

I am not Disney nor Japanese.

Hey Everyone! It's been a long time, but in August, I put up a 'Update Me!' poll with the stories that had not been updated for the longest amount of time. Horse for the Force won, and here we are.

**Since it's been so long here is a brief summary:**

Wayland, conquered by the Jedi, is guarded through several attempts by the CIS to claim the planet by the Nova Guard, while Ranma and Shaak are busy making certain the Reborn don't start a war with the Republic over the fact they cloned Jango Fett. After a series of combats, Bo Katan proves that despite being a woman she has much bigger balls than the clones, beating several squads of them all on her own and proving that the real thing is much better than any number of copies. Meanwhile, Ranma and Shaak evince concerns about the whole idea of cloning, wanting to make sure that they are treated well. Then they return with their allies to Wayland. Using the shocking tactic of boarding a ship in combat, Ranma, Shaak, and a select troop of specialists take enough of the Lucrehulk ships in orbit over Wayland to turn the battle in space decisively against the CIS. During these boarding actions two Sith acolytes die, one of them at Ranma's hand despite his attempt to convince the overwhelmed Acolyte to surrender.

## **Chapter 26: New Homes, New Responsibilities, New Breakthroughs**

The battle in space had ended not long ago, but as Ranma stared through the ship's viewscreen at Wayland, the main hologram of the planet, showed that the fight was still going on down there. "Flipping droids, they're beaten but they are still fighting for no reason. Why can't they be more like you, huh?"

He looked over at the badly damaged droid, who he had ordered to join him on the bridge, armed just in case the crew tried anything. Since this was the first time Ranma had been on a Lucrehulk, it was entirely possible that someone could pull some trick and he wouldn't be able to tell. The droid, Ranma thought of him as Scrappy at this point, seemed to have developed an extremely good survival instinct.

This he pointed out now. "While this unit was able to overcome its priority programming due to damaged internal circuits, the same cannot be said for other droids. Unless commanded by a recognized authority, the land units will continue operations until destroyed. Self-preservation is only a secondary concern."

Ranma snorted, then his gaze flicked past Scrappy to the dead Sith, Saato. With a sigh he turned away, shaking his head. She'd no chance against him, and still had fought, still had taunted about killing his loved ones, reminding him of some of his old enemies, only far more dangerous and darker. Yet even so, ending her life still ate at Ranma, causing Ranma a good deal of angst and frustration. *And this appears to be a way to get some of that anger out.*

Twisting around, Ranma glaring around at the officers and others, then looked back over at Scrappy. "Yo, if I left, would any of these assholes be able to countermand my orders?"

"This unit believes that they would. While my primary and secondary objectives have been switched, the secondary objectives, that is, the programming to obey those in command of CIS forces, still exist. Without you here as a clear and present danger, secondary objectives will have to be obeyed."

"Hmm..." Ranma looked around, then shrugged. "Well, I suppose that this ship'll need to be repaired anyway. Point out every system that doesn't control communications and internals."

Even as the bridge crew gnashed their teeth, Scrappy did so. Ranma was a threat to its existence and thus Scrappy would obey him, ensuring its survival. With the droid directing him, Ranma destroyed much of the equipment they would need to run the ship, the weapons, the shields, the engines. Then he went to the engine room, doing the same thing there.

Returning to the bridge, Ranma looked around the now thoroughly beaten crew. "Right you lot, I'm leaving now. A crew of Corellians should come here to take over the ship. Until then, you all just stay put and don't do anything that'll make me come back up here."

He waited until they all nodded and then pointed at one of the Neimoidians. "You, you were sitting over at the communications console, right?" The green-skinned alien nodded and Ranma went on. "If I upload a song to you, are you able to play it through all of your radio frequencies, including the one connecting to the Army on the ground?"

The droid and the other bridge officers all looked at one another and then hesitantly nodded. "You, er, you've kept the communications console intact, so yes, I should be able to that. But you realize that the droids will simply ignore any kind of radio signal, correct? Even the um, the taunting of them has been countered by this point."

"I know. But I want to make a statement, to you and to any other prisoners, and maybe to the droids like Scrappy here. That the size of your army doesn't mean kriff, I'll freaking still turn it to junk," Ranma drawled. Then he smirked, shaking his head. "Besides, some things just sort of demand musical accompaniment."

With that, Ranma left the bridge. But as he was making his way to the hanger bay, Ranma passed a coolant line that he previously been damaged in his original battle where he

met Scrappy. The coolant line took that moment to burst, showering Ranma with an incredibly cold liquid. it wasn't water, it was too viscous, more like slime than water, but it was close enough, and more than cold enough, to trigger his change. "Oh, what the FUCK!?" she screeched, staring down at herself as the familiar laughter of the Force reverberated around her.

Ranma took a moment looking down at herself before shaking her head and wringing out some of the slime from her hair. "Damn it, I've been slimed. Ugh. Whatever, it's not enough to bother me."

She was still chuckling ruefully at her own bad luck when she boarded a small shuttle that was rated for humans rather than droids. Evidently even a ship like this had to transfer living people sometime. and thanks to Ranma's training with Shaak, she was able to pilot the shuttle up into the air, and then out of the ship. As the shuttle flew down into the atmosphere, the first song Ranma had chosen played. "Namarini ni sora..." **{Donten Gintama}**

**OOOOOOO**

Thanks to the omni-directional nature of Ranma's background music, the other boarding groups heard it as well. The effect on the Reborn crews and even some of the Corellians was instantaneous.

Janice grinned, then turned to look over at Sev'rance before giving orders to the rest of her team. Half would be staying aboard the ship, while the others with her, as she looked at the red light saber wielding Senate. Her eyes widened however as she saw the blue-skinned woman shutting her eyes in what looked like delight. "Oh yes," Sev'rance practically purred. "That is the stuff!"

"Did you just take drugs?" Jessica asked, one hand falling to her Vibro-blade.

"What? No, drugs constitute a lack of control, that would be ridiculous. Although I suppose you could say I just got a bit of hit of something," Sev'rance chuckled, the sound deep and almost sensual. "We force users can, can almost take in the emotions that song is creating. It's nothing at all like what I felt back on Corellia, but nice enough. Almost as good as the fight here. I have to meet the Chaotic Locus, if he's able to evoke so easily being near him or her would be most interesting."

Janice twitched at that, before shaking her head. That wasn't her problem, and besides, seeing Sev'rance interact with Shaak could be hilarious. "Right, well, let's see what we can do to get down there."

For her part, Shaak had felt the spike in Ranma's emotions, his anger, grief and overpowering frustration. She knew when she felt that strange soup of emotions that Ranma would normally ignore or push away quickly remaining within him, that Ranma would need to

let loose a bit. When she then felt the normal laughter from the Force, which signaled Ranma's transformation, Shaak was more pleased than she would have been, knowing that becoming female would allow Ranma to calm down.

Despite how good Ranma had gotten in expressing softer emotions thanks to their love for one another, Shaak knew that Ranma still had better emotional control as a woman than as a man. *Well outside a certain time of the month. But beyond that, Ranma has a tendency to suppress grief and other unwelcome emotions as a male. As a female he will turn them into violence and then let them go. As a man, he would keep them inside regardless of anything else.*

But like Janice, Shaak still had to prepare the Lucrehulk for its new skeleton crew before she could go to her husband/wife.

Bo Katan Kryze didn't. After all, why would she? Leaving her Night Owls behind to guard their prize, Bo Katan walked back into the hanger bay of her captured (and oh yes, she was going to demand this ship be turned over to the Reborn once it was repaired and Wayland defended well enough) Lucrehulk, where the Bes'uliik had been sent, while Bo and the Reborn took the bridge. Its weapons would have made a hash of the bridge's consoles, which would have been disastrous.

"Hey there big beast," she crooned, rubbing her head against the large robotic creature's as it thrust its muzzle towards her, her eyes alight with growing delight. "Fully charged?" The creature nodded, and Bo moved over to the controls of the hangar bay, typing in a few commands. The bay's doors opened, and as the warning lights came on, Bo was back by the Bes'uliik, flinging herself into the saddle. "Let's go then."

The Bes'uliik turned, and made its way out of the hanger, where it used its jets to head down into the atmosphere, the reentry shielding coming up in front of Bo as she connected her blaster into the mechanical monster's inner generator. There weren't any surviving Vultures in the air above the battlefield, Wayland's anti-air defenses having smashed them out of the sky, and the first the enemy knew of her arrival was when she and her stead fired as one, targeting four enemy tanks, barely visible within the foliage of the forest. They seemed to have been moving to fire at Ranma from long range.

"Now that's just not on..." The now high-powered rifle, which was at the level of a disintegrator, took one tank, an AAT, right on its main gun, blasting through and making the weapon useless. The Bes'uliik however disdained such precision, unloading from all of its weapons at once. The armor of the tank was not very good from directly above, and the heavy cannons and rockets of the ancient war machine tore all four into shreds as it twisted, flying directly above the forest and into the center of the battlefield.

As she arrived, Bo heard Ranma singing as she hurled droids left and right, one of them hitting the side of an already badly damaged transport, so hard, the droid came apart upon

impact. "This is an admission and our mission is to bring down the walls!" **{On the Rocks by Amaranthe}**

"At that point the background music played, a gravely voice growling out, "It's our mission, not fall to submission!"

"Life is an addiction with conviction, you're a Hypercom star," Ranma belted out, while Bo grinned and began to disconnect herself from her stead.

"My addiction to feed my conviction!" again the growling voice, which made Bo wonder where the song had come from originally. *That voice just doesn't sound human, or at least wasn't originally human anyway.*

Using a Magna Guard as a pivot, Ranma's heavy repeating blaster appeared in her hand, and she fired around at the surrounding droids, while also tearing the droids head off slowly. "Light up the fire, I bring you back to life, taking us higher like it's the Fourth of July!"

Bo slammed down into the same area of the battlefield that Ranma had previously, causing quite a bit of damage to another AAT who had apparently been stuck in the entrance of a destroyed troop transport. Bes'uliik roared and toe the tank into shreds, firing his weapon against a few groups of droids as they tried to join the battle from the wood line. while Bo grabbed two concussion grenades, tossing them to either side where they exploded amongst the closer group of droids that been using the tank as cover to attack Ranma.

Winking her way, Ranma continued to sing, having grabbed a droid's arm and used it to smash several other droids down before ducking under the blow of a Magna Guard, her foot catching the droid in the chest, hurling the beast so hard that it flew upwards. The Bes'uliik twisted its head around, destroying the droid with a single shot of its cannon.

"That's right, come on, we can make it hot, hot, bring it on the rocks 'Round, 'round, down right until you wanna drop, acting like a hotshot, drop it like it's hot. So swing another round, right, 'cause we will never stop!" With that line, Ranma dove into two Magna Guard.

"You really know how to show a girl a good time, Ranma," Bo quipped, as she fired her wrist launchers, destroying another, horribly mangled AAT whose main gun had been trying to traverse her way, then flashed forward, using the explosion as cover for a moment. From within the conflagration, Bo, trusting in her armor, fired out into the droids, most of whom now ignored her, something she became angry about. "Ugh, come on you kriffers, you could make this harder you know."

A few seconds later, she rushed out of the fire right before her armor's internal systems were about to give out. The droids were still almost entirely uninterested in attacking her, but a few did so, and the majority of them seemed to be the staff wielders, like two which were rushing towards Ranma from either side. The heavy droids, the most of B2-HA Super Battle

Droids also ignored her, trying to rain down fire on Ranma with no discernable damage being done to the redhead.

Instead, Ranma leaped and dodged and bent in a way that no human body should ever be able to, her hand flashing up like snakes when the Magna Guard attacked. The attack was perfect, so well-choreographed even Bo would have had trouble with them, but Ranma had positioned herself so that she could dodge around the strikes, her hands grabbing at the electro-staffs, right behind where the electrical currents arced along the head of the staff.

Neither of the droids could move their weapons for a moment. Even in her female form, Ranma was far stronger than a droid of a comparable size. Then both droids found themselves hurled into the air, while Ranma continued to sing. Like her previous toss, the two Magnaguard were destroyed by the Bes'uliik, who seemed to enjoy the exercise.

Bo took to the sky, before a similar ambush could catch her, and even as she attacked with her own weapons Ranma hurling herself forward like a dervish, the two staffs in her own hands now slicing and dicing as she went. She was also still singing, although Bo couldn't make out the words.

*Those droids might be capable of fighting Jedi, but not someone like Ranma,* Bo reflected, before realizing her blaster was running low on power. "Rookie mistake," she grumbled, dropping the weapon, then pulling out the Darksaber, landing a second later and carving three droids into wreckage before they even realized she was there. Not that that was saying much in the moment.

A second later, Bo came face-to-face with one of the electro-staff wielding droids. She dodged backward, ducked under a second blow then parried a third the droid showing a surprising amount of speed. *And is it just me or does this one seem to have learned from its fellows how to set its feet and strike better?* Regardless, Bo was able to shift the electro-staff to one side, cutting at the shaft of the staff. The phrik metal of the staff seemed able to withstand the blows of a lightsaber, a but the Darksaber was made to stand such things, and the blade of her weapon was special and did not turn off as the blade of a normal lightsaber would have.

A second later, Bo's own armor then took a hit, but she grinned cheerfully under her helmet as the Darksaber came up and around, faster than the droid could move, slicing its head off. "You're not the only one with armor that can withstand hits, kriffer," she muttered, but then doubled over with an 'oof' of displaced air, as the droid's staff crashed into her chest. The electrical prods didn't do anything to her thanks to her armor's absorption layer, but the blow still carried her backwards a bit, as she stared in shock. "Right," she muttered, shaking her head. "Droids. They can have receptors and brain boxes anywhere. Annoying."

Bo was forced to retreat as several of the nearby droids seemingly under command of the first droid finally turned away from Ranma, hurling fire at her. Bo quickly used her jet pack, rocketing up into the air, flying backward, before grabbing at a nearby tree branch, flipping

herself up and the trees. Then she was barreling back into the clearing, using her jet pack as she flew a few feet above the ground. Two hand blasters previously attached to her jetpack were in her hands now, clearing the way as she charged forward.

Then she was dropping those weapons as she grabbed at the Darksaber at her waist. Once more, the droid's electro-staff raised to block the blow but her forward momentum caused both of them to crash to the ground. The droid let go of the staff, grabbing at the arm holding the Darksaber. Then Bo pulled out a holdout vibro-knife, the knife popping out from under the vambrace on her armguards around, stabbing down into the droid's chest several times.

Then she rolled off the droid, pulling the Darksaber out of the dead droid's grip and chopping it around her, cutting legs off of several droids nearby as they attempted to fire on her and Ranma began to belt out a third song.

**OOOOOOO**

Of course, since the ship that Ranma had captured was blasting out the music he'd chosen across all of its communication channels, the allied ships in orbit were hearing it too. At a much lesser volume for certain, and only if they wanted to, but it was still coming through. "Damn, that beat is awesome!" said Corellian communications specialist to another as they listened to the song currently playing.

"I know, right? Although it is kind of strange to think about people actually fighting to music like this. I would've thought that most Jedi at least would take fighting seriously. But we just saw at least a few of them dropping into the atmosphere along with the Mandalorians."

"And after that party the Mandos threw back on Corellia, we know how they act," his friend quipped, nudging the second speaker in the ribs. Both of them were actually from Coronet City and had gone to the rave that the Mandalorians had thrown after the battle had ended.

"But that's my point," the second communication specialist opined. "I just can't see any of the Green Jedi from back home doing something like that."

"Well, we've heard about the rumors that Ranma fellow isn't actually a Jedi, so maybe it makes sense for him?" the first speaker murmured, then smiled, turning to look over at another bridge officer. "Hey, do we still have any of those sensor probes aboard?" The Gozanti-class had occasionally been used as survey and scout vessels to hunt down pirate bands or find smuggling bases in peacetime. To do that, they were loaded with several sensor droids, which would be sent down to planets or asteroids and survey the territory without risking anyone's life.

"I think we have a few. Why? We do need permission to use them, you know," the third officer responded warily.

"Permission granted," a fourth voice interjected from behind the three men, causing the communication officers to flinch, turning to see the captain of the ship standing directly behind them. "Although not for the reasons you might be thinking. After all, if we can get real-time data from the ground, we might be able to perform a partial bombardment on the droid army down there and thus help our friends."

While the captain's reasons for agreeing with this idea was couched in military terms and objectives, all that went out of the window as they watched the battle occurring around Ranma. With the background music going, it was a sight to see for certain.

The first communication specialist took some time watching the battle going on and then surreptitiously flicked on a recording device when one song ended. His timing was pretty good, and a second later, his computers were recording the sight of Ranma and the Mandalore fighting to pulse-pounding music as Ranma started to sing along. My cousin has some shares in a record label, I think. I wonder what he'd think of this?

At the same time, other ships, which were communicating with one another and the galaxy at large, were also watching this. The communication network between them allowed the other ships in orbit and even those coming closer to orbit to see much of the same information that the Gozanti-class, *Fearless*, was getting off its drones. And more than one of them was sharing what they saw with those back home. In a matter of moments, the recording went viral on a half-dozen planets Republic-wide, spreading from there.

**OOOOOO**

Ranma finished two more songs before the rest of the Night Owls, Shaak, HK, Janice and her odd companion arrived, along with a light rain.

Shaak plummeted down from on high, using the Force to protect herself from the drop from her shuttle, landing near Ranma, dancing around her, lightsaber flashing out, cutting and deflecting. The two of them barely looked at one another before they began to move as one, a sign of teamwork that had to be seen to be believed, beyond even a normal Padawan-Master Gestalt. The two of them became a carousel of destruction, making Ranma's previous attack seem almost childish in comparison.

The others use more normal Mandalorian tactics, hovering above the ground, their weapons blasting out down on the droids, rockets from their backs. And they had, unlike Bo, remembered to refill their magazines.

However, a moment later Shaak paused, as Janice and her group joined the battle, staring in shock, or as much as a Jedi would show, at the red lightsaber wielding blue-skinned woman.



Ranma also paused, having just grabbed a droid's arm, and pulled it out of its socket to smash into the head of another one. He idly kicked the droid up and over the battlefield to once more be smashed out of the sky by Bo's mechanical war beast. "Er, correct me if I'm wrong, but red lightsabers do mean Dark Side users, right? That isn't, you know, a guideline or anything, that's a hard rule, right?"

"Considering that the specialized crystals the Dark Side users use within their lightsabers are created artificially, and adding blood is part of the process, yes, you're correct Ranma, it is a hard and fast rule," Shaak drawled, cocking her head to avoid an electro-staff before idly using the Force to hold the enemy in place then slicing the droid into several pieces, avoiding the phrik staff easily.

Yet all that was automatic, Shaak was too busy studying the almost ecstatically pleased face on the Dark Side user. "Hmm... Although, it does not seem to then equate that all Dark Side users are the enemy. She seems to almost be enjoying the emotions of the battle, and I do not believe that any here are so filled with hatred for the droid race that they would be feeling it now."

"Aggrieved note: Mistress, I am certainly filled with hate. Hate for all of these mass-produced, soulless, disgusting constructs! They are the true droid, and even worse, they are weak!" HK bellowed from nearby, firing his mini gyro rockets out into the forest. This destroyed several dozen droids, and hulled an AAT just as it pushed out of a small culvert in the forest.

Of course, the droids pulling back to attack Ranma didn't just give the defenders the mountain of Wayland a break. It gave the Nova Guard time to regroup and launch their own attack. The Nova Guard poured out of their defensive works, including all of their own mechanized cavalry, and the reserves that General Yorick had been husbanding up to this point. The only people he retained in the fortified lines were those facing groups of droids on the far side of the mountain, which apparently had been out of touch from the rest of the droid's battlefield communications.

About half an hour later, the battle was all over. As the last of the fires around them sizzled and hissed in the rain, Ranma stared around the battlefield, scowling angrily. "Aww, no more?"

Many of the others who heard him chuckled, but Shaak moved towards Ranma, enveloping the shorter woman in a hug, shaking her head as she looked down into Ranma's face. "You don't really want to destroy any more droids, Ranma. You just enjoy how much doing so is very much a black-and-white issue. They are the enemy and aren't even alive, as most would use the term. I can understand the allure, but you are only letting your enjoyment of that whitewash over the problem."

Ranma stared up at her wife, not replying, and Shaak knew she was right. "Later, we will talk about what is really bothering you. And don't even think about trying to get away," she

admonished, leaning down to Kiss Ranma's rain-wet forehead. "Although I will ask now... why the music?"

"Why would I ever try to get away from you?" Ranma laughed wetly, although she also nuzzled into the hug, nodding her head against Shaak's chest. "As for the music, meh, dropping from orbit like I did, some things just deserve music. After that, I thought it added a bit more to the humiliation factor. A whole army against me and they didn't even really make me sweat. And I want every freaking CIS officer out there who hears about this fight to know it."

With that, Ranma pulled away slightly, pulling out her communicator from her ki space talking into it. All right, you lot, you can cut off the music now."

"I understand your reasoning for the songs, but not the grief that led you into such anger," Shaak answered, once more pulling Shaak into a hug, which Ranma now returned so tightly that Shaak, for all her training with the martial artist, could feel her ribs creak. "And we will still talk about it later, Ranma."

"Ugh, how saccharine," the Dark Side user muttered, shaking her head as she looked at the two women, while the background music cut off instantly, allowing for far easier communication between the various ships and people on the surface. "Still, I suppose allying myself to you Light Side users has to have some drawback."

"Beyond being our prisoner, you mean?" Shaak questioned, looking over at her and shaking her head, not ending her hug with her wife. "Janice, would you like to explain what is going on here?"

"Not really, considering that the full story doesn't really shed the best of lights on Corellia or us Mandalorians. But I suppose I must. She's a stowaway," Janice answered bluntly. "She first snuck onto the ship, then snuck onto the boarding boat, and then threw herself into the fight aboard the ship I was assigned to take. She introduced herself as Sev'rance Tann and that she might wish to join the Reborn."

"Then I would suggest you start talking," Shaak practically ordered, with Bo backing her up from nearby, where she was stripping some of the dead droids for their weapon magazines while also looking for the rifle she'd dropped earlier.

"There really isn't all that much to it, although I suppose as Jedi you are obviously interested in my life story. I'm willing to share what I know of Tyranus' operations, although it will not be much. We acolytes were always organized into cells so that while we knew what we needed to know to get our various missions accomplished, we did not know much about the overall war effort or his long-term plans."

Ranma and Shaak pulled away from one another, exchanging a look at that before Shaak looked back at Sev'rance. "That's fine. Getting a lot of that kind of information out of you

would've seemed too good to be true in any event. A but you are still not telling us why you are here and why you are on our side."

"I'm on no one's side. You can keep all that sanctimonious for the Republic, for the public or whatever greater good nonsense you Jedi believe in to yourselves. As to what I am here for..." Sev'rance paused, looking towards Ranma for a moment, then gave a very brief account of how she had hidden away after the invasion of Corellia, unwilling to throw her life away in a lost cause. How Sev'rance then felt the emotions of the party the Mandos had thrown and the impact it had on her. "There is power in those emotions, and... a certain amount of pleasure too. I have only been trained in the Dark Side of the Force and never realized that other emotions could contain power. But I ran into the same thing here." She gestured around them.

Sev'rance's tone turned thoughtful at that point. "I'm not certain what that makes me. I'm obviously no longer just a Dark Side user, certainly no Sith. But as I just said, I have no wish to be a Jedi either. That would take a view of the universe that is just too removed from reality. So, I suppose that puts me someplace in between."

"Heh, that's the nicest way to say yer a pessimist that I've ever heard. And being between is rarely a comfortable place to be," Ranma quipped.

"While Ranma speaks truly on that score, what are your goals for having hidden away as you did to come here with us?" Shaak asked suspiciously as Nova Guard began to come out of the forest around them, cheering and waving at them as they began to go through the detritus of the battlefield. "I sense no feeling of falsehood through the Force but find myself unwilling to trust that alone."

"To get close to the Chaotic Locus, of course. The one who helped to create that tumult of emotions I felt on Corellia. The one who was at the center of this latest example," Sev'rance answered instantly.

Shaak's scowled at that while Ranma flinched a bit, wondering how this was going to go and praying he was wrong. "That much was obvious, but what are you actually after?"

"I don't know. What have you got?" Sev'rance taunted, her gaze switching over to Ranma, who had turned to wave back at the Nova Guard.

For some reason, Shaak now really wanted to gouge Sev'rance's red eyes out of her all too pretty blue face, But Shaak was a Jedi. She did not give in to her sudden urge, no matter how satisfying it might have been. Instead, she turned abruptly away, linking her arm with Ranma's. "Your fate will be decided when we meet up with the other Jedi. I will not make a decision on your fate on my own."

*And if you do try to go after my husband, well, what was that catchphrase that one old fiancé Ranma told me about? Rivals are for killing? I might be willing to put that into practice if there's no other alternative. No, stop that Shaak Ti. You are a Jedi,* Shaak admonished herself, walking beside Ranma. *Do not give in to your ancestor's primitive nature. Just because she might try to flirt with Ranma is no reason to kill her out of hand. So long as she doesn't take it too far, anyway, Shaak couldn't help herself from adding.*

Unaware of the Togrutan's somewhat blood-thirsty thoughts, the Dark Side user simply shrugged. Sev'rance then fell into line as the group of combatants made their way towards the line of Nova Guard soldiers.

Setting aside her questions on Sev'rance, Shaak looked around them, holding one of Ranma's hands in her own as she took in the damage done to the forest, taking comfort in that connection, while also lamenting the damage around them. *This world was not quite a pristine world before this, but it was close. And now these forests will take a long time to recover from this, despite the amount of metal in the trees.*

As she looked around, Shaak was struck by the fact that the droid army had done a lot more damage to the forest than the Sith presence ever had. *Now that is an interesting philosophical point. Machine violence can create an impact far greater if not deeper than the Sith. And all done by those who have no feelings of their own. There is a warning there, I feel.*

Her musings were interrupted as noises were heard through the forest around them. Ahead of the two lovers, two empty hoverbikes came into view, controlled by a Nova Guardsman they recognized as Cro who was riding a third behind the other two. He hopped off, holding up a hand in greeting. "I thought to save you some time and effort," he said, gesturing to the bikes. "There's a few more on the way."

True to Cro's prediction, several dozen bikers came out of the forest around them, hopped off their bikes, offering them to Bo and the others. Soon enough, they were all racing away through the trees towards the mountain.

This became an actual race after a few seconds when Ranma, feeling better now that she'd gotten her guilt and anger at having to kill Saato, reached across as they drove side-by-side, tapping Shaak on the side. "Tag, you're it!"

With that, Ranma up to the speed of her bike, racing ahead of everyone else. Without the Jedi's continual connection to the Force, Ranma relied on her reflexes and ability to read the terrain even through the rain to stay in one piece. Not that this seemed a detriment as Ranma raced far, far faster than most people would've thought safe, even when not doing so in the forest.

Behind her, Shaak stared after Ranma, shaking her head. Normally she would not indulge in this kind of thing. At least not with so many witnesses. But something about

Sev'rance set her teeth on edge, and so more to get away from the girl who was sharing a bike with one of the Mandos for now, Shaak too revved her engines, racing after Ranma.

"That looks like fun," Bo muttered as she too began to speed up. She was followed by the other won't Mandalorians, some of whom used their jet packs to speed up still further. But she and the rest of the Mandos didn't have Ranma's or Shaak's ability to connect to the Force, so even Sev'rance couldn't go as fast as the two lovers when she got into it.

About 45 minutes and three near-accidents later, Ranma and Shaak were now neck and neck as they burst out of the tree line, heading up to Wayland's main entrance.

Free of obstructions, Ranma revved his engines all the more, pouring on the speed as much as possible. Finally, she pulled away from Shaak, who weaved around one large boulder, losing time.

Ahead of them, Ranma saw the opening to the mountain's hanger, wherein Anakin, Kit, Obi-wan, and the Nova Guard and Mandos the Blade had left behind were waiting for them along with several Jedi Ranma hadn't met before. Most laughed or rolled their eyes as Ranma skewed to a halt directly in front of them. Shaak was just behind him, having taken a shortcut, bouncing her way over a boulder field that Ranma had to navigate slowly. Their roles had reversed most amusingly to Shaak in that last little stretch.

The others trickled in slowly, and Obi-Wan and the other Jedi blinked, staring in surprise at the red-eyed pale blue-skinned woman. "Is that... did you actually managed to take a prisoner? And if so, why are her hands not tied?"

"That is her own tale to tell. Beyond that, this is Sev'rance Tann, a Sith Acolyte. Apparently, she helped Janice and her troops take the Lucrehulk they were assigned to," Shaak said as the group entered the main hangar bay of the mountain.

Now under cover from the rain, Ranma moved behind one of the nearby Nova Guard tanks for some privacy. There she pulled out a water bottle from her ki space, heating it from the at the bottom, tossing it over her head before the now male Ranma changed his shirt and pants. While he wasn't about to get sick or anything like that- and Ranma knew from experience that damp clothing wasn't enough to trigger the change - no one liked being in damp clothing any longer than they had to.

When Ranma rejoined them, Sev'rance was finishing her tail, and having felt the Force's laughter, she turned and gave him a once over, her voice turning into a purr as she moved forward, running her hand across his chest before Ranma could back away. "Oh my, I now have an entirely different reason to get close to the Chaotic Locus. I think this is something we're both going to enjoy..."

"Tell me Sev'rance, am I going to have to Force Choke a bitch?" Shaak 'questioned' aloud.

The other Jedi looked at her in utter astonishment, never having thought Shaak Ti would ever say something like that, then confused concern, in particular Kit and Obi-Wan, who thought they knew the Togrutan Master quite well. Even Anakin, who didn't really, wondered where the kriff that came from. All of them heard the jealousy in her tone, but reaching through the Force, neither Obi-Wan nor Kit could sense any hint that Shaak was feeling the pull of the Dark Side, and calmed down somewhat, though they were still looking at her warily.

Bo, Janice and the Mandos and Nova Guard around them were simply laughing at her wording.

Yet somehow, that lack of any sign of the Force responding to her anger made her comment all the scarier to Sev'rance, who was the veteran of several campaigns, numerous training sessions that even Ranma would think of as torture and duels to the death, backed away. This allowed Ranma, who had frozen at her touch, to shift sideways to be closer to Shaak, holding up the hand that held the ring that Shaak had given him. "If you got any idea in that direction, forget 'em. Shaak and I are married. We love one another, and nothing's gonna come between us... and survive, anyway. That's all there is to it."

"Exactly," Shaak said, feeling Ranma's all other arm going around her waist as she too showed off the lek bracelet that Ranma had given her, ignoring the looks of a few of the other Jedi nearby, some of whom hadn't heard about her marriage, evidently.

Nearby, Bo paused from where she had been about to pull off her helmet, scowling for a moment before she got her face under control. While Bo knew intellectually that ship had long since sailed, the Mandalore still held out hope that eventually, the two might be open for some... experimentation. Getting a hand on Ranma and, perhaps even more importantly, having a child with him would be enough for her to pinch-hit for the other team, as it were, for a bit.

*I certainly haven't met any other man quite like him as this entire battle shows start to finish. Oh, Dooku has a certain charm, and if he was thirty years younger, I might consider it. Anakin and Kit are the closest, I suppose, but with Kit, I get the distinct impression that he would never be willing to go that far or commit to an actual relationship.*

This was something Bo really wanted, mostly because of the example that Ranma and Shaak were showing. Quick rolls in the hay were all right. In fact, Bo thought of them as necessary, if for no other reason than to burn off adrenaline after a good fight. But having someone besides her, to stand with her, an equal? That was something else entirely. *And Anakin is too young...although, give him a few more years to mature, maybe.*

*Still, I've got time. I'm not even thirty. I've already learned a lot from Ranma enough that I think I'll be able to survive this war well enough, and unless they are the target of an orbital bombardment, I don't see anything happening to either of them either.*

But whereas Bo had decided to take her time, Sev'rance didn't seem put off in the slightest. Instead, she smirked at Ranma, deliberately looking him up and down once more than looking at Shaak, before almost instantly dismissing her as a threat. "Is that supposed to stop me from flirting with you? After all, I am a bad girl, why would it..."

That was as far as she got before Dralshy'a who grabbed Sev'rance from behind, pulling the taller woman into a hug, one hand grabbing at the blue-skinned woman's lycra-covered breast. "That's enough of it out of you, Blue girl." She looked over at the others, shaking her head. "Don't worry, I'll keep this one in line."

Every Jedi there, even Shaak blinked at that, while Sev'rance growled and was about to twist around and go for her lightsaber when the Arkanian Mando twisted her nipple hard. "Behave," she ordered, a blush on her white skin that was most distinctive.

"What the..." Ranma muttered, turning his head away from the admittedly somewhat arousing side of the armor-clad Janice basically feeling up the catsuit wearing Dark Side user. "Er, Dralshy'a?"

"What?" Dralshy'a questioned before ducking a backward headbutt from the woman in her arms and then backing away as the taller woman burst out of her grip. "I might be mostly about guns, guns and big booms, but I have needs too, damn it!"

"This is becoming rather surreal," Obi-Wan opined, also looking away. "My opinion of Dralshy'a as something of a social wallflower and mad scientist has now been utterly destroyed."

"Are you serious?" Shaak asked, frowning. While she hadn't seen any hint of which way Dralshy'a's sexual orientation went before this, it still seems to come out of the blue to her.

"What can I say? Danger excites me, it's like being near a big gun as it fires. And um, blue skin is also really, really attractive," Dralshy'a admitted, blushing a bit. "I thought about flirting with Knight Secura at one point, but I never saw a hint that she was interested. Whereas this one, was checking out both of you, Janice, and even the Mandalore just now."

Sev'rance grumbled a bit of that but didn't gainsay her. Indeed, the woman felt she was slowly coming down off a... well, a Force High, if there was such a thing, from the emotions of the battle. What she had felt from orbit had paled into insignificance from what she felt when she joined the fight on the ground, along with the other Mandos, all of them filled with battle lust and a desire to prove themselves, a fierce love of life and conflict. Like that night back in

Coronet City it had overwhelmed her, although not as much, since there weren't as many people feeding into the emotional miasma.

The Chiss woman was interested in Ranma, yes, but flirting like she just had was not something Sev'rance would ever have done normally. Indeed, such things would never be seen as appropriate to her people and that aspect of her personality hadn't changed when she fled with her then-lover when they discovered their Force powers. "Um... we, will have to see on that score, I guess."

Janice shook her head, trying to ignore the last few minutes, which had stretched even her ability to roll with the weird. "Er, well, Sev'rance, you too said it yourself. You were interested in joining us Mandalorians when you revealed yourself. And I don't think that was a lie."

That caused many of the other listeners to shift beyond the obvious of what Janice had been doing to what she was saying, and after a moment, Ranma nodded slowly. "The Resol'nare as the Reborn practice it has a lot to say for itself. I'd agree on that score." He then laughed suddenly. "And eventually, if she does go with you Janice, you lot will be heading back to Mandalore itself, where she'll be meeting with a certain sector Jedi."

Shaak also slowly nodded at that, taking in the... not guilt, but embarrassment on Sev'rance's face as she continued to slowly be coming back to herself. "Yes, I think the Mandalorians could be a good influence on her. Dooku also might be a good influence. And certainly, he could control Sev'rance if she turned back to the Dark Side."

"She is right here, you know," Sev'rance muttered, although there was no heat in her words as she looked around at them all thoughtfully. The high from the emotions she'd been feeling throughout the battle was gone now, and she was able to think of her own desires for the future to really examine the predicament she found herself in. That is, surrounded by Jedi, in a mountain dedicated to the Sith, with very few of those Jedi having any reason to play nice with her. *And after having given one cause to come up with that 'Force choke a bitch' line. While I will undoubtedly steal that line for myself at some point, that doesn't make it any less daunting.*

"All right, I'll agree to that too." She looked at Janice's face for a moment, cocking her head to one side. "And maybe that other thing as well."

She looked over at Shaak and Ranma and shook her head. "Although I would at the very least like to talk to the two of you at some point. The way you use the Force, Chaotic Locus, is simply fascinating. And I noticed a moment ago that you didn't allow your jealousy to impact the Force, Togrutan. That level of control is something I might need to develop. While I am not willing to become a Jedi, neither am I willing to fall back into the same patterns as a normal Dark Side user. Anger and hate, and fear are simply emotions, and I will not allow them to control me again, but I see no need to let other emotions control me either."



Shaak nodded at that, and then, the Wild Blade landed, and Ahsoka and the others boiled out, with Ahsoka racing over to her master before pausing and staring at the Dark Side user, her eyes narrowing as she felt something off about the blue-skinned woman. After a second glance, however, she shrugged and turned away, smiling at her master. "Master Ti, it's good to see you in one piece. Oh, and you too, Ranma. I suppose."

Bo was also reuniting with her niece nearby, and while Janice and Obi-Wan kept an eye on Sev'rance, everyone began to move deeper into the mountain at that point. Soon, groups of them peeled off. Obi-Wan and Kit took Sev'rance with them, unwilling to allow her deeper into the mountain despite her protestations to being a free agent. There were just too many knickknacks, too many areas of the mountain still steeped in the Dark Side, too many experiments. So instead, they would begin questioning her about what Sev'rance could tell them about Bulq, or Tyranus as he was called by the Sith acolytes.

In contrast, Bo simply wanted to take some time to talk to Keala about how she had found working with Ranma and the others so far before regrouping with the others in the command center. Shaak and Ahsoka would have also broken off to talk about the battle and how Ahsoka had done as pilot of the Wild Blade. But before they could break off, a messenger from General Yorick found them. He wanted a few of the Jedi in with him as he talked to the leaders of the various naval forces about what would be happening from now on.

Morgan, the captain of the Ardent Defender, started off the discussion on a very positive note for those on the ground. "We'll be staying here. This planet and the treasure trove of information within the mountain is the most important strategic find we have made against the Sith. We need to keep it. And my ship, unlike normal capital ships, doesn't need a drydock to repair itself. We're already out in the outer reaches of the system looking for asteroids for it to eat."

Ahsoka smiled at that, where she sat next to her master, then looked across Master Ti at Ranma, who was also obviously thinking the same thing. He turned to look over at her and made 'nom, nom' noises for a second, causing her to have to choke back a giggle as she thought about how oddly cute it had been to watch the Wild Blade eat in the past, wondering if the same would be true for the larger living ship.

"We can even start to supply Sekotan style starfighters for the captured Lucrehulks if we can find enough material. And have enough time," Master Saa added. "With that, the defense of this system will have a major boost."

"There's been several battles in space around this planet. So I don't think you're going to be hurting for materials," Ranma quipped.

"Unfortunately, the rest of our ships don't have that option," said the chief speaker for the Corellian portion of the combined fleet. "But regardless of that, my orders are similar to what Captain Morgan and Master Saa said. I don't have anything in my orders to demand that I

hold to the death, but beyond that, I'm under the command of you Jedi for as long as you need us."

"We should contact the Jedi order. We need one of Rendili's mobile shipyards to get those Lucrehulks back into action, as well as to see to the repairs to of the rest of our own ships," Kit mused. "The Order can get in touch with them in turn and send one here. I know it will take days to get here. Those things wallow in hyperspace as much as in realspace, but even so..."

"That might be, but I believe that the time has come for you and your padawan to head to Sekot. The amount of damage Anakin was able to do mentally controlling a wing of starfighters was impressive, and I think both of you would benefit greatly from having your own bonded seed-ship."

"That's fine and all, but unless we can get all of those Lucrehulks we captured up and running, we're still going to be woefully understrength in terms of the larger capital ship classes. The Sun Destroyer class is good, but the *Ardent Defender* can't do everything. So, I think the time is come to reach out to the Republic, get them to send in some of their fleets to help defend this planet," Anakin opined, speaking up for the first time since he had arrived on the planet. He had been lost in memories of Master Giiett for a time but now roused himself from his minor funk.

"We could do that, although convincing the Republic high command of the necessity would probably force us to share the fact that the Sith are out there and behind this war. And moreover, that we hope to use this planet to discover the hidden Sith, the one that we have long assumed is hiding in the shadows as Tyranus provides an obvious enemy. All of which they might not believe," Bo cautioned. "I know I wouldn't if I hadn't seen the Sith's machinations firsthand."

"Do you think your prisoner, or turncoat, I suppose, has any information on that score?" Master Saa asked. "And I would rather like to come down to the planet to examine her a bit myself. I have never have been able to have a conversation with a Dark Side user, and there are numerous questions which need to be asked before we can accept her conversion."

"Sev'rance is actually quite adamant that she isn't converting to the Jedi ways. She's trying to simply forge her own way, possibly by joining the Reborn. But given her past actions and affiliations, I fully agree with having you talk to her, Master Saa," Shaak answered formally. "Obi-Wan and Kit Fisto are already doing so."

She waited for a moment, then went on. "But I do not believe that asking the Republic for help would be a good idea. Setting aside the issue of the hidden Sith, to truly protect this planet the Republic would have to shift quite a lot of its forces in the area to Wayland. It would open up entire sectors to the separatists. Further, the Republic would be more interested in sending ground troops, which we don't need."

*And maybe a security risk depending on where the hidden Sith is hiding, Shaak thought, the idea coming to her mind with such clarity that Shaak knew it had been sent by the Force. "Whatever else happens, no clone troops can be allowed on Wayland. The Nova Guard has guarded this place so far. Let them continue to do so."*

Yorick nodded at her in thanks, pride at how well his people had done so far in defense of Wayland clear in his body language for those who knew what to look for even as he turned his mind to other matters. "Yet now that a full battle fleet has been sent and lost here, how will the Confederacy respond? Their fleets are huge, and I am not even going to pretend I have any sense of the logistical side of things of this war. But surely losing that many ships for no gain will hurt them."

"Unfortunately, perhaps not as much as we all would like to think. You are correct in saying that the Separatist forces are huge, but recall the other aspect: most of their troops are robots. Most of their ships are heavily automated. Although we won this battle, we probably lost at least two times more in terms of actual sentients being killed than the enemy," Shaak answered, remembering her earlier thoughts on how much damage the droid army had done to the forest and thinking once more that dehumanizing warfare to that level was a mistake. *It makes it all too easy to declare war when your own people do not suffer the deaths that they are causing on the other side.*

Kit had a thought at that point. "What about the Kuat Remnants?" After punching a few buttons, the space around Wayland showing in the main hologram was replaced by a larger map of the territory. "The Kuat Remnants represent both a large fleet and an incredible amount of industrial capacity. They might not have been able to retreat with mobile shipyards as they never made any, but they were able to get out the vast number of workers and their people. They also need a home. Offer them Wayland. Have them agree to fortify it, to help us defend against any further assaults, and then they can colonize the planet afterward."

Thinking about it, Shaak frowned. "There are already at least two native species living here, at least. I have only read about Kuat and never had any dealings with anyone from that planet. Could they be trusted to not encroach on the territory of the natives?"

"While I have issues with how clannish their society is, Kuat's citizens have always been quite adamant about not damaging their planet. There was a reason why all of their industry was in orbit, after all," Master Saa mused. "If you wish, I will reach out to certain contacts I have among the Kuat Remnant. They are also still working closely with master Rancisis, so we have a contact there as well."

"Huh. That sounds like a good idea from what I know about everything that you're all talking about, but how quickly could the Kuati fortify this place?" Ranma interjected. "Remember, we're not just thinking about the long term here. Who knows how long we have until the next attack arrives?" *And here Shaak and I are, with our feet nailed in place, waiting*

*for it. Ugh. Darn it the whole point of taking this place was to give us a target, and now we've got an even bigger one on our backs.*

"There are ways to make that harder for the enemy, and I know Master Yoda was thinking in those lines already. As large and powerful as their fleet, most Separatist fleets are already tied down either offensively against the Republic or in defense of their own planets. Since the attack on Kuat, that isn't a small consideration. Regardless, I think the Remnant will surprise you at how fast they work once they get here. And recall that those ships they are bringing include several hundred dreadnaughts, along with smaller capital ships," Saa opined.

"Until then, we can ask Corellia to send all of the dreadnoughts they have refurbished from the katana fleet here," the leader of the Corellian portion of the fleet added.

"It's not even been a week. How much work could Corellia have done?" Ranma questioned. For all that Ranma understood the size and complexity of the ships and the shipyards he'd seen in Corellia, Ranma didn't understand how that translated to how much time any specific project would take.

"The only way to know that is to reach out to them. For now, I think we all have our assignments," Yorick stated, looking around the room for anyone who would interrupt him. When no one did, he nodded. "In that case, I'm going to get back to work on rebuilding our defensive line, and the rest of you have things to contact people about, so..."

At that point, he was interrupted by one of the dozen slicers scattered throughout the command room. "Yes! We did it."

"You did what, you cracked open the mountain's memory banks?" Yorick asked quickly before anyone else could get the words out.

"No, not yet. But we have found a key to the organization of the whole thing, and..." The slicer trailed off, inputting a few more commands on his system, breathing in deeply, then whooping in delight when a long list of annotated things appeared in the hologram. "And, we found a list of everything that is within the mountain physically or in the long-term memory banks!"

One of the other slicers looked up at the data lines, then clicked on one of them in curiosity. "A cloaking device? A functional cloaking device?!"

All of the more experienced space combatants there leaned forward at that, even Morgan and the others who were only there in holo-form. Yorick asked sharply, "What do you mean a cloaking device?"

"Why are you lot all acting like that's unusual? Surely there's nothing new in someone having a cloaking device," Ranma protested. "Heck, Shaak and I have run into a few ships that were damn hard to find, and ECM and stealth are a thing, ya know?"

"A cloaking device that works, which doesn't block out all the scanning equipment that you would need to actually know what you were doing and where? Yes, Ranma, that could be very, very important," Shaak explained, staring at the information the list provided, which wasn't all that much, unfortunately.

"Okay, I understand all that, I guess. But does that mean you're actually getting somewhere? I mean, this is all great everything, but it's not why we assaulted this planet," Ranma opined, trying to drag the discussion back to that point. "Hidden Sith, wondering where he is, what resources he has beyond this place, does that ring a bell?"

"No, unfortunately, it doesn't. Like we've been saying; literally every separate section of this mountain of data is encrypted one way or another as well as password-protected in the first place. It's weird that it is. I mean, this was supposed to be some kind of secret base, right? In that kind of situation, you have one, maybe three layers of security on the actual memory banks most of the time. Here, every single section of the data has its own password, and getting to that section alone isn't enough help to figure the next layer of security out," the Nova Guard slicer wondered aloud.

"You are overlooking the mentality of the individuals who made this place their home. The Sith have, almost to a sentient, been on the lookout for the trail among their own numbers. Even in this so-called Rule of Two, which rather seems to have been more of a guideline than an actual rule, those above would be fearful of those below," Shaak answered.

"And those below would always be on the lookout for ways to benefit themselves at the expense of their rivals or superiors," Kit added, while Anakin scowled and Ranma nodded agreement, muttering the words 'assholes always being assholes' under his breath, earning him a poke in the side from Ti and Ahsoka.

"I don't get it," said another Nova Guard slicer, shaking his head. "I understand the Sith are deadly. I've studied enough of galactic history to know that. And I know how dangerous this current war is. But how could Sith become so dangerous to other people if they're always infighting? 'Order and unity of purpose are what make us strong'," he quoted from some book or other that, much like the Resol'nare made up the bedrock for their society.

Saa sighed faintly. "Because as much as Sith hate one another, they hate the Jedi order more, and ambition for conquest has always trumped personal one-upmanship in their ranks. They have conquered the galaxy several times and even succeeded in nearly wiping out the Jedi order. But always, their infighting and their inability to rule with anything but the iron fist comes back to haunt them."

"Well, as interesting as that is, we're all more concerned with stopping that rule in the first place. So, let's leave the slicers to their business," Ranma practically ordered, gesturing the others out of the control room.

For the next few hours, Wayland got in touch with the various groups they had been speaking about. The Kuat Remnant was almost ludicrously pleased with the idea of having a planet to settle and to help the Jedi defend it. Rancisis had won quite a lot of respect for making the hard decisions during the battle for Kuat that allowed them to retain a large portion of their defense fleet, rather than fighting to the last ship in a hopeless battle that would then have seen the slaughter of their people.

And while their vast mercantile Empire had slowly begun to come together, and most of their ships were now repaired, or close to it, a home for the vast majority of their people had yet to be found. After all, although they lived in the orbital shipyard above Kuat that did not mean that the Kuati population was small. Few planets could take in more than a million refugees. Taking in several billion refugees? In wartime? That was much harder, for all that many a sector fleet looked at the ships of the Remnant covetously.

However, Ranma and Shaak were in part of these discussions. First they spent some time alone, finding a room that had been made into housing for the officers among the Nova Guard. There Ranma told Shaak Ti about his confrontation with Saato, his attempt to talk her into surrendering, and the madness that had forced him to put her down. "I just, in part it was like, like putting down a rabid animal, y'know? It was just sad. She wasn't any threat and she kept fighting, kept threatening you all, and I could see the madness in her eyes, the madness just taking over entirely. It was almost a mercy to kill her, but..."

"But it was another life ended at your hands, Ranma," Shaak soothed, leaning her head against his, feeling her montral scrap against his head in a way that was oddly personal as they laid out on a bed, staring up at the ceiling. "I understand. Killing should never be easy, even if it is the only way to protect others."

Ranma nodded wordlessly, and the two of them fell silent, for a moment, simply taking solace in one another. Then Shaak spoke kissing Ranma's cheek.. "I must confess to some mental exhaustion of my own, although in my case it also comes from being put in a leadership position as much as being the cause of the death of other sentients. If we are told that it will be a long while before a target is found, then I will request we not be given any new assignment for a while. Training with the others and maybe exploring this world beyond the local forests would be a nice sabbatical. What do you think?"

There wasn't anything really sensual or even erotic about that but feeling Shaak against him like this told Ranma something else they could spend their time doing. Yet more pleasing even then that was the idea of having some time away from killing, away from war. "You'd be fine with being cut off, I mean, I know I wouldn't like to hear of any of our friends being in trouble without

“I would be willing to do so, yes.”

“In that case, yeah some time off sounds good,” Ranma replied, turning to give her a brief kiss. Again they fell silent for a time, before sighing in unison. This cause Ranma to laugh and Shaak smiled as they both stood up. “I’ll go check on the invalids.”

“Hmm, and I will find out what trouble Ahsoka has caused in our absence. Busy, busy,” Shaak chuckled.

After that, Shaak worked Ahsoka into the ground for a bit as Ranma talked to Fabian, Anakin, and the wounded they had left behind: Kik’tova, Kad Solus, Dralshy’a and Cro. All of them would be rejoining the crew of the *Wild Blade*, something Ranma had anticipated, or else he would have been forced to open the door to more Mandos while on Corellia. This was good because, in Ranma's opinion, Cro and Janice were about a month away, maybe a little less in Janice’s case, to when they would be able to start using ki consciously. To the scale of at least making their own ki space, anyway. Captain Cro had also added two more Nova Guard to their detail.

Meanwhile, Master Saa gently questioned Sev’rance Tann. The Dark Side user was willing to answer a lot of questions, but was very clear that any attempt to simply incarcerate her would end her willingness to be helpful. All Sev’rance wanted in return was a chance to eventually talk to Ranma, but she was willing to go along with things for now. She didn’t want to join the crew any longer, Shaak had ‘concerned’ (read, scared) her a bit too much to try any game of subtle seduction of the married martial artist.

Her demand she keep her freedom was backed up by Bo Katan and the Reborn, who were firm that Sev’rance had requested to join them. She would need to be taught the Resol’nare and pass several trials, but anyone could join the Mandalorians if they did that and could prove themselves. Bo warned that any attempt to imprison the woman unless she attacked or attempted to escape would be met by the Reborn withdrawing their aid from this battlefield and perhaps more. The idea that someone could join the Mandalorian way of life was that important to them.

Nonetheless, Tra Saa was getting quite a bit of information about the CIS and it’s command structure as well as the other Acolytes, although not their current objectives. That, would do for now. Beyond that, Saa was also certain now that Sev’rance would not be going back to the Dark Side. Already there was a distinct change in the woman from the way a Dark Side user would normally act. Those two factors were enough for Saa to guarantee the woman her freedom.

But as day turned into night, Ranma was called into the communications center where Master Yoda's image hung suspended in midair. In front of him Shaak was standing, turning to look at Ranma as he came in.

"Master Yoda has a request for us," Shaak announced. "Specifically, the Wild Blade. There is a mission that we are uniquely suited for. The Jedi Agri-worlds have come under attack. Master Yoda wants us to go to the planet of Talu. The Jedi and Agri-corps workers have fallen back into the mountains, but that is all that is known so far. Master Yoda would like us to go there and discover what is going on, and if possible, evacuate the people there."

"That sounds okay, I guess. It's not like the two of us or anyone from the Wild Blade can really add much to the repairs and so forth going on. Although they'll probably miss us if Wayland comes under another attack," Ranma mused, pulling at his pigtail.

"Actually, we should only be gone a few days if that. Talu is close by, in hyperspace terms, and even that amount of time will be taken up by the need to evacuate the planet rather than getting there and back," Shaak explained, her lekku twitching in amusement. "And we, our group of thrill-seekers, I mean, are uniquely suited to this kind of mission. And it will get us out of here for a bit, away from Sev'rance and off Wayland."

Something about Shaak's expression said that she had just heard something she found quite interesting. But by the way Shaak was talking and trying to chivvy them along, Ranma knew that she wouldn't be sharing what that was. Not yet anyway. *Well, whatever. Putting up with your wife's foibles is part of being married I suppose, so I'll just have to wait until whatever is tickling her funny bone comes out into the open. It ain't like I disagree with her reasoning after all.* "In that case, when do we leave?"

OOOOOO

Scowling angrily, Tyranus fumed silently. Indeed, if not for the self-control he had taken from Sidious and made part of his personal creed, Tyranus would no doubt be raging at the moment. *No, uncontrolled rage will serve no purpose. Rather, this is a problem I need to think through.*

Tyranus had felt the loss of two of his acolytes through the Force, their passing something he could feel despite the fact that he had no true apprentice type bond with them. It made him wonder what had happened to Sev'rance Tann on Corellia, as he had not sensed her death, yet the Chiss woman had not contacted him since the battle there turned against the Confederacy Fleet.

But he set that minor mystery aside for now. *That is not important at present. With the fleet I sent with Saato and Trenox possibly destroyed in detail, what can I do to reclaim Wayland from the Jedi? Before, hopefully, they can crack enough of the archives to discover Sidious. The Great Plan must succeed and it cannot happen without Sidious in place.*



The problem was that he was coming up against a hard logistical block.

The Republic had finally started to fight back. They weren't launching any offenses yet, but their fleets were fighting smarter, their coordination was getting better, and more and more of the Jedi were fighting at the front lines, leading clone troops in the massive fleet the Republic had built in secret and on the ground in the vast clone armies.

This was all according to the Great Plan. Having the Jedi involved in this war meant they could die all the easier. And indeed, many of the Jedi had died up to this point. In the past week alone, twenty had died, possibly as many as twenty-six, since feeling the death of a padawan wasn't as easy to feel through the Force unless that apprentice was extremely strong in the Force on their own.

What wasn't part of the plan was how many of the Clone fleets were acting offensively. Instead of shoring up defenses, many of the reinforced Ord patrol fleets had gone on the offensive, attacking Separatist planets. The Confederacy of Independent Systems had a large reserve placed on defense, but now, that reserve was actually seeing combat, forcing the Confederacy fleet to cut back on its own offensive operations.

And in this sector in particular Ojoster Sector, Grievous and the other admirals had already started to use the local reserves available to blockade Balmorra. That planet had proven to be a thorn in their sides, working directly with the Jedi Order and breaking away from the Techno Union following the destruction of the nearby Hypercom Relay Center. This meant that Tyranus had little to no local resources that weren't already tied down elsewhere to work with.

With a start, Tyranus realized that he had become complacent. "No, complacent is not the right word," he murmured aloud, reaching up to rub his hand across some of the ridges on his face. "Arrogant is closer. I have spent so much time acting rather than being forced to react to our opponents' moves. I am used to having so many resources that I can follow every goal I wish to."

Shaking his head, Tyranus banished that kind of thinking from his mind. Since he couldn't do so any longer, he now had to decide which goals were most important. "The defense of Confederacy planets is a low priority. Indeed, our propaganda would actually make credible use of a Republic assault, successful or not."

For a moment, he wondered about that. Tyranus knew the Neimoidians, at the very least, would balk at the idea of their actual populations taking significant losses. Few indeed among the Separatist factions could be called brave in their own right. But Neimoidia and its colonies were all among the most heavily defended systems in space, so that was immaterial. "It will also feed the growing power of the Dark Side just as the rest of this war is doing. Therefore, more of the reserve can be taken from the defense and uses on offensive operations, regardless of the actions of the Republic. Including Wayland."

With that, he began to shift around resources once more. However, this time he decided not to try to use a single type of attack. *Before, we assumed that a large enough hammer would work. Now, I must assemble a large enough hammer to break through whatever spaceborne defenses the Republic and the Jedi have been able to cobble together. But I don't have to assume they'll be able to do the same on the ground.*

With that, Tyranus started to bring together not just an outright assault but an infiltration team. There was a new kind of droid, a scout droid, that could be used for this. They even had ships that could be used to make a secret landing. "And with Diabolus behind the lines dealing with Antilles and the other so-called Lost Jedi, I think that it has become time to utilize one of the Sith's most historically deadly weapons..."

OOOOOO

Ranma, Shaak and their team arrived over the Agri-world Talu within a bare four hours after they left Wayland. Most of the crew spent that's time sleeping or getting to know one another. None of them had the endurance of Shaak and Ranma, after all. So, they were all ready for a fight when the Wild Blade came out of hyperspace at the closest point Shaak, using the Force, could navigate them to.

They found two Munificent class cruisers, four frigates and several squadrons of gunboats in orbit over the planet. There wasn't a single Lucrehulk with the enemy fleet, nor was there a combat air patrol out, and the gunboats were spread out over the planet in low orbit, probably providing air support and scanning the planet for the troops below.

Ranma grinned like a shark as the Wild Blade flashed towards the enemy fleet while beside him, Shaak spoke into the pickup. "Launch starfighters. Stay close to start and guard our backs against the vultures, then go after the gunboats. Let the Wild Blade deal with the capital ships."

"Roger," Janice announced as she led the other experienced pilots out into the starfighters from the back of the Wild Blade. As normal, there was a sense of **weirdness** as her starfighter moved from the ki-expanded hangar bay and out into space. That was the only way that Janice could describe it, that moment when they moved from ki-expanded space into realspace. But it faded quickly, and she led the others, Kad, Dralshy'a, Cro and his Nova Guard into position behind the charging Wild Blade.

Keala and Fabian were not with them. Neither of the youngest Mandalorians had much piloting experience. On the other hand, Ahsoka had been allowed to come with them, with HK taking over half of the Wild Blade's weapons for the battle. Shaak had decided it was time to

see if Ahsoka was as good a pilot for a starfighter as she had proven occasionally to be for the larger Wild Blade. So, the young Jedi flew at Janice's elbow in a brand spanking new Delta 7 Aethersprite, much to the chagrin of the two youngest Mandos.

Vulture fighters were already spewing from the enemy cruisers while the frigates and gunboats moved to attack directly, coming over the planet's horizon towards the incoming pocket battleship. But the Wild Blade's defenses sneered at their fire, and three of the enemy gunboats and a single frigate that had been out of position in comparison to the others for some reason exploded one after another after only a single attack from the Wild Blade. They continued on towards the only two ships there that posed any real threat to it, the Munificent class cruisers.

As the Wild Blade closed with the main enemy formation, Janice led the wildly varied and short-staffed starfighter squadron on an attack run on another of frigates and found that its anti-starfighter fire was formidable. All of the starfighter's shields each took a pounding before the ship died under the fire from one of the Mandos Flashfists, and they all turned away towards the Wild Blade.

This maneuver had let the Wild Blade strike the rapidly deploying Vulture fighters first, pulling all the enemy starfighters' attention to the pocket battleship. But even so, there were so many vulture fighters already in space that getting back into position on their mothership's tail was hard, and she cursed herself as their starfighter's shields quickly began to dim. "Can't give into overconfidence, Janice, old girl," she thought to herself, twisting her starfighter around and away from of vulture fighter who had attempted to lock onto her.

"I've got him," Ahsoka's crisp tones came through the communicator for a moment, and a second later, the vulture's shields flared, the ship dying within a second of their failure. Then Ahsoka was on Janice's wing again, and the two of them twisted around as one, coming in behind another group of vulture fighters that had been trying to line up a shot on Cro. Cro cut the acceleration of his Sekotan starfighter, letting the two vulture fighters passing by, flipping around and down to rejoin the swingman, while the vulture fighters who had been attacking him died under Janice and Ahsoka's fire.

Yet even while Janice was dealing with the shortcomings of her plan, the majority of the vulture fighters were still attempting to attack the Wild Blade and not having a good time of it. The ship was moving radically this way and that, throwing off their targeting software, and one weakness of the droid mind which controlled the vultures was that they wouldn't fire their concussion missiles without a solid block. The Identify Friend or Foe portion of their program would not allow them to do so. And the regular blasters on the vulture starfighters were not really a threat to the Wild Blade, thanks to its extremely strong shielding.

"That one," Shaak intoned, pointing at one of the Munificent class ships on their radar, as they slowly came within actual site of the ship, the ship gleaming with the reflected light of

the sun and the planet below. "I am sensing more panic on that ship than its division sister even from here."

"The mistress is correct. Sensors indicate that a few of that ship's shield generators were down recently, perhaps for maintenance. As a result, their overall field integrity has suffered," Tune intoned quickly. One of the screens in front of Shaak changed slightly to show an outline around the enemy ship as they closed, denoting where the various shield blisters of a Munificent class were and where the weaker portions of the shield bubble would be.

Ranma obligingly ran the Wild Blade to one side of the enemy ship, dodging the turbolaser fire from its main spinal mounted guns, hoping briefly that their starfighters would have had enough wherewithal to be able to do the same behind him. While the Wild Blade could take a hit from those large ass guns, they were still no joke.

Then he was skidding the ship around on its flat axis, bringing the Wild Blade's own forward batteries to bear on the side of the Munificent class, the name of which spelled out Crabclaw for some reason.

The enemy ship's secondary weapons fired back as the enemy ship tried to turn, and the other Munificent attempted to do the same, trying to bring their main spinal mounts to bear. But while the Munificent was maneuverable and fast, they weren't fast enough to lock up the Wild Blade with their main guns. "It's almost like a fight between a cobra and a mongoose," Ranma chuckled in amusement.

"I am familiar with cobras, but mongoose?" Shaak murmured.

"Tell ya some other time," Ranma replied, whooping a second later. "Hold on!" With that shout, he jinked the ship to the side and down before sending it into a barrel roll, dodging concussion missiles.

Unlike the vultures, the Munificent class had living crewmembers aboard, which could override the need for a lock before shooting them. More missiles flashed out towards the Wild Blade, and one of them struck despite all Ranma could do to dodge, but the enemy ship's shields were flickering badly, one of the nacelles that had been down for maintenance apparently not having been fully repaired.

And the Wild Blade also had lock-on-style weapons. A blast from its magma cannons crashed into the shielding, followed an instant later by two torpedo proton torpedoes lancing out through the battered shields.

They hit the same section on the Munificent class, and the Crabclaw showed the same design weakness, which had been prevalent since the war began. While the shields of the Munificent class were pretty good for their size, their armor was practically nonexistent. The ship exploded, and the Wild Blade darted forward rather than to dodge.

During that last run, the vulture fighters all around were able to lock onto the ship for a brief second, and the other Munificent had come up and above their fellow, the spinal mount firing. Unfortunately, that blow struck, dimming the Wild Blade's shields down to yellow, but Ranma sent the ship through the debris of their former victim at the same time. Confused by the debris and gases released, the concussion missiles went awry, slamming into debris, simply losing the lock and exploding after a few seconds or going entirely awry.

Janice and the other starfighter pilots had dived down out of the main battle around the Wild Blade, fighting it out with the gunboats in the upper atmosphere of Talu for a time. The gunboats were old patrol craft designed to run down smugglers or pirates and lacked the weapons needed to fight starfighters, with numerous blind spots. Several of them had died while the Wild Blade was fighting the two Munificents, although one of the Nova Guard fighters had been forced to break out for deep space, his Sekotan starfighter's shields having been knocked out entirely.

Now they came up back up, attacking the vulture fighters. The disparate understrength squadron took a toll on the vulture fighters that attempted to follow the Wild Blade through the explosion of the Crabclaw. Their sensors degraded by the explosion, the vulture fighters never even saw them coming, and Janice Allison and the others left the wreckage of forty vulture fighters behind them before moving into the defensive envelope of the Wild Blade's anti-starfighter weapons where they turned and began a vicious dogfight with still more vultures keeping them off their mothership's back.

As the remaining Munificent tried to turn around once more, the remaining enemy frigates, three of them, and the few remaining gunboats attempted to attack the Wild Blade. Watching them in action with one eye while waiting for Ranma to turn them back and attack the remaining Munificent, Shaak shook her head. "Those frigates are anti-fighter platforms, poor designs too. And they are not being utilized in the best fashion."

The Wild Blade passed by one of the frigates so closely that HK caught it with a dovin basal gravity shot, the ship crumpling in, breaking apart, while he also destroyed two gunboats with the quad lasers on the wings of the Wild Blade. "Jaundiced observation: Mistress, it has always seemed to me since this war began that the enemy doesn't seem to understand the importance of having a balanced fleet. I believe that that is a sign of the normal Sith ego. Amused tone: to whit, bigger is better."

Shaak chuckled at that while Ranma quipped, "I wouldn't call that actually a part of the normal Sith mentality, HK. A lot of people believe that bigger is always better."

"Mostly men," Shaak cut in with a smirk, even as Ranma maneuvered the ship towards the last of the Munificent class.

This ship was a slightly harder nut to crack, and by the time they did so, the shields of the Wild Blade had almost hit the orange range. But eventually, its shielding too faded under

the Wild Blade's assault. Four proton torpedoes crashed into the enemy's shielding around a central point, the shield going down for a moment. Ion cannon blasts lanced through the opening, and the enemy ship's systems started to flicker, its weapons and shields overloaded by the ionic energy. A second later, magma cannon rounds lanced out, shattering the main weapons on the enemy ship, then destroying its engines.

With that done, the Wild Blade turned its attention fully on the remaining enemy gunboats and frigates while the ship's accompanying Starfighters continued to reap a toll of the enemy Vultures. The Separatist forces kept on fighting grimly, which Ranma reflected was, "Really freaking stupid! The concussion missiles on those frigates are a threat, sure, but only if they hit us with enough of them. And if they couldn't do that, while our attention was on the cruisers, how the hell are they supposed to do it now, when we are attacking them?"

As if to punctuate his words, one of the enemy frigates exploded under their fire, followed by several of the gunboats falling to HK's accurate fire, while all around them, the vulture starfighters continued to try and breakdown their shielding. They weren't succeeding in that, and their single-minded concentration on that meant they were dying to HK's fire or that of the starfighters with them in droves.

"I think at this point they are simply trying to hurt us as much as they can," Shaak answered sadly. "Ordering that all of their ships fight to the death is in keeping with the Sith mentality. The fact that the Separatist crews would obey is a rather sad sign, but after the complete destruction of Kuat's shipyards and the bombardment of the planet itself, it isn't all that of a shock."

Ranma grunted in agreement, twisting the Wild Blade up and around on its own axis to come back the way they had come, surprising several of the gunboats and throwing off a squadron of vulture fighters that had been about to get a lock on them. Only three of them were in a position to continue their strafing run, and all three died before they could get their concussion missiles off.

Soon after that, the last of the frigates fell to the Wild Blade's fire, leaving only the vulture fighters. There were still eighty of them, but the Wild Blade moved among them, a much larger predator preying on smaller jackals, the magma cannons grossly overpowered to destroy enemy starfighters, although they lacked the range of the turbolasers. And the dovin basal gravitational weapons continued to make a hash of entire squadrons of vulture fighters, either pulling them out of position, destroying their concussion missiles, or occasionally destroying several vultures out of time.

With no further capital-grade fire hitting them, the Wild Blade's shields were back up into the green when the battle ended. In contrast, their starfighters had taken a pounding again and been forced to retire, flipping and burning away from the battlefield several times to let their own shields recover. No one was going to die today, not on such a small battlefield and not when they could help it.

As the final ship died, Shaak and Ranma both felt a sense of grumbling pride, perhaps? From around them and both of them understood where it was coming from too. "So even without the synaptic headdresses, we can feel the emotions of the Wild BladeWild Blade? Although what the heck is it grumbling about?"

"I think as the gestalt Eve all and ages that yes, its emotions will come through to us more clearly. As for why it is grumbling, your guess is as good as mine," Shaak answered with a wry smile.

Ranma leaned over and kissed her, one finger coming up to trace her lek, before pulling away, frowning in thought while directing the Wild BladeWild Blade down into the atmosphere and ordering Tune to look around for any concentration of droids or military units. "Maybe... Maybe it feels a sense of pride for once more winning, but also is kind of disgusted at the opposition? I mean, in comparison to the other fights we've taken into, this one was kind of dull for all that the Confederacy had put more gunboats and frigates here than we had previously seen."

Shaak smiled and leaned over to kiss Ranma in turn on the side of the head and neck. *We are going to have to get some alone time once we returned to Wayland. It has been several days since the last time we were able to in orbit over Corellia.* "As I said, your guess is as good as mine, my love. But we have more important things to concentrate on right now."

"And that's a damn shame," Ranma retorted before Tune informed him that he had found a target, a single large concentration of droid's troops and mechanized cavalry. The Wild Blade broke down into the atmosphere, where it hovered over that position, completely ignoring whatever fire the droids below could train on them.

"It's not a full army deployment. They don't even have anti-air weapons. Those are just a few tanks, I'd say... barely a company, perhaps? Who have been able to elevate their guns to take us under fire," Shaak murmured.

"Those troop transports things aren't a joke, but they lack the hitting power they did need to bother us," Ranma agreed, as two magma blasts crashed into one of those. The transport's armor wasn't able to stop the magma cannons, and it exploded as the Wild Blade twisted around, hovering in place upside down and raining down fire on the droids, tanks and transports. "But have you noticed, there don't seem to be many actual infantry-type droids here."

"Analytical note: Master, from what I am seeing, I believe this was not in point of fact a base, rather a depot."

Ranma frowned in confusion. "I know what a depot's supposed to be, but what's the difference between it and actual base?"

"Professional response: a base is a long-term occupation for meatbags or droids alike. A depot can simply be part of a larger structure or a place to store items that are not currently in use. It can do so out in the field as well. Furthermore, we are close to those mountains Master. Terrain where hover tanks or transports would be at a severe disadvantage."

Shaak nodded. "That coincides with what Master Yoda said. The Jedi here fled into the mountains. So it stands to reason that the droids would have to come after them."

"Then let's get down there. Recall Ahsoka and the others. We should probably leave them in the Wild Blade just in case." While Tune could pilot the ship in an emergency, the astromech droid couldn't fire the ship's weapons simultaneously.

"Actually, we should probably leave Janice and the other Mandalorians here. I don't know how much of the Agri-corps had been keeping up with current events, so they might not know of the alliance between the Jedi Order and the Mandalorians just yet."

Shrugging, Ranma bowed to Shaak's greater knowledge of the people involved and settled the ship down on its landing struts. As Ranma did so, the starfighters returned, setting down all around the Wild Blade, while Fabian and Keala began a vicious argument that they should be allowed to come along.

"As much as I don't like it despite our armor, both of us are still on the short side. We look like teens, and even if the Jedi spots us and sees us as Mandalorians warriors, they might hesitate to attack in that case," Fabian pointed out.

"And we're going stir crazy!" Keala added.

By that point, Janice, Cro and Ahsoka had rejoined them, coming up the gangway, passing HK, who was standing guard outside, his eyes scanning the burning depot from one end to the other, making certain there was nothing left that could threaten them. Ahsoka looked a little smug at Fabian's words, having actually participated in the battle, unlike her two new friends. But she didn't allow the emotion to get a hold of her too much, moving to stand beside Master Ti, while Janice and the other older Mandalorians all laughed.

Shaak hesitated, and then, to her own surprise, Ahsoka spoke up. "Master, I think we should listen to Keala. I don't think she's entirely right on the fact that any Jedi who sees them wouldn't attack, but having a few people along with jet packs might be a good idea. And I suppose it is really isn't fair that they had been forced to sit out every fight since joining us."

"While I would not see it in that light, I can understand why those of a warrior culture would consider it such," Shaak answered slowly. "And I do believe that Ahsoka is correct. Jump packs might be necessary in the mountains. But you will answer to Captain Cro while we move forward. Do either of you have a problem with that?"



If they had, Janice and the other Mandalorians who had been part of Ranma's retinue longer would have taken it out of them. But, luckily, the niece of the Mandalore and Fabian showed that they had some understanding of good sense, both of them saying that they didn't have any problem with that idea.

The group set off into the mountains, following what looked like a trail for a time, as Shaak and Ahsoka used the Force to try and discover where the Jedi were hiding. Finding droids that way wasn't easy, but Shaak felt if they could find the Jedi, the droids would be somewhere nearby.

Ranma and the two young Mandalorians took the lead, Ranma racing ahead of the rest of the group, as fast as any land speeder and as tireless as any horse. Whereas the two Mandalorians made use of their jet packs to cover a distance in leaps and bounds randomly, throwing off the targeting of the first droids they ran into. This happened about an hour later when they moved up into a narrow valley, and fire blossomed from behind several boulders on the mountainsides above.

With a whoop of delight, Keala bounced off the ground one final time, jinking to the side of her original parabola forward. In her hands, she held two pistols, and Keala rained fire down on the enemy to one side. Not being ambidextrous like his companion Fabian used a rifle, but he proved to be a far better shot. The enemy droids, who had taken a position in the mountains to hold off the newcomers, fell from their perches above the pass to his fire, while the others found themselves pinned in place by Keala's fire.

Having raced past that initial point of contact, Ranma now leaped up, bouncing off one boulder to land behind a second where several droids had taken cover. There, he grabbed one droid by the shoulder, and shouting "YEEEEETTT!!!!" hurled it up into the air over his shoulder.

The droid's dopplering scream as it disappeared through the mountains caused every droid there to stare, but then they were moving forward or back, firing at Ranma with renewed fury. Then Ranma had his staff in hand, both sides of the light-pike slicing through droids left and right as he leaped from one source of cover to the other.

From out of a small copse of trees right before where Ranma had stopped his run, a dozen droidekas rolled out. Their shields flickered on as they began to fire downrange towards Shaak and the others.

Shaak stood her ground, calmly blocking or redirecting the bolts of plasma coming towards her back to the droid, with Ahsoka beside her. The Master and padawan pair entered into the normal combat Force Gestalt of such pairs, their lightsabers flashing this in that way and that to defend not only themselves but one another.

Behind them, Cro led his troops to one side of the current engagement, heading up and into a bit of cover before moving onto the mountainside cleared by Ranma, overlooking the

area where the droidekas had appeared. There, they began to rain down heavy repeating blaster fire on the droidekas. When the roly-poly droids turned their attention in that direction, this allowed Shaak and Ahsoka to charge forward, forcing them to return fire to them.

Then Ranma leaped down from where he had finished destroying the last group of droids on his side of the valley, while Keala and Fabian dropped grenades down on top of them. The droideka's shields flickered, and Ranma reached them, grabbing at two of the droids before they could roll away, using them as battering rams against several of the others.

Then Shaak was there, her own lightsaber flashing down and around while the shields of the droidekas faded.

Still more droids moved through the woods towards them, firing at the Jedi and Ranma where they stood among the wreckage of the droidekas, forcing Ahsoka to step up to defend herself and Shaak once more before her Master turned, adding her lightsaber into the defense. The next second, there was a 'crump' sound behind them, and Ranma moved to interpose his body between the droids and the young padawan. "Watch out!"

Ahsoka had barely a second to look at Ranma's back before there was an explosion among the droids firing at them. This was followed by two more, accompanied by the 'crump' sound from behind. Within a second, the area around the droids had been shredded, droids and trees alike.

Ahsoka's eyes widened at the destruction, but she followed as Shaak and Ranma raced forward, asking, "What the heck was that?!"

"Mortar rounds. Indirect fire weapons, they're like concussion missiles fired on an arc. This lot seems to have been loaded with both explosive and shrapnel," Ranma grumbled, raising a hand to a new hole in his shirt, pulling out a bit of metal and tossing it aside. "Cro just earned himself a thumping for that stunt. I didn't even know the Nova Guard had brought those along."

A second later, the trio hit the last remaining droids on the battlefield, while above them, Keala and Fabian jumped down from above, getting behind the droids, forcing them to split their fire.

As Ahsoka sliced the last of the droids in half, Shaak paused, closing her eyes. "The Jedi are that way," she said, pointing in that direction. "I sense they are scattered somewhat, but not overmuch, perhaps in a few large enclaves connected by some means? I also sense that some are currently in distress, while others are not."

"Do you think you can get in touch with them, either through the Force or, you know, using a phone call like a normal person?" Ranma quipped, smacking his shoulder lightly into his wife's.

Shaak shrugged. "I believe that several of them already know I am here, although not all. Recall that the Agri-corps is made up of those individuals who have proven to not have enough touch with the Force to become Jedi or who have washed out of the training course for one reason or another. So they might lack the ability or knowledge to feel my presence. As for a phone call, no. I doubt that the Jedi have any such remaining after more than a week playing hide and seek with the droids."

"How far?" Cro asked.

"The majority of the living people I sense are in a single position a few hours away. However, there are many scattered Jedi between us and there and around their position. It is from some of those people that I am sensing distress."

"So we split up and take the droids from behind. They'd prepared this ambush point for us, but if the rest haven't pulled back from attacking the Jedi, that leaves them vulnerable to attack," Cro said briskly.

"Indeed," Shaak agreed.

"Keala, Fabian, you two work with HK. Cro, keep your people together as another group. Ahsoka, Shaak, I presume you two want to go together?" His wife nodded, and Ranma went on with one of his more infuriating smirks on his face. "So that leaves little old me all on my own."

Shaak sighed theatrically. "Ranma, I would be lecturing you about pride and arrogance right now and those emotions being real even if you can back them up but I will refrain." It was her turn to smirk then, her lekku twitching with amusement. "After all, if I did that every time you spouted something like that, we'd never get anything done."

Ranma laughed and then pulled Shaak into a hug, giving her a long kiss on the lips, which Shaak, after a second, returned eagerly. He then pulled back, winked at her and turned, leaping away through the shattered woods higher into the mountains.

Shaak rolled her eyes behind him, although she was now smiling widely as she stared after her lover, then turned to Ahsoka, who was making a gagging sound deep in her throat. "Come, Padawan. Before you do your face a mischief, we should be moving as well."

"Yes, Master," Ahsoka said with a nod, setting aside her somewhat feigned disgust at such moments of public affection to concentrate on the here and now. They too moved forward, using the Force assistant jobs to almost parallel Ranma's abilities, heading in a different direction than him.

The two younger Mandalorians stared at HK, both cocking their heads to one side. "How exactly are we supposed to move with this big bucket of bolts holding us back?"

"Amused observation: Your diplomacy is about as good as your aunt's. Your observational skills, however, need work." With that, HK turned aside and began to run forward, his robotic legs carrying him through the detritus of the forest. The other two used their own jets to keep up with them in jumps before HK came to what looks like a blank wall of stone, with a ledge high above them. Fabian was about to open his mouth and mutter something about trying to rig up some kind of pulley when the back of HK's lower legs opened up, and he rocketed up on a plume of fire, just as the two Mandalorians had.

"... Observational skills, got it," Fabian said instead, shaking his head.

"Sarcastic tone: Oh look, the little meatbag is learning." Without another word, HK turned and began to march along the ledge around the precipice they had just passed deeper into the mountains.

While Cro and his team couldn't move as fast through the mountains and the others, they still moved at a decent enough clip, using ropes, grapnels and pulleys to move up and around the mountains when they had to. Unfortunately, they were also the first of the now-separated group from the Wild Blade to run into the enemy several hours later.

The Nova Guard found a group of droids assaulting what looks like a large cave in the mountain. The flash of lightsabers could be seen inside the cave's entrance, the owners' flanks secured in the darkness within, as the droids attempted to rain fire into the opening.

"That's sound tactics against the droids," Cro murmured, scanning the battlefield. "Anyone see anything beyond a B2?"

A chorus of negatives came back to him, and Cro nodded. All the droids in sight were the regular B2 variety, the common combat droid. No Droidekas, no Magna Guard, and none of the larger, more heavily armed variety either.

"Likosh, set up the mortar there," Cro ordered, pointing back the way they had come, looking around his team, hidden behind a large boulder below the ledge the droids, about a company worth, were operating on. "Ekven, Kik'tova, spread out to the left and the right, catch them from both sides."

Moments later, the heavy repeating blasters of the Nova Guard opened up from both ends of the ledge, the men wielding them having rushed forward into position, while Cro had watched. A moment later, the mortar opened up behind them, and the droids turned at bay. But they were too packed and they started to lose members.

The survivors turned, firing to where the shots had come from, only to be cut down in turn quickly. A few other droids came out from where they had been hiding elsewhere above the cave, and Cro personally began to fire at them. "Mortar team, one more round, then move up to engage."

The final mortar round shattered, literally, the last group of droids that had been in a group. At that point, the battle became a thing of single rounds exchanged in either direction. But the droids were not nearly as accurate as Cro and his team and there wasn't enough cover for them all.

But thinking they might be on a time limit – after all, there could be other groups like this who had caught up to the Jedi – Cro decided to pull a Ranma. He fell back into cover and pulled off the heavy, durasteel shield he held on his back, which he had added to his equipment permanently after the battle through Wayland. With it in hand, Cro moved forward, firing around the edge of it occasionally with his blaster.

Blaster bolts from the droids cracked into the shield, not penetrating at all. But what this move really did was bring the droid's attention on Cro alone, bringing many of them out of cover to fire at him. That made the droids easy pickings for his troops.

Soon, the last droid fell to fire from one of the new men, Adrathi, and Cro barked out, "All troops check-in, ammunition level, injuries. Team one, hold, team two, move above the cave, minor food break."

As two of his men charged past Cro, he moved towards the cave entrance himself, listening with one ear as his men reported in. By the time he reached the cave, Four Jedi had emerged. Three of them looked at the Nova Guard, then one, the youngest, a human with a missing arm and a robot leg, moved to join team two in climbing up the side of the cliff face, talking to them in quiet tones. Two others turned back into the cave, leaving one to speak to Cro.

This Jedi was an extremely elderly Sullustan who looked at the Nova Guard with his head cocked to one side. "I had sensed the arrival of another Jedi or two, but I had not anticipated they would bring further aid. I'm afraid I don't recognize your armor, good fellows."

"Nova Guard Captain Cro at your service Master Jedi. If you could direct us to where the rest of your people are hiding, we have a troop transport arriving within..." Cro checked his chronograph and grimaced. "A few hours that will be able to take all of you out of here. Moving through these mountains is taking us longer than I thought."

"We're not going to try to stay?" The Jedi Master lost some of his poise at that, frowning at them all. "Surely the Order does not mean to completely abandon the planet? It is one of our primary agricultural centers, one of the things that keep us somewhat independent of the Republic's money counters."

"I don't know about that Master Jedi. I'm just here to help," Cro answered.

"Well... I suppose I cannot argue that staying here is no longer as peaceful as I would like," the old Sullustan answered, chuckling wryly. "Very well, captain. We have around two

hundred Agri-corps workers here and are communicating via runners with two other such sights. There are seven in total and smaller groups of volunteers scattered around to bring in food or attack the droids as need be. I propose...”

Elsewhere, HK and the two Mandalorians also started with some good luck. After several hours of travel, they attacked one group of droids from behind before another group came up and around a hill to attack their flank. HK and Fabian took the new group under fire, retreating quickly, which allowed the two Jedi who had taken cover under an overhanging to come out swinging.

Keala, who had been on the ground and pinned there by the enemy fire, stared at the Jedi, realizing they both were her own age. She didn't know the significance of that and them having lightsabers was, but if she had been there, Shaak would have explained this meant the two of them, twin humans, had been rejected for further training due to emotional or educational concerns.

Not that even that would have mattered to Keala. She burst out after them, firing over their heads into the droids the Jedi were charging toward. Then she was in the air, leaping up and over them, dropping some small concussion grenades down onto the droids. This broke their fire enough for the two padawan-aged Jedi to get in close.

“Exultant Tone: Excellent, it is always nice to see meatbags who understand that there is no such thing as overkill, only dead and not dead enough!” With that, HK charged forward as well, bellowing a challenge in droid. The enemy droids, busy as they were with the Jedi, didn't see him coming until he was in among them, at which point, it was far too late.

Shaak and Ahsoka found a far larger group of droids attacking two other, older Jedi, who was leading a band of sixty other sentients away from one of the caves they had been hiding in up until then. Seeing the plight their fellows were in, Shaak shook her head with a scowl, then leaped up over the cover she and Ahsoka had slid into when she had felt the other Jedi. “No time for any real plan, Ahsoka, get it stuck in!”

“You've been around Ranma way too long, Master Ti!” Ahsoka retorted before leaping up and following her Master forward with a grin.

These droids were a bit more on the ball than the droids Cro had decimated. Half of them turned, taking the two newcomers under fire, but Shaak instinctively fell into a modified Shien defense, bouncing all of their blaster bolts directly back into several of the droids. Beside her, Ahsoka did the same, although not to the level Shaak could.

The two of them were able to cross about half of the distance between them and the nearest group of droids, at which point Shaak reached out with the Force, using the Force Crush technique to destroy several of the droids, causing still more of the droids to turn aside from the two Jedi they were fighting to face the new threat.

Realizing the area they were fighting, and didn't have a wide enough area for both herself and her Master to attack, Ahsoka now did a very un-Jedi-like thing. She turned off her lightsaber, stowing it on her belt and, using the Force, pulled a blaster from one of the destroyed droids to her.

Firing past her Master, Ahsoka killed several of the droids while Shaak battered aside the plasma bolts coming towards them, mostly redirecting them against those droids who fired on her as she prepared another Force Crush. This time, her reach extended to more than a dozen droids hiding behind the same low boulder and that in turn allowed the Agri-corps force sensitives to flee in that direction.

Between the two Jedi on the other side, and Shaak and Ahsoka at their back, the droids stood no chance despite having a large numerical superiority. This proved out within minutes, as the other Agri-corps workers started to lob rocks down at them, using the Force in groups to add impetus to the makeshift projectiles.

When the battle ended, Shaak bowed from the waist towards the two Jedi, deactivating her lightsaber and hanging it at her waist. "Greetings. I am Shaak Ti. I was sent here to help you all off-planet. Might I ask who you are, and then, I think we should move on, quickly. We have no way of knowing if the enemy battle group we destroyed in orbit sent a request for aid, and it has already taken most of the day to find you."

Elsewhere, Ranma didn't have much luck finding the enemy at first. Now, while Ranma had a near-fanatical determination to learn every martial art he came into contact with, outside of that, he sometimes had the attention span of a very young child. So it would have come as no surprise to Shaak, or indeed any of the crew when he began to shout at the top of his lungs, "Yooohooo, Chaotic Locus, right here! Come and kill the anomaly!! Unless ya want boredom to do the job for ya, in which case, it might start working soon."

This, actually worked. Several groups of droids heard Ranma shouting and attacked from ambush or simply burst out blasting away at him. However, destroying squads or platoons of droids took Ranma no time at all, and then he was back to being bored. It was only when the sun had begun to set that he finally found something interesting.

Ranma came around a tiny goat path, balancing on the edge of it with some difficulty, then stopped, staring down the cliff face where he was poised to what looked like another path. It was larger than the one Ranma was on, but at first, Ranma thought it might have ended at a blank wall. Looking closer, he could see a jagged rent in the rock, an opening in the mountain face leading upward. In that opening, an injured youngling was being dragged away by two more. All three were about Ahsoka's age, maybe a bit younger, and all of them looked a little battered, but the one being dragged had been shot in the leg.

While sad, that didn't really grab Ranma's attention. There were only two droids currently trying to attack the fleeing younglings, after all. Oh, Ranma could see over a dozen

had been knocked off the cliff face, but that didn't grab his interest either. No, the fact those two droids were fighting off a fourth youngling in close combat was what Ranma concentrated on.

And the young girl in question was fighting the droids without a lightsaber. Instead, she had somehow ambushed them, coming up behind them, maybe? However she'd done it, the young girl had entered hand-to-hand range and was fighting both droids, using what Ranma knew was the Jedi unarmed combat style. Shaak was somewhat good at it, although preferred to use it in conjunction with her lightsaber, and had learned a lot of Anything Goes to augment it. But Ranma had sparred occasionally with Plo Koon, who was a Master of it.

In this young girl, he could recognize a certain level of ability. She wasn't a Master, but she was intuitive, and she didn't stick to the forms precisely, showing a willingness to shift her flow.

But the young girl was making a simple error. She was attempting to fight these droids as if they were people. But droids had entirely different weaknesses beyond the sensors and their heads, and the young girl wasn't tall enough or strong enough to get at them.

"Attack the hinges," Ranma intoned as he leaped down, idly putting himself between the entrance to the tunnel and the two droids.

"W, what?" The young girl said, looking over his way, before dodging around an elbow thrust from one of the droids. She grabbed his arm, twisting hard, sending him stumbling into the next droid, throwing off its own punch, then kicked out, relieving that second droid of its blaster as she already had the first.

"Droids have different weaknesses, always attack the hinges. The hands like you just did," Ranma said, pointing to where the droid's fingers had been crumpled, so much so that the internal servers couldn't retain their grip on the blaster. The first blaster had been fouled up by a dagger of some kind and discarded as useless.

"You, you're not going to help?" the girl asked.

Ranma shrugged, pulling off his light pike from his back and activating it. "I suppose I could. If you wanted me to?"

Something in Ranma's tone goaded the girl, and she huffed as she dodged a kick from one of the droids. Her fists, which were covered with gauntlets, crashed into the side of the droid's knee, then she once more grabbed the arm of the flailing droid, leaping up over a kick from the second droid, performing a handstand using the outstretched arm as a balance beam, her legs kicking out backward.



The girl wasn't strong enough to really send the droid flying, but it did stumble, which allowed her to wrench the arm of the first droid clear off at the elbow. She then thrust upward into the droid's face with the shorting-out segment of the arm. The blow landed, crashing into its chin and sending it stumbling.

Another two punch combo to the knee of the other leg and both knees were crumpled, in what for a human would be some nasty bruises. In the droid, the outer shell had been dented enough to impair its ability to lift and move its legs appropriately to walk.

Once more, the girl impressed Ranma. Instead of staying to finish off that one droid, she moved to attack the second droid, as it recovered from her mule kick and moved in to help his fellow. Cutting off that movement and twisting around the droid, she put it between herself and the injured droid, then backed away, as if the droid's punches and attempt to grapple with her were pushing her off-balance. This moved the two droids away from where they could support one another and made it so the injured droid could not get to the girl without going through the less-injured one.

"Nice," Ranma murmured. "Good situational awareness, guess you could put it down as a Jedi thing, but still, gotta give her an eight out of ten so far."

After a few seconds of gauging how quickly the injured droid could move on its legs now, the girl charged in, ducking underneath and around several blows from the droids, returning her own blows to knee, elbow and ankle. This caused Ranma to nod in approval again. "She took my advice to heart too."

But just as Ranma spoke, the girl made her first real mistake. She went for a hold on one arm and then twisted around as if she was going to throw the droid over her back. But while the droids lacked any sense of hand-to-hand coordination or training, these were B2 droids, after all, not Magna Guard, the droid was still heavy to any normal person.

And the girl was young too, around Ahsoka's age, maybe a bit older? Ranma wasn't sure. So of course, her attempt to toss the droid failed, and the droid was able to pull her back into its chest. The droid's one arm pushed the girl's arms back into her chest, holding them there as the other hand rose, reaching for her throat.

A second later, the droid's head disappeared from its shoulders as Ranma crossed the intervening distance, smashing its head off with a single blow. Then, as the droid spasmed, he wrenched the arm off of the girl as if the droid was made of tinfoil rather than steel. "Not bad," he said judiciously. "Not bad at all. Ya, let your training get the better of you for a bit there at the end, but that kind of thing happens to the best of us. Now, do you want to finish off the last droid, or should I?"

The girl looked up at him, her eyes wide, staring at what he had done to the droid. Then as Ranma tossed the remnants of the destroyed droid off the path, her face firmed, she twisted

around, and launched herself back towards the injured droid. The speed with which she made a choice had Ranma's eyebrows rising in surprise, and he shook his head. *Damn, looks like the spitfire's got something to prove, I guess.*

The remaining B2 droid had apparently sized up its chances once injured and Ranma on the scene as not being very good. It had begun to retreat back down the path, but its damaged legs meant it hadn't gotten very far.

"Remember, attack the hinges. Target them, aim for weaknesses. You've already damaged its legs. Aim a little higher, or lower, don't be predictable," Ranma admonished as the girl bore in hard. "Launch a few feints elsewhere, and since it seems to be listening to what I'm saying and what you're doing, switch targets to its arms. You can't use your whole body, just yer hands, but you can use your whole body to spoof out the droid."

The girl obeyed, following Ranma's instructions and learning as she went despite the best the beleaguered droid could do. Repeated attacks had one of the droid's legs starting to crumple under its own weight. The servomotors were damaged and no longer able to keep it upright. When it started to falter, she bounced up off of its leg, kicking out hard not the droid's head, but at the side of its neck. One of the metal bits there broke under her attack, sending the droid's head listing to one side as the girl retreated for a second. Then she rolled around the droid side, getting behind it.

That, Ranma reflected, was a really gutsy move. It could have sent her falling off the edge of the path just as quickly as most of the droids had fallen off sometime before Ranma arrived.

As Ranma watched, the girl leaped up onto the droid's back, her gauntleted hand smashing again and again into its face, destroying its sensors. The droid attempted to grapple with her, reaching up and over its shoulder for her, with both arms, despite the damage they had taken. But the girl dropped back down to the ground and moved to the other side, her movement now silent even to Ranma's senses.

*Another Force trick, I suppose,* he mused.

The droid continued to flail about, its droid mutterings of "I cannot see, I cannot see, this unit is impaired," ringing out through the mountains until the girl leaped up again. A double-kick caught the in the side, and, with its leg injured, the droid no longer had enough balance to right itself. The blow sent it tumbling down the side of the mountain to join its fellows.

"That was pretty good," Ranma nodded with approval. "A little showy, but meh, showy is only bad if you're unable to back it up. That was fun to watch."

The girl mock-glared at him, then smiled slightly. "I suppose it was actually kind of fun to do too. But, um, who are you? I thought I knew all the Masters of Teras Kasi by sight."

Ranma chuckled at that. "Heh, it's actually kind of nice when my notoriety doesn't go before me." He held out a hand, and the girl shook it hesitantly, shaking hands like that not being a Jedi form of greeting. "My name's Ranma. You might have heard of me or the fact that I am the source of a lot of the new techniques you Jedi have been practicing recently."

The girl's face fell at that, looking away. "Not all of us," she muttered.

"Why not?" Ranma asked, turning away from the girl and heading back towards the tunnel. There, he picked up the wounded youngling with one arm, then gestured the other two to lead on. "I told the Order that the younger they started the toughness training and speed technique training, the better."

"Yes, well..." The girl paused, rushing after Ranma but saying nothing, seeming to struggle with her own thoughts.

"Droid got your tongue?" Ranma teased, winking at her. "I'm not a Jedi kiddo. Whatever you're going to say, whether or not to rail at the Order for putting you here or for not giving you that training, I'll listen and won't pass on to anyone if you don't want me to."

Something about that expression and Ranma's teasing got through to the girl, and she finally replied. "I... those techniques are only taught to exceptional padawans, Jedi Knights and Masters, mostly those already on the Guardian path. They are, they're deemed too dangerous for the younglings like me. And even if I was a padawan, I doubt I would be allowed to use them. They're way too Force intensive, I don't, I don't, I can't use a lot of the Force. I barely made the cut to become a youngling in the first place, and after only a year of waiting to see if someone would want to become my Master, the Order decided I should be sent here."

She blushed a bit, looking away. That also had quite a bit to do with how unorthodox her combat styles was, and her willingness to wear armor and use weapons other than the lightsaber. When she started to have trouble building her lightsaber, the Council of First Knowledge, which was still led by Consulars who were largely against the more militaristic bent the Order had been forced to assume, decided that was a sign that she should be sent to the Agri-corps.

"That's stupid. My techniques can be learned even by people who don't have access to the Force! Why the hell would someone say that," Ranma announced incredulously. "Surely Master Yoda at the very least knows that, heck, every Jedi I've interacted with knows that." He paused then, frowning. "I won't say anything about the age limitation. I think it's silly, but if the Order is doing it that way, maybe it's because they don't have enough resources to put both Jedi and younglings through it? I know it took the old frog years to get the Order to agree to the training at all."

The other two younglings with them both looked shocked at the way Ranma was speaking about Master Yoda, while the girl who had been fighting the droids looked thoughtful, concentrating on the rest of what Ranma had said. And as she did so, she was getting annoyed. **Really** annoyed if Ranma was any judge.

“Now...” Ranma paused, realizing he hadn’t yet asked the girl her name. “Erm, what’s your name, kiddo?”

“Tallisibeth Enwandung-Esterhazy," the girl replied, knocked out of her own thoughts for a moment, as she stared at Ranma in a new light.

Ranma blinked then shook his head. “Well, Talli, ya got some good instincts. Tell me some more about yer training. We’ve got time, and I might as well give ya a few pointers.”

By the time they met up with the other groups several hours later, it was pushing nighttime. But since the *Wild Blade’s* crew had shattered what remained of the droid brigade on this planet, there wasn’t any further opposition, and the groups of Agri-corps workers began to make their way out of the mountains.

Shaak looked over toward where she could sense Ranma, gesturing Janice to take over the discussion with Master Jal Fen, moving towards him through the crowd. She watched as Ranma handed off a wounded youngling to one of the other Masters assigned here, not stopping in his discussion with a young girl. The girl reminded Shaak somewhat of Ahsoka, coltish almost, with a lot of energy, short-cropped red hair, and too much energy for her own good, bouncing around Ranma but hanging on his every word. *Ah, this must be the one Yoda sensed.*

And looking at Ranma, he seemed just as enthusiastic about the discussion, throwing a series of punches then moving into one of the katas he loved to perform. It was originally from the style known as Wing Chun on his homeworld, and Shaak, too, believed it was one of the most elegant styles she had ever seen.

Reaching her husband, Shaak waited until he finished the kata, then put her arms around Ranma’s waist, pressing her chin into his shoulder as she stared at the young girl with them, her montrals rubbing familiarly against his head. "And who is this?"

“Her name’s Talli, and she practices your unarmed combat style. She’s pretty darn good at it, and I think she’s got the best unarmed instincts I’ve run into since coming to this universe,” Ranma answered, waving at the girl, who was staring at them in some shock. “I found her fighting a few droids hand-to-hand after apparently planning out an ambush for a full squad of the idiots. So, I’ve been talking her through some of Anything Goes.”

His voice dropped into a whisper at that point as he spoke directly into her montrals. “It’s kind of a pity that we’ll have to leave her here.”

Shaak smiled, pulling away slightly to look her husband in the face. "Yes, that would be a pity, wouldn't it?"

Ranma looked at her sharply at that, while Ahsoka moved through the crowd towards them, the troop transport coming down towards them. Something about Shaak's tone niggled at his senses. "What do ya mean?" he asked warily.

Smiling, Shaak asked Talli to excuse them for a moment, signaling Ahsoka to wait as well before she pulled Ranma away from the rest of the crowd for a moment. Then, when she was certain they couldn't be overheard, Shaak turned and addressed Ranma once more. "Ranma, you just said it yourself. Talli has a gift with unarmed combat, which happens to be your specialty. Something that cannot be said for me or anyone else you've trained. Isn't it serendipitous that you found someone who matches you so well?"

"Serend..." Ranma broke off, the suspicion niggling at his mind now crystalizing into certainty. "You knew, didn't you?"

Shaak didn't even bother trying to hide it. "Master Yoda was nudged by the Force to send us here, to send you here personally. He saw you training a youngling yourself, and from what you just told me, that is Talli. I don't know if this is important, Ranma, or simply the Force guiding us to something good, but I think this is a chance for you to have a true padawan of your own that you need to grab."

Scowling, Ranma looked away out into the mountains tugging furiously at his pigtail. "Ugh. I doubt I'll ever get used to the Force messing with us when we don't go looking for advice. Ugh. This is reminding me too much about what happened on Yavin. It might be good, I guess, but I still don't like being led around like this. I'll say it again: if the Light Side of the Force had a physical body, I would spank the heck out of it for messing me around like this."

Laughing, Shaak felt the Force react to that statement, feeling what could only be called a blush suffusing the Living Force around them. Indeed, Ahsoka and many others around them felt it, although few knew what to make of the strange sensation, nor were any of them close enough to overhear their conversation. She shook it off, however, concentrating on sweetening the idea. "Perhaps you might be feeling like you have been manipulated, Ranma, but is it so bad a thing? Especially considering what it would mean for young Talli?"

"I... see your point," Ranma sighed, then nodded and moved over to Talli, ruffling Ahsoka's montrals before she could escape as he addressed the other young girl. "Okay, kiddo, so, like I said, um, yer instincts are pretty damn good when it comes to hand-to-hand combat. Which, like my wife here just said, is my particular style too. So um, I ain't so good with words, but er, how'd ya like to be my padawan? I mean, I ain't a Jedi, but Shaak says I could still take ya as an apprentice, so..."

Talli stared up at Ranma, the words not registering at first. The whole day had been a trial; indeed, every day since she had been sent to Talu had been, but it got worse when the invasion happened. But today had been particularly emotionally trying, and things had been coming at her too fast. First, Ranma's approval, his help before, and just meeting someone as dedicated to unarmed combat as she was. Then seeing Master Ti and Ranma together had thrown her off entirely, not having heard anything about their personal connection. Then the weird feeling in the Force a moment ago.

And now, here Ranma was, offering her a chance for something that she had known, not feared, but **known** was beyond her reach. It was too much. Talli began to cry softly, tears dripping down her face even as she nodded.

This caused Ranma to panic, and he bounded around the girl, his arms waving wildly. If there was one weakness he still had from his old life, it was girls crying. The whole happy tears thing didn't make any sense to him at all. "Hey, hey, that, that's a good thing right, come on, why are ya cryin'?"

"Of course she is crying, Ranma," Shaak murmured, going to one knee beside Talli, ignoring the looks from many of the other force sensitives around them as she put an arm around her. "She has bottled in so much grief, so much rejection. How could she not cry with joy at finally being able to let that all go?"

"Yes!" Talli shouted, both in agreement and as a verbal answer to Ranma's question.

"Oh. Er, those happy tears thing then?" Ranma breathed a sigh of relief and was about to join the hug. Thanks to Shaak and becoming more mature, he was far better at understanding and expressing softer emotions like that despite not understanding happy tears.

This time, however, he didn't have the chance. Above them, the night sky opened up, rain pelting down onto them, initiating the change, and the laughter in the Force broke out across the group of Agri-Corps workers, and everyone there was startled into laughing aloud at the feeling, including Talli.

"REALLY!?" Ranma roared at the sky. "Really!?" Which, of course, just set off Ahsoka and Shaak Ti, causing Ranma to grumble even as she turned back and joined the hug around Talli, ignoring her questions about his form for now. *Spankings, swear to Amaterasu, many, many spankings!!!!*

Getting all the workers in Jedi off the planet took the better part of that night and the next day. Unfortunately, the Order was so strapped for ships at the moment that they could only get a few small freighters out to Talu, and only a few shuttles. Thankfully, it didn't seem as if the enemy task group commander had gotten out a request for help. Or if he did, the Agri-corps world was not important enough to send another fleet against. Not knowing the Wild Blade was there.

But eventually, all of them were aboard the transport. The workers would all be sent to Wayland her along with the Wild Blade.

"There, you will work with the Kuat remnant and the Nova Guard. You will help communicate with the local tribes, create an enclave for the Kuat Remnant, and help them develop living quarters on the planet. The Kuat leaders have already decided that they will not change their former policy: all of the industrial capacity of their society will remain in orbit, along with their shipyards, when they start to rebuild them. But that will be the work of decades, if not centuries, and they will need somewhere to call their home beyond the refugee fleet," Master Gallia explained to the leaders of the Agri-corps on the planet over the Hypercom.

Master Jal Fen sighed faintly. "And this is what the high Council is decided on for us? We are really going to abandon that planet?" He had quite enjoyed his retirement there. *For all it was quite short.*

"Yes," Yoda answered simply, staring at the other elderly being with some amusement. Although that was nothing compared to the smile of profound delight he'd bestowed upon seeing Talli and Ranma earlier. "Do more good you will on Wayland. Greater defensive abilities Wayland has. Manpower to defend Agri-world planets, possess it we do not. Losses among the Agri-corps, extreme they have been. Able to save you, we were. Able to save all too many others, we were not."

At that, Jal Fen and the other Masters among the Agri-corps workers all bowed their heads, both in acknowledgment and in regret for the dead. The group of Jedi continued to talk about specifics for a time, with many a specific name passed between them. In this time of war, many of the Jedi younglings who had been sent to the Agri-corps due to laziness, personality issues or other such reasons would have to be given a second chance. The Republic and the Order needed every Jedi and padawan they could get their hands on. Yoda and the rest of the High Council had created orders along those lines before, but now they made them retroactive, encompassing padawans who had been sent to the Agri-corps before those rules had gone into effect.

Eventually however, the Masters were dismissed, and the connection to the convoy ship cut out. This left Ranma and Shaak connected to the High Council from the Wild Blade. Ranma had not been part of that discussion, and had instead been running some exercises with Talli, Ahsoka, and the others. Talli and Ahsoka seemed to be on the way to becoming fast friends, with Keala and Fabian already there.

That was good in Ranma's opinion. The four of them were the youngest aboard the ship. In any combat situation, they would undoubtedly be paired together and given simple assignments for a time despite what the two Mando brats might want or their previous combat experience. They would have to act and work like a well-drilled unit, which Janice and Cro acknowledged, vowing to work hard to bring the four of them into their command.

"Hrrrhhm, to Tallisibeth Enwandung-Esterhazy, we now come. The youngling who kidnapped you have, speak about we must," Yoda intoned, looking over at Ranma with amusement once more plain in his eyes.

"Bah, as if you didn't plan this out, ya meddling Muppet," Ranma grumbled, shocking the Jedi Masters around him and causing Talli to blanch. She liked Master Yoda, and hearing Ranma actually insult him – even if she had no idea what a Muppet was she knew it was an insult – was surprising.

But Yoda took it in stride, chuckling and shaking his head at Ranma. Even without the Force, he could tell Ranma was simply objecting for objecting's sake, nothing more.

This was true. Only a bit of Ranma's grumbling was heartfelt at this point. Ranma liked Talli well enough, and she had all of the instincts he wanted to see in a real apprentice of his.

But at the same time, adding yet another youngster to their group, who would no doubt stay with them even after the war ended, was only going to complicate his and Shaak's lives at that point. *So much for going back to just wandering our way across the galaxy. I doubt the Order'd let us do that while dragging around two of their younglings. Although they let Fay get away with it, so maybe it's not a lost cause...*

"Deny it, I will not," Yoda intoned with a slight chuckle. "Grateful I am, saw potential in her, you did. Saw the same, I did. Willpower, strength of personality, morals, drive to succeed. All of these, Talli has. Lacking only in the Force, she was. A sad day it was when Council of education's decision to send her to the Agri-corps, I was informed. Stupid it was. Between the stars, so much darkness there is. Why would throw away one who burns so bright? "

To one side, a thoroughly exhausted Talli had been listening to this, her eyes wide and a blush suffusing her tanned features at how warmly Yoda spoke of her, happy tears once more coming to her eyes. Of course, Yoda was doing that on purpose, banishing the lingering self-doubt and recrimination within her that had built up throughout her time as a youngling within the temple, when she struggled to do even the smallest thing with the Force. "Believe the Force aligned in this, I do, to bring Talli someone who could teach her as you can."

"I still don't like the idea of the Force pulling me this way and that, even though I've gotten used to Shaak and our combined Force visions guiding where we go. There's a difference between asking for directions and being guided like a horse on a bridle," Ranma grumbled, shaking his head before smirking and giving Talli a wink. "Still, give me a few years with her, and she'll be able to sneer at your lightsabers and start breaking steel with her punches instead of just denting it."

Talli looked a little intimidated at that, but Yoda chuckled again, and Ranma went on. "If I had any real complaint about this, it'd be about the fact that she's a girl." He waited a moment for that line to register and for every woman in the main area of the Wild Blade to start to glare



at him before going on, a smirk crossing his face once more. "I mean, come on! Between Ahsoka, Shaak, the Mandalorians, and now Talli, us guys are really outnumbered here, especially with Kit and Anakin jumping ship."

That won some laughter, and the glares subsided as Ranma went on, making an even bigger joke out of it as he pointed at Fabian. "Heck, are we even certain that kid is a man! Heck the only time he took off his helmet was to throw up after the endurance run, and even then, he only pulled it up above his nose."

Ahsoka frowned at that, nodding slowly. She, too, hadn't seen Fabian's actual face yet. Keala had taken her helmet off a time or two since coming aboard, but not Fabian.

"Well, youngster, are you going to respond?" Janice asked, patting Fabian on the shoulder.

With a sigh, Fabian reached up to his face mask, pulling it off slowly. When he revealed his face, Talli, Ahsoka and Keala all gasped in shock. "By the Force/Resol'nare, he's gorgeous!"

This was actually true. Fabian had the sort of aquiline jaw and facial structure that made holo-stars, or rather, the kind of holo-stars that appeared in romances. This was paired with deep brown eyes and blonde hair done in short ringlets, which, just looking at it, you could tell would be silky to the touch. Which the girls, including Janice and Dralshy'a, all started to confirm a second later, much to the teen's annoyance.

Ranma turned back to Shaak and Master Yoda, the frog chuckling quietly at the expressions on the faces he could see through the holographic pickup. "That doesn't make me feel any better," he drawled. "In fact, this just opens up a whole new can of worms, doesn't it?"

"I am afraid so," Shaak agreed, staring at Ahsoka and Fabian, then the other two younger girls with some chagrin.

"Hrhrhrhm humans have a saying, they do. Covers this quite well, I feel. Sucks to be you, it does," Yoda quipped, cutting the connection before Ranma could fire back.

**OOOOOOO**

Sidious had connections within the Kuat Remnant fleet. He had been watching with interest how much of the scattered trade fleets and billions upon trillions of mega-credits were changing hands moving this way and that as the Remnant attempted to get their feet under them once more. After all, just because they lost their homeworld and its massive shipyards did not mean that the families who ruled Kuat had lost all of their resources. He was somewhat astounded even now they had stayed the course together. In his psychological profiles of various family heads and their business practices, Sidious had assumed their hatred for one another would force them apart.

Indeed, Sidious had almost planned for it. Clans that he had tagged to help with the industrial side of creating the secret Republic Fleet and equipping the clone troopers could have been elevated into preeminent position, making them beholden to him going forward. This would have tied Kuat, who even without their home planet still represented several dozen scattered shipyards, not including the ones that made the Republic's secret fleet, to Sidious personally. Which would've come in handy in the future.

Instead, the Kuat Remnant had behaved in a very different manner. They had stayed the course together, bringing together all of their resources that they could, repairing their combat ships, placing a few important families and noncombatants where they could, but generally speaking, keeping the rest of their people together. And now, they were on the move once more to a destination that his contacts within the fleet were unaware of.

Sidious's agents, all types three and four, had been unable to find out why. But they had passed on that the Remnant's leaders, the clan heads and various military officers, were all enthusiastic about it. Moreover, that eagerness was spreading among the fleet, a hope that they could rebuild Kuat somehow.

With a scowl, Sidious set that aside. The Remnant was something to be taken advantage of in the future. Wayland still being in the hands of the Jedi was **THE** problem for now. And after dealing with several more minor mysteries and looking over a few reports of his type one agents who had entered the Dac System but hadn't found anything yet, Sidious turned his attention to that issue, reading the report Tyranus had passed on.

Reading it, part of Sidious wanted to rage at Tyranus for his failures there. *Does the fool not understand how important it is that my existence not come to light?* The entire Great Plan was based upon playing both sides of the clone wars against the Jedi! And the Jedi were already proving that they had long understood that they would be a primary target. The different temples the bed opened up across the galaxy, the number of younglings that had slowly transferred out from the temple, the number of toddlers and babies discovered to be Force-sensitives, which disappeared from their homes. It had taken a while for Sidious to realize how well the Jedi were preparing for war, but when he had looked into it, the preparations were obvious from top to bottom.

But this made it even more imperative to Sidious that his position never be discovered by the Jedi. Public opinion and his position as Chancellor were the most important parts of the plan, and public opinion was not turning against the Jedi as quickly as Sidious wanted either.

But Sidious did not rail at Tyranus. No, the other Sith had acted as he should have. Two of his acolytes and a fleet that large with an equal army component should have been enough. And it would have, if not for the intervention of the Chaotic Locus and his own, thankfully unique, ability to turn any kind of combat on his head. That, and the secret resources the Jedi Order had been building up. *I hope my agents in the Dac sector turn up something there soon...*

*And thankfully, I have had time to prepare my escape,* Sidious reflected, before looking up as a bell chimed. That was an alarm that Sidious had created to give him forty minutes to prepare himself to be seen in public under his Chancellor persona. Very rarely had used it and the sound had nearly startled him.

He stood up and quickly moved to one side, where he pulled off his robe and began to just get in his Chancellor garb before moving to the secret hatchway up to his official office. But even as he did so, Sidious' thoughts returned to that one point. *I have prepared a method of my escape. My apprentice's work on the bomb is ongoing, but it will be finished soon enough. And my other little surprises, crippling the Republic fleet, destroying ships, and finally, the various sabotage I have put in place on Kamino. Unfortunately, with the Jedi watching the process so closely, I haven't had the opportunity to start emplacing the control chips that would be necessary to turn them against their commanders. I will still give the Order even as I run. That should still cause quite a bit of chaos. But it would in no way be the sweeping massacre that I had hoped for.*

However, all that was predicated on Wayland continuing to be in the hands of the Jedi. If Tyranus' new plan worked, then all of that wouldn't be necessary. The Great Plan would continue, those various sabotages, and everything else would remain in place unused. But if the worst came to pass, well, Sidious was fully prepared to wipe out the Jedi by conquest rather than betrayal. *Although perhaps it is a sign from the Dark Side that what might save the Great Plan is subterfuge and betrayal, the very things that form the bedrock of the Great Plan itself.*

It took Sidious far longer than it ever had before to center himself, to control his growing anger and fury at how things were not going according to plan as he stood in his office, which overlooked the senatorial district. Far longer. So long in fact that another alarm, one that had never been used, beeped at Sidious, warning him that he was due to speak to the Senate about the course of the war in five minutes.

With a start, Sidious realized that he had used most of the time he would normally spend hobnobbing with various senators regaining his mask. *I am that concerned about the Great Plan, about my position? Understandable, I suppose, but I am well enough to face the Senate. I will have to make certain that I allow for more time in the future,* Sidious thought to himself as he left his office, nodding to the senatorial guards on either side of him.

They both wore full facemasks, something that they had only begun to do with the declaration of war. And they had real weapons to hand, whereas normally, they would only carry sidearms. "Gentlemen, let us be about it."

Sidious waved off his aid, Pestage, who was looking at him with some concern. "Matters of state kept me from arriving early as is my wont, but never mind. I am prepared for this meeting regardless."

That meeting was something like a state of the war addressed to the Senate as a whole. And despite his issues with self-control moments before, Sidious performed as well as he normally did. The sheep among the Senators were satisfied with how the war was going, now that the Republic had gotten their feet under them, and the use of the clones was being lauded and applauded by many. Most Senators and planets were unwilling to pay the price to really take part in a galactic war, especially against an enemy that used unfeeling droids. Concerns about the clones being human were beaten down without Sidious really needing to take part most of the time, a good sign, in his opinion. Part of the Great Plan was to make certain that the clones were alienated from the populace, after all, thus easier to turn against the Jedi, with fewer scruples.

At that point, the peace party made their typical sheeplike bleats about wanting to reach out to their opposite number to get the two sides back to the dialogue table. *Excellent.*

With the barest nod, Sidious released one of his senatorial attack dogs and sat back to watch the fireworks. "After the attack on Kuat, you still think we, the aggrieved party, should reach out to our abusers?!" The senator for Malastare shouted, interrupting the calm tones of the senator of Alderaan.

"We of the Peace First Party believe that those attacks, and the loss of life that they propagated, is precisely why we should continue to look for a nonviolent means to end this conflict. Those attacks mark an escalation, which neither side can truly want to see!" Padme Amidala retorted.

"But the Republic haven't escalated back. We are still obeying the so-called rules of war!" Ask Aak shot back. "I believe that it is up to the Separatists, the side which has already shown a willingness to burn whole planets, to wipe out entire infrastructures, to reach out to us instead of the other way around."

"How can we expect them to do that when it has become clear that the Confederacy of Independent Systems so-called Confederate Parliament has little to no real power over the war effort? I believe we should reach out to them because we can empower them further if we do so. There must be people among the general populace, among the industrial sector, who understand that this war cannot be allowed to be a total war!" Padme said, and although her voice was strident, it was not a shout. Rather, it was the sheer passion she put into her words and that carried from one end of the Senatorial Hall to the other.

"The Republic is too closely tied together. We have planets that cannot make their own ships. We have planets like this one, ladies and gentlemen, who cannot make their own food. What would happen to Coruscant if all of the planets who supplied it with food were bombarded from orbit, wiped of life? There are planets just like that in the Confederacy. I am not asking for a cease of hostilities, Senators. I am asking simply that we reach out to our opposite numbers and declare together that some acts of barbarism are off-limits. Surely that is not too much to ask! Not too much to ask to save the lives of trillions."

The Senate debated on that point for several more minutes until it was finally agreed that they would reach out to the Confederacy and its leader, Sora Bulq, to see if they could create some kind of rules of warfare. The destruction of Kuat had been a high note, so to speak so far, one that could not be repeated. And yet, in so doing, as Sidious had planned, the Peace Party further alienated themselves from the Centrist Party. The mutters of treason and traitors were now being spoken of within the Senate halls and Sidious could not be happier about it.

After the session let out, Sidious made up for lost time, speaking to various senators one on one, heading to various meetings, stopping senators in the hall to discuss things, being smiling and affable. Yet as he did so, something occurred that caused him to nearly lose his self-control once more.

"By the way, on an amusing note, have you seen this yet? I asked Gallia about it, and the face that she pulled was simply hilarious," the senator for Solloops muttered, pulling out his datapad and opening a video.

Sidious obligingly leaned forward and watched, his eyes going wide, as he saw the female form of the Chaotic Locus on the screen, fighting what looked like an army of droids as she sang in some foreign language. The beat was almost overpowering, and her voice rose to the heavens in such a way that undoubtedly garnered a lot of attention on its own. Of course, the fact that the redheaded woman's shirt practically clung to her probably also had quite a bit to say about it, as would the ease she was tearing droids apart regardless of type.

But Sidious could recognize the trees around them and realized that this was a real video taken from a battle. A battle on Wayland during the recent defensive victory the Jedi had won. This reminder of his now-precarious position caused Sidious' anger to flair so much that it nearly broke his control.

Through the suddenly rapid beating of the blood rushing to his face, Sidious heard the man laugh and say, "The 'singing Jedi' the pundits are calling it! The videos' gone viral across the entire Hypercom, lots and lots of people are asking questions, wondering who this particular Jedi is, and why the Jedi felt it appropriate to take this kind of video."

"I am certain that master Gallia told you that this is not in point of fact a Jedi," Sidious said, his words coming out almost through clenched teeth but not quite. That would come out soon enough. Best to remove himself from such rumors right now. "While she is a Force-sensitive, this woman and her brother, I believe, were far too old to be taken into the Order when they were discovered. Instead, the Jedi have kept a watch on, with their agreement admittedly, for several years now. You will find her an extremely different kettle of fish than a Jedi."

"True, but the vast majority of people believe that if you are a Force user, you must be either a Jedi or a Dark Side user and thus evil by definition. They do not understand the Jedi training or anything else outside the whole no emotions or attachments kriff. And so, the

questions are building up and the discussions! You will have to read some of the comments that people make. Those are simply hilarious as well."

The man was a jolly sort of the best of times, and he was even jollier now. Solloops was now the most prominent planet of the Kuat Sector, and already his planet had received trillions of dollars and windfall from the planet's destruction. Of course, he would never ever say that Kuat's destruction was a good thing. But it had certainly benefited him.

"I am afraid that one cannot cure ignorance save through education, and that is an entirely different kettle of fish," the Chancellor opined, causing the man to laugh again, and Sidious quickly but politely, always politely, made his apologies and left the man there talking and laughing with several other senators.

*Must the Chaotic Locus hound me at every turn!* Sidious howled in his mind as he retreated to his room. He desperately needed some more time alone to gather his thoughts again.

The wheels were coming undone, and despite making plans for that eventuality, Sidious was coming to the end of his ability to roll with the punches...

**OOOOOOO**

The Wild Blade and its new companions arrived back at Wayland to find that the space around the planet was far busier than it had been. Several dozen small construction ships had arrived, along with one massive ship that Shaak pointed out a Mandator-class along with several dozen escorts. "These must be the scouts for the Kuat Remnant. Although I didn't know any of the Mandator-class survived the battle of Kuat."

"I'd wager it was on loan to some other power, then came home to lead the Kuat Remnant's naval forces." Janice shrugged, before smirking. "Although, named like that, do you think they named it after us?"

"I'm more amused by how close the Mandator, the Scalawaq? What is a Scalawag?"

"A very odd name for a warship," Ranma said, snorting with laughter, before explaining the term to much laughter in the cockpit. "But you were saying?"

"How in the universe did a ship that huge become labeled with such a silly name?" Cro shook his head and went back to his previous point. "I was going to say that I am amused by how it seems to be paralleling the artist defenders' course. Rather like two large predators, with one of them uncertain what to make of the other and the second one being rather aloof about things."

Indeed, it did look like that, and Ranma also noted that the ardent defender was reading as larger than the other ship. And after being aboard and reading about how well he had done in the battle - he hadn't been able to watch the fight after all - Ranma knew which 'predator' he would put his money on. Although again, he once more felt the Wild Blade gestalt consciousness responds to being around the ardent defender as they moved into orbit.

Scanning the listed ships in orbit from the IFF transponders, Shaak noticed that all of the Lucrehulks they had captured were still in orbit, but many of the Corellian ships were gone, replaced by Kuat ships, and none of the Mandalorian ships were there either. That was to be expected, Janice thought, pointing this out to the others as she said, "The Nova Guard seem to have a handle on fighting on the planet, and with Kuat here like this, and more arriving, we don't need to the Mandalorian fleet as well. I'd wager that Bo pulled them back from here and from Corellia, heading home to rest and refit."

"And rearm," Ranma interjected at the same time that she said it, exchanging a fist bump with the former Night Owl. "I hope that Dooku and the reborn are sent a few more of the dreadnoughts as thanks for their help in Corellia at the very least."

"I would assume so, yes," Shaak answered before pausing, identifying a single ship. It was a tiny, almost nondescript tramp freighter, the kind that was built to convey luxury goods very quickly but also was somewhat rundown and unassuming in nature. "That ship..."

"Is something wrong with it?" Ranma questioned quickly, on guard already.

"No, there's nothing wrong with the ship. I simply don't recognize it. I'm not getting any sense of danger through the Force. It just seems out of place."

"We are being hailed from that ship, mistress," Tune supplied. "Since the man on the other end refused to identify himself, I had thought that it a low priority given all the other people that are attempting to contact us at the moment. But if you wish to speak to him..."

"Send our identifier and that of our friends to everyone who needs to know about them. Tune, and in particular, warn the general that we are bringing in quite a lot of force sensitives and others. They will have to be housed within the mountain alongside the Nova Guard for a time, unless the Kuat Remnants of already set up a base of operations?"

"Judging from the scans of the planet, I do not believe they have done anything on the surface as yet, mistress. Information sent. Opening communications," Tune said without pause.

The man appeared on the screen a moment later, and Ranma frowned, staring at him in thought. *He looks familiar, but I can't place him.*

On the other hand, Shaak could, and her smile of greeting turned slightly warmer as she placed her hands in front of her so that they pick up could see them before bowing slightly.

"Master Vos, how are you doing? It has been many years since we last saw one another. We were not warned of your coming here, although I am pleased to see you."

"Master Ti," the other Jedi said, also bowing from the waist. "We shadows tend to move where we wish without anyone knowing our movements. It is safer that way. I do not have to tell you how deadly the clandestine war against the Sith and their tools have been in the underworld of the galaxy. But, when I learned through an intermediary that the Order had scored a tremendous victory somewhere, I decided to look into it. When I heard about Wayland, I thought that perhaps my insight to that side of the Sith operations could be of use in cracking the code here."

"In that case, we are doubly pleased to see you," Shaak said, and Ranma nodded along with her. "Perhaps we are close to a breakthrough and can finally unearth the hidden Sith and end his depredations upon the galaxy so that we can fully face Tyranus."

"It can only be hoped," Vos answered with a smile, while behind his eyes, the Force Stealth he had learned from his real Master kept his true thoughts from appearing as he stared at one of the people who he believed was the real cause between his and Aayla being separated. "It can only be hoped."

### **End Chapter**

Well guys, sorry once more that it's been a while since this story was updated. Hopefully with it in the small story poll it won't be as long before we see it again.