emotions are power, they don't have to be the Dark Side emotions," the woman answered in clipped tones, then she smirked, an expression that seemed to be quite natural to that face. "You Mandalorians are recruiting, aren't you? I saw quite a few Corellians joining up with you lot, talking to you about your beliefs and so forth. So, here I am."

Janice shook her head with a wry chuckle, then gestured the Sith on, and the two of them raced down the corridor together as she replied. "You're right. We don't have time for this right now. So talk to me after the battle is over, liit'mesh (mysterious beauty)," she answered as she twisted a knob on one side of her shoulder guard, changing the music blasting through the speakers of herself and all of her troops. It was still a combat song, but this was more drum-heavy than guitar, and her troops roared in approval ahead of her.

"My name is Sev'rance Tann," Sev'rance smirked in reply as she raced along beside Janice. Soon she reactivated her lightsaber as the two of them came out of the corridor into another open area directly in front of the engine room's hatch. The droids from the other halls which had retreated here were already being pinned down by several of the Reborn. Ahead of them, the sparking remains of several heavier guns showed the remains of a prepared defensive zone. However, several droids were still firing from several small bulwarks set into the floor, and more were coming in from the flanks.

Riding the high of the emotions of the gathered Reborn, Sev'rance leaped forward, her lightsaber flashing this way and that to batter aside bolts of fire coming towards her, while Janice flew into the open air of the area laying down cover fire and bouncing off of the roof to come down behind the droids in front of her. "I bet I destroy more droids than you, liit'mesh!"

"You're on!" laughing wildly, the Sith roared out as she charged forward, her lightsaber flashing all around her, filling the air with the *vizz-spang* noise of a lightsaber deflecting blaster bolts.

OOOOOO

As had been agreed, two of the boarding parties were comprised solely of Ranma and Shaak, with HK backing her up. The last two were manned by Green Jedi, who were slower to reach their targets.

And of all the boarding parties, it was Shaak who had the best luck. Her ship crashed through the shield of another Lucrehulk, this one of the two that she and the other Jedi had sensed would have a Dark Side user on it. And when they hit the ship in turn, they smashed into the hull near the engine room.

HK tore his way out of the front of the boarding ship, cackling as the blood of the living boarding ship coated his claw-like fingers for a second, before leaping out and firing in either direction without even looking. "Joyous announcement: face the reality of a true three-sixty degree targeting system you miserable excuses for machinery!"

Shaak hopped out after him, not yet activating her lightsaber as she looked around thoughtfully. What few living presences she felt were to her left and straight ahead. She cocked her head thoughtfully, then gestured towards the left. "We'll head that way first, I think."

HK didn't bother replying verbally, simply trooping in that direction.

The two of them quickly ran into opposition. More droids came from behind, but Shaak was undeterred, ordering HK to follow the corridor behind her as they continued on.

Of course, since she wasn't masking her presence, the Sith aboard the ship was aware of her in turn, and as he came out into the same security zone that Janice had run into her a few moments ago, she found the Dark Acolyte waiting for her. Janice recognized him, Trenox, a former Jedi, now apparently fallen to the Dark Side.

She moved into the area, her lightsaber flashing to either side to block incoming blaster bolts, while HK trundled up behind her. "Ecstatic tone: Mistress, if you could but remove your meatbag self, my systems have already locked onto the defensive stations."

"Then do fire away, my homicidal droid." With that, Shaak rolled to the side, taking shots from a few of the droids, but her toughness training under Ranma was up to the task of seeing her through.

Once his mistress was out of his line of fire, HK instantly opened fire with all of his weapons. Heavy blasters fire took some of the B-2, while gyroscopic missiles flashed forward to crash into the defensive bulwarks destroying them, the quad lasers in the sides and the roof of the area, the last exploding underneath the Sith's foot.

Trenox hopped up over the explosion, bringing his lightsaber down towards Shaak, who came out of her roll, flicking her lightsaber up and around to block his blow before a subtle Force Grab caught his leg and pulled him off-balance, allowing her to twist around and block more bolts from the few surviving droids in the area. In a show of Shaak's Shien skills, each bolt was returned to its owner, destroying the droids, and she ordered, "HK, destroy all but one of the hallways leading into this area. Then destroy any droids within the engine room and power down the engines."

"Annoyed observation: Now isn't that just the way with you meatbags, taking the fun for yourselves. Resigned drawl: Affirmative Mistress," HK replied while he finished cutting down still more droids and more droids tried to surround Shaak. Simultaneously, the Sith crashed into her again, their lightsabers clashing against one another with the distinctive *Fizz-zoom* sound.

A Force Push burst through Trenox's power as he tried to defend himself, and Shaak hurled him back to crash into the doors leading into the engine room.

Then she called thermal detonators into her hand, from her belt, tossing them up and directing them through the Force to each of the corridors that HK wasn't already heading towards. With Trenox busy getting to his feet, they hit their targets and a second later, they exploded, destroying the corridors and limiting how reinforcements could try to attack them. But by then, Trenox had recovered, pushing off the door into the engine room and attacking her again.

Once more, Shaak matched him, taking a single step back and slipping into Soresu for a second as they danced around one another, the Sith using a mix of a Sith style and Ataru. "I don't suppose I could talk you into surrendering? You were a Jedi once. Turn aside from the Dark. Its promises are lies, the power it offers a facade. Nothing it gives you is worth the price you pay."

Her words hammered into Trenox's head, her Force Presence pressing into him as Shaak had once done to her apprentice to test Ahsoka. However, Trenox was not willing to hear her words. Instead, he roared aloud, shouting out, "I will have your head, Jedi! The Dark Side is supreme!"

Shaak sighed and took a step backward again, before taking a half step forward and switching styles on the fly to her personal style of mixed Ataru and Makashi. *Honestly, I would've thought even an Acolyte would know better.*

There was no arrogance in that thought, only fact. Shaak Ti had walked beside Ranma through dozens of battlefields, faced Sith Lords past and present, fought assassins of all stripes, and had come through it all. Yet an Acolyte, barely more than a berserker, thought he could fight her? Indeed, that belief made her rather sad. *So, the Acolytes are just another disposable group. That, alas, is rather par for the course in terms of how these Sith think.*

Shaak's sudden shift to an offensive mixed style through Trenox's Force Precognition, and that was all she needed to take the momentum of the fight and keep it for the few seconds she needed. Trenox desperately tried to fall back onto his defensive style, but the fight didn't last much longer before Shaak ran him through the chest. His skin held for a moment, showing he had been put through the toughness technique, but Shaak quickly recovered, leaping into the air and to the side before flipping up into the air.

From there, she trusted forward, her blade coming back up quickly to block his blade to one side before sending a few short, economical slashes towards his body, spreading the heat of her attacks all across his right side. Trenox tried to fight back, but to Shaak, his motions were so slow it was like fighting a child. Another call of surrender rang out to the background of droid on droid violence in the engine room, but it only served to make Trenox angrier and sloppier.

A second later, Shaak senses Trenox's toughness training fading as the heat of her strikes built up along his midriff. Shaak twirled around his next strike and cut him in two.

The Togrutan stood there for a moment amidst the carnage as she stared down at the other Force user, shaking her head sadly, before sighing and moving to enter the engine room.

OOOOOOO

Back in the main battle, Kit watched as the Wild Blade's shield faded into the orange. Up to this point, their maneuverability and number of other targets in space had been helping, but now the last of the gunboats and patrol ships had passed through the enemy formation, those that had survived anyway and more of the Lucrehulks were turning their firepower solely onto the Wild Blade.

The Munificent's were not, continuing to race after their opponents, hoping to catch the smaller, speedier vessels between their formations, which Kit smiled at. That meant that they would be out of position to help the Lucrehulks, and already, another Lucrehulk was pulling out of formation, its engines gone due to some internal explosion. And one of the Lucrehulks, which had been giving out orders to the rest of the fleet, had fallen completely silent. *I wonder if that was Ranma or HK and Shaak?*

The other was still in charge, though, and the two Lucrehulks that had been boarded so far were pulled out of formation, with several of their fellows ringing him just in case. But as Kit watched, that one too fell silent. Regardless, it didn't change the fact that the Force was screaming at him. "Now," he ordered, looking over at Tune. "Send the signal now."

An instant later, the Ardent Defender and the four accompanying heavy cruisers came out right into the gravity well of the planet, putting it above and behind the enemy fleet's current position, brought there by Master Saa. And as it came out of hyperspace, the massive ship instantly launched Sekotan starfighters, while the katana-class ships spread out behind it.

For a second, the Lucrehulks continued to hammer at the Wild Blade, while elsewhere, the Munificent clashed with the second and first assault waves. Then the Ardent Defender opened fire targeted one of the Lucrehulks to the Sun Destroyer's starboard, pushing through into their formation, the banks of weapons at its forward and port firing off as well. The Katana class ships didn't, peeling off to target two battered Munificent class ships from behind.

The Lucrehulks instantly turned their attention on to the new ship, and its shields went to work overtime, the Lucrehulks ignoring the four new heavy cruisers. The Wild Blade, too, was practically forgotten, allowing their shields to swiftly regenerate. Meanwhile, Ahsoka got them behind one of the Lucrehulks engaged with the Ardent Defender. In a riot of ion cannon and turbolaser fire, the ship's shields fell, and their engines were blown into pieces.

On the heels of the Ardent Defender's arrival, several starfighter wings arrived from Master Tiin's portion of the battle, diving down and then up, heading towards the Lucrehulks to engage them. Despite that, though, and the fact that two Lucrehulks had already fallen out of formation, and another had been battered into scarp thanks to the fortress's weapons, that still left eight ships.

That became seven quickly as one of them suddenly went off-line. This was followed by another one, its shields dying, as it fell out of formation. Kit sensed the two teams of Green Jedi in action aboard both ships, and ordered the four katana class ships, who had already shattered their original targets, to stay away from it for now.

Still, six on one, the Ardent Defender should've been overwhelmed. But given its size, and the nature of its shielding, and far heavier proton torpedo broadside, the new ship was fighting harder and tougher than anything else in the space lanes. If any of these Lucrehulks had been involved in the battle of Kuat, they might've likened it to facing one of Kuat's Mandator star dreadnoughts. But the Sekotan Sun Dreadnaught was not only bigger than those, but it was also far tougher too. And the Wild Blade was still there, flipping around this way and that, bringing down shields here and there for a few seconds, providing openings for the starfighters or the larger ship to exploit.

And then the Ardent Defender came in close enough range to fire its magma cannons. Shorter range but more powerful than the turbolasers, they started to knock out the Lucrehulks' shields. There weren't as many of them as the Sun Dreadnaught's heavy turbolasers, but they started to have an impact quickly.

Yet as some of the Munificent's turned back, now ignoring the Corellian ships and gunboats, Kit thought the battle was still very much in doubt. The next second he was gripping his chair in shock, Ahsoka flipping them up and around to come straight down at one of the other Lucrehulks, hammering shot after shot into its shields, as those weapons, which could range on them fired back, only hitting them occasionally thanks to the young Togrutan's defensive maneuvers.

And yet, I believe that the momentum is all with us, Kit mused, his grin widening as he fired the Blade's weapons.

OOOOOO

Like Janice, Ranma's luck was not with him when the boarding pod slammed into the enemy's Lucrehulk. It hit the Lucrehulk almost at one of the C's points at the front of the vessel. And even that had been pushing it, the bioship having expanded much of its internal energy to

get there at all, thanks to how the battle had been moving around. Regardless, Ranma was at last able to pull himself out of the crash webbing then enter the ship, almost absentmindedly dodging through several blaster bolts sent his way.

He closed quickly with a few of the droids, destroying them with punches and kicks, before grabbing up their weapons and twisting around the other way, firing down the corridor and killing still more droids in that direction. He left one droid alive, though, ripping off its arms and grabbing its thin neck in a chokehold with one arm as his other hand moved up to his helmet. "Hey buddy, ya don't mind if I have a look at a map of a ship, do ya?"

"Emergency, emergency, this unit has been crippled and requires immediate attention!" the droid warbled back. "It will do nothing to help the intruder."

"Even if I leave you with your legs so you can maybe run off and get repaired?" Ranma asked. "I mean, a chance like that's better than me finishing the job I did on your fellows, right?"

For a moment, the droid's keening stopped, and it seemed to think about this. "I find your terms acceptable."

Smirking, Ranma connected his helmet to the droid's skull, waiting. "Good, just remember any tricks, and I can crush your skull like a tin can."

"Your warning is understood," the B-2 mumbled.

A second later, Ranma saw that a map of the ship had appeared on his Hud. That part of the Mandalorian helmet was just great sometimes, and now it showed Ranma where he was on the ship. Seeing where that was, he cursed, then frowned thoughtfully. "Wait, the hangar bay is that way?"

"Affirm...this unit will not help the intruder further!" the droid cut itself off, now sounding ashamed.

"Right, well, you did your part, dude." Ranma removed his arm from the droid's tiny, rail thin neck, patting it on its shoulder. *Time to think out-of-the-box thinking*, Ranma thought, twisting around and moving in the opposite direction. "You go that way, I'll go this one. And hopefully, you'll only be repaired after I've taken the ship."

"This unit believes the attacker is crazy. But will take this offer regardless." The droid moved down away from the hanger bay as Ranma turned in that direction.

He ran into trouble twice. The first time a wandering squad of droids found him, another had been moving around the hangar bay. It was currently empty, all of the ships Vultures having been launched long since. But here, Ranma found himself facing a real firefight.

“Destroy the anomaly!” shouted every droid there, even the ones who weren’t currently armed. This consisted of several droids who were part of the loading system, half a dozen droids still connected to badly damaged Vultures, who twisted the Vultures around mid-hangar bay and a few half-droids hanging up on hooks to be connected to Vulture bodies in the future.

Ranma laughed, throwing his arms wide for a second. “It’s always nice to be loved.” With that, he activated his light Pike and leaped straight up, crashing into the roof of the hangar bay and then lashing down

He concentrated on blocking or redirecting the laser blast from the Vultures in midair, tanking the infantry droids’ shots, as he felt towards them. Ranma then reached into his ki space in midair and pulled out his heavy blaster rifle, laying down fire to one side of his landing zone. Three of the droids died to his fire, while still more ducked undercover.

A concussion missile from the weapons underslung carriage crashed into a Vulture, while Ranma speared his light pike through the one he had landed on. With fire coming towards him again, Ranma leaped into and through the explosion, landing on the other side. A few precise shots into the back of the other two Vultures ruptured their generator walls and caused both of them to explode as Ranma raced into the last group of armed droids, his blaster disappearing, as he wielded his light Pike with two hands.

He soon sliced through the last droid who actually posed a threat and, ignoring the chorus of “destroy the anomaly” from the droids on the hooks to one side, moved over to the interior entrance, closing it, then destroying the controls with a single punch. “Shut up, you lot, or I’m going to send you all to droid hell! None of you are even freaking armed. How are you supposed to destroy me?”

The droids looked at one another, and some kernel of self-preservation seemed to activate, at last, informing them all they were indeed unarmed. A second later, they all shut up, although a few robot arms and other things still seemed to be straining towards Ranma.

Ranma ignored them once more, looking around for the controls to the hangar’s outer door, the one that led out into space. Finding it, he looked around, and after a few minutes, found a spacesuit, complete with magnet-boots and a small backpack with an air supply. Being for a Neimoidian, the suit didn’t fit, but the boots at least fit, as did the backpack and the gloves, which he tied off around his wrists. Quickly Ranma put on the backpack and hooked up his air supply to his helmet, checking to make sure it was airtight via the heads-up display.

Then, after breathing in deeply, he moved to the entrance and opened it to space before hopping out and upwards, grabbing on to the edge of the entranceway as he did. He flipped himself up and out, slapping one foot down on to the outer hall, the magnet in his boot clamping down. From there, he looked out towards the command ball, estimating the distance, and then after a single moment to think to himself, *am I really going to this hell yes, I am*, crouched down and disconnected his magnetized boots. “Moko Takabisha, beam form!”

From his hands thrust back along his body, Ranma burst out a blue spear of energy, which hurled him off the hull towards the command ball. As he did, the command ball and other weapons along the interior of the Lucrehulk's C shaped hull started to open fire. This forced Ranma to use further Moko Takabisha in mini format to shift this way and that. Thankfully only a few weapons could train directly into the empty area between the outer C and the command ball.

A few minutes later, Ranma crashed into the side of the command ball and, activating his light Pike, began to cut his way in. Inside, he had to rush forward along one side of a hall as ahead of him an inner bulkhead was closing, red lights flaring at the loss of atmosphere. Leaping forward, he barely slid between the bulkhead coming from both the floor and ceiling, so close he nearly lost his feet to it before the bulkhead closed behind him. Laying on the ground, Ranma watched as the nearest LED turned green after a moment and ripped his helmet off, gasping.

That had been very close. For all Ranma's strength and various abilities, Ranma still needed to breathe. He could hold his breath for a long time, but Ranma would still have to eventually breathe again. *Yeesh, that was a little too much, even for me.* Standing up and putting his helmet into Ranma's ki space, Ranma then smirked as he moved down the corridor, his deactivated light on his shoulder as he went. "On the other hand, if it's crazy and it worked, it ain't crazy."

After passing through the crew compartments for some time, Ranma found himself facing the hatch leading into the command center at the center of the ball-shaped portion of the Lucrehulk's hull.

He was about to start cutting into it when the hatch opened, and Ranma leaped backward, avoiding a strike from a red lightsaber.

He bounced off the floor twice doing somersaults, then landed on his feet, his light Pike held crossways in front of him as he looked at the individual in front of him.

"You will not escape, anomaly! I, Saato, will become the favored apprentice of Darth Tyrannus!"

Ranma shook his head then lifted a hand off of the Light Pike to lash out with a Moko Takabisha. The woman deflected the bolt of ki with her lightsaber, and Ranma charged forward, shouting out, "When are you people going to learn, kill your enemy, then make speeches. Not before!"

"Raagh!" the Sith warrior shouted, bringing her lightsaber around. At the same time, the droidekas moved around her, firing at Ranma. But unlike the heavier blaster bolts from the vultures in the hanger bay, Ranma could ignore them. It hurt like getting pelted by a similarly-sized ball of ice, but the Sith was the important enemy here.

The light pike's yellow beam crashed into the red of Saato's lightsaber. A kick was blocked, then a punch nearly caught Saato in the face, but she dodged it by the skin of her teeth and cut at Ranma's leg. Ranma flipped up over her, using his Light pike to try and deflect the bolts from the droidekas into the woman. She stumbled but didn't go down, lashing out with her lightsaber once more. Ranma blocked it and smashed the end of his light pike into her face causing her to stumble, and she barely sidestepped a blow to her side.

Saato roared and reached out with the Force, grabbing at Ranma's throat, trying to Force Choke him. But Ranma flared his ki out like a battle aura, breaking the grip, then kicked out hard, catching a droideka in the side of his shield. His foot was moving so fast it smashed through the shield and destroyed the droid, though his boot also was burned quite a bit. Saato tried to stab him, but Ranma dodged into her grip and an elbow crashing into her chest. Whatever her durability training wasn't up to stopping a blow like that, and she flew backward with a cry as her ribs broke and her lightsaber flew from her hand.

Before Saato could push herself to her feet, Ranma had destroyed the four other droidekas. Blood dripped down from his hand for a few seconds before the hand healed thanks to his ki healing, and Ranma stared down at Saato. "Surrender, girl, please. I don't want to have to kill you."

Looking down into Saato's eyes, Ranma shivered. There were no iris there. Those eyes were just pure yellow, filled with malice and madness equally. It looked as if this woman had fallen entirely into the Dark Side of the Force, or perhaps an inner darkness that had always been there. Perhaps this woman had never even been a Jedi, just raised to reach for the Dark Side from a young age. Whichever the case, the vitriol that spewed from her mouth even as Saato concentrated on the Force sealed her fate. "Never! The Dark Side will win, you, you will die in agony! Your Togrutan Jedi whore will die screaming..."

Sighing, Ranma flipped his light Pike behind him, blocking Saato's lightsaber as it flashed towards his back and kicked down hard, slamming several dozen kicks into the woman's head until her neck snapped. Turning, Ranma leaned down, flicking the red lightsaber off before pocketing it and placing it in his ki space. "Damn the Dark Side," he murmured, shaking his head.

Moving over to the door, Ranma looked up at a camera, glaring at it. "It's been a long day, and this door is not going to stop me for more than a few minutes, but it will make me even angrier than I am now. Do any of you want me to be angry?"

A moment later, the door opened, and Ranma moved into the ship's bridge. Standing there, he looked around at the crew, most of whom were Neimoidians, with one or two alien species scattered among them. "I'm the captain now, and we're going to turn on your fellow confederates. Does anyone want to argue?" Ranma asked, suddenly very tired.

No one did, and Ranma nodded. "I didn't think so." *And a damn good thing, too, considering I have no idea how to fight a ship this huge.* "Target our nearest former sisters, and open fire. Signal the Ardent Defender we're on their side. Let's get this fight over with," Ranma grunted, flopping into the captain's chair, shaking his head tiredly. *And hopefully, with all this, we'll be one step closer to the Sith Lord and maybe starting the process of bringing this war to an end.*

OOOOOOO

At first, Thrawn had been somewhat dismissive of Master Fay's after Fay said she was mainly a diplomat, a peacemaker and a teacher. Why, after all, would someone who had won everything he'd had in life with the sword care overmuch for the pen? Despite Thrawn having been banished for his own people's actions, he still firmly believed in a militaristic way of life and a firm, controlling governmental style.

But Thrawn was an incredibly intelligent man, and one thing he was not was close-minded. After several days of debate, Thrawn still felt that a strong central authority was needed, but Fay had convinced him that eventually, the means to an end to create that authority would eat itself. Control was good, but not enough by any means to create lasting **stability**. Without a threat, and an internal one is better than an external, the means with which the Sith wished to take power would damn them once they had it. It would become a self-fulfilling prophecy, militarism for militarism's own sake, with little in the way of stability beyond that of a boot to the throat.

For a small system polity like the Chiss, that was enough because they had enough exterior threats to convince every citizen that order over individualism was the best way to ensure their species' very survival, not just the best way to rule them. On top of that, Thrawn's race was inclined to slow methodical thought, not expansionist at all, and socially wedded to the idea of their Great Houses and the military they served.

For the Republic, such a thing would be **impossible**. There were just too many civilizations, too many different societies, and the Republic was just too big. You needed a centralized authority for such a polity, yes, but it could not be one placed there by the sword. Or else the sword would have to grow to the point there was nothing but the sword itself.

Worse yet was the Sith themselves. Fay had access to the Jedi Library, and with it, she had been able to point out categorically that the Sith could not create the kind of order and stability that Thrawn wished to see in the galaxy. And worse yet, the Sith were not loyal to anything but themselves. No agreement with the Sith ever lasted, especially between them and

non-Force users. So any agreement Thrawn made to serve the Sith to benefit his people or prepare the galaxy for the threats beyond would be worthless or used for the Sith's own goal.

And with that, Thrawn knew he would never serve the Sith. Not now, not when he too could see the future if he did. *No, the Sith are not the way forward, even if the Republic as it stands is too fragile an edifice to believe it could be much help to my people, misguided though they are at present.* He looked over at Fay, shaking his head, a wry look on his face. "Was that a trap the other day? You allowed me to basically take apart the Republic system as it currently stands, and then you took apart my own thoughts of what could replace it. It seems a little too coincidental. Did you know I would do that?"

Fay shook her head in turn. "No. But I have never said that the Confederacy didn't air legitimate grievances with how the Republic was being run. I simply believe that what they want to put in place is much, much worse and that the movers and shakers of the movement do not, in fact, care about those grievances at all."

"I don't know about you, but these conversations have fried my brain. Four days, four days of this conversation, interspersed with research of course, on governments, history, society, socio-political movements and everything else," Aayla groaned, rolling her eyes in a particularly un-Jedi-like manner. "This was not what I thought I would be facing when the Force directed me to join you."

"Nonetheless, thank you for helping me with the research and for allowing me the use of your refresher station, Thrawn owing his head to Allison. "It was a help, and shaving was delightful." Gone was Thrawn's stubble, and his hair too had been cut short, so short it was a cru-cut now.

Aayla waved that off. "It wasn't a problem. I won't even comment on how you kept on trying to catch me out on whether or not I was trying to steer you in the research one way or another..."

Despite being called out like that, Thrawn was unapologetic. "You had control of the information, and you are on Fay's side, even if you pledged neutrality when aiding me. To take you at your face value would be foolish, even if I know that you Jedi have proven trustworthy up to that point. A commander can never truly trust what one does not see without his own eyes, after all."

"And for my part, I have really met anyone as intelligent as you, yet so stubborn, Master Fay laughed lightly. "And yet, by your tone, I believe you are willing to concede defeat?"

"In this, I suppose so." Thrawn smiled thinly. "So, what do you wish to know of the Sith?"

Master Fay chuckled but held up a hand as Aayla made to speak. She looked at the young Jedi, one eyebrow cocked and Aayla after a moment side. "Darn it. I understand Master Fay." She looked over at Thrawn and addressed her next words to him. "While you might know about the Sith, I very much doubt you know anything in terms of actionable intelligence."

"You would be somewhat correct," Thrawn mused. "I know one of his creatures, although he did not give me his proper name, and that the Sith was a human. Beyond that, I could not tell you more." He gave a description of a man who could, in point of fact, be described by the word nondescript. Medium height, medium build, brown hair, brown eyes, the kind of human that could disappear without even a ripple into any world humans were prevalent.

"Very well, what do you wish of me? You said you came to convince me not to join the Sith and perhaps to join your side. Your mission is only half accomplished. What do you want of me personally? I am... less than enthused with the Republic as it stands as you well know by this point."

Master Fay leaned forward, her eyes and face turning stern and commanding. "I am not a fighter. I'm not a soldier or anything of that nature. I'm a diplomat and a peacemaker. But what I want you to be who, what you are but for us."

Thrawn stared, his eyes already gleaming red, lighting up further like twin coals. "And by that, you mean...?"

"Lead the Jedi forces," Fay said firmly. "Lead the Republic forces against the Confederacy and the Sith. Be **our** Admiral, Thrawn, and then, when the war is over, the Republic **will** change. I Master Fay, can almost guarantee it. It will not be perfect, no government is, no society is. But it will change for the better. Too many cracks have formed already to let the Republic keep going as it is."

"We can even get you in as an Admiral," Aayla inserted, also looking hopeful. The man was impressive, and his tactical and strategic brain was truly fearsome, shown in a very strategy games the two of them had played of a night as a break from the debate. "The Republic allows officers of local powers to retain their rank when they are seconded to the Republic Navy. They would just have to give you a wargame-based test to see if you were worthy of it."

Thrawn thought about it for a moment, thought about what Fay had told him, then about Fay herself and the Jedi like her. *C'baath truly was an anomaly, I think. And if there are any more like her, or like Aayla in the Order to push for that change, then I can see it occurring. And I must admit to some less than logical thoughts about what spending more time with Aayla could lead to...* "Very well, Master Fay, you have yourself an Admiral. Where do we begin?"

End Chapter

How and why Thrawn was exiled is very much up in the air. On the one hand, before the Great Dis*ey Shift, the story went that Thrawn's proactive actions like his battle against the OFP were directly against the Chiss desire for stability, defensive actions and closed borders. For this, he was exiled. After the Great Shift, it was added that he met Anakin during the Clone Wars... and then was pretend-exiled to see if the Empire was worth allying with, the Chiss having had a VERY low opinion of the Republic. And since they were out past the Outer Rim, who can blame them? But honestly, that idea doesn't make much sense.

So I figured that the Sith would put the idea of Thrawn serving them in the future in his mind and provide him with reasons why the Sith were looking to overthrow the government, with the whole issue of Jedi vs. Sith removed from the discussion. I also figured that showing the full debate would not be fun for most of my readers, so I decided to show the beginning and end of Fay's talks with him. Of course, he hasn't met Ranma yet. How will a believer in order deal with the ultimate chaotic factor? We shall see.

Beyond that, I wanted to show more about the war efforts going on elsewhere, but the battle in Wayland went too long, and the issue with the clones and the Reborn was a bitch to get right. Still, I hope you all enjoyed this, even if it wasn't quite the chapter I hoped for.