

Hello everyone! Happy Belated Father's Day to my patrons! Or Juneteenth... something I'm still not used to...

Here is the last chapter of *Horse*. I am posting it here first because, as *Novus* proved with *Bhaalson*, I can trust you all to give it to me straight on a fic, and I will hopefully have time over the next few days while finishing up *ATP* for you all to make changes if need be.

RL has yet to settle down, but I have found a house, and we are close to settling. I won't say I will have more time LOL, not until I am moved in and have everything done, but hey, progress.

This has been edited by Hiryo.

Joke for the day: My Speech to word program had Lucrehulk come out as 'Large Holes'.

Chapter 32: Choosing Chaos Counts as a Plan, Right...? Right?

If one were to only use the astronomical data, the system that the Confederacy fleet led by Darth Tyranus and Diabolus was a normal nothing system. It had a yellow star, completely normal, one of literally millions known throughout the galaxy. The known galaxy was vast, and Wild Space like this was even larger. There were no planets and no asteroids, which was somewhat unusual but not entirely so. That merely raised it, from one among millions, to one among hundreds of thousands.

However, the astronomical data was so off base it was not even funny to the sentients aboard the Confederacy fleet. Because besides the star, there was one other planetary sized body within this star system.

The monolith floated near the far edge of the star system, almost completely lost in the blackness of space. If it were not for the fact that it reflected light from the sun, none of the sensors on any of the Confederacy ships would be able to pick it up at all, despite the sheer size of it. It had no internal energy source their ships could detect, no lights of its own, no sign or life. Ironically, it was almost like the Katana Fleet was when Ranma and Shaak, through the vagaries of the Light Side of the Force, had stumbled across them.

But it was not a ship. No, it was a true monolith, the name going around the fleet swiftly, and with no debate that it was truly appropriate. The size of the thing was monstrous, beyond anything the Republic had built in all the entire history, beyond even the largest luxury planet, which would normally be the size of moons. This thing was about as large as two planets the size of Coruscant – itself a massive planet built up well past its original size thanks to the normal ecumenopolis expansion – set one on top of another.

It was so large that as the fleet came close to it, weapons active as well as sensors, all of the living crewmen aboard those ships felt tiny. After all, their ships were so dwarfed by the thing it felt like they were so many Mynocks (bat-like parasites) standing next to a Rancor.

The monolith was shaped like a diamond and made of some strange black and reddish material. Around the equator there looked to be a small inset separating the top and bottom half. The readouts the sensors specialists were looking at said that material was not metal. Even passive sensors should have told them that, if only by reflection. It looked like metal superficially, but if it was metal, it used unknown material in at least fifty percent of its composition.

That was next to nothing in comparison to what the two Darth's were feeling at the moment. Because while the monolith did not have any kind of normal power source within it, through the Force, it practically glowed, like a massive bonfire of Force Energies. It was so overwhelming that neither of them could do anything but stare for a few moments as the fleet slowly closed in on the thing.

But once the fleet was near enough to start spreading out around the monolith, the Sith came back to themselves and began issuing orders quickly: Close, and remain at battle stations but do not power up the weapons.

"Could it have been made by the Force, somehow solidified into physical matter?" Diabolus asked, her mind-boggling at the very idea.

"Perhaps, but one thing is for certain that it is **powered** by the Force. And feel it out more in depth my apprentice, the power of the Force is flowing **through** it, not from it," Tyranus stated, his eyes closed as he reached out through the Force to the distant object, feeling its presence out at the edges so to speak, almost like an invading army probing their enemy's defenses.

While scowling a bit at her Master's use of the 'apprentice' term, after all, she was now a Darth, Diabolus began to do as he said. "It is, the Force within the object, it is all Unifying Force, I cannot feel any kind of emotion or Living Force component within."

To a Force user, there was a slight but noticeable difference between the so-called Unifying Force and the Living Force, the two sources of where the Force itself came from. The Unifying Force came from nonliving things, stars, rocks, asteroids, space itself according to some. The Living Force came from plants, people animals and so forth. There was a difference there almost as profound as between the Dark Side and the Light.

"And I do not believe it is being created by the monolith either, Master. I would liken it almost to a light at the far end of a tunnel. Only this light is also supposed to power the tunnel?"

“Well surmised. That is my impression as well. But how to connect to it? Do we reach out to it, trying to control it, or reach out and pull some of its Force into ourselves? If so how would it react to the Dark Side?” Tyranus mused. Even when they were calm and controlled, Dark Side users connection to the Force was always tainted by their darker emotions, and if this thing in front of them somehow was able to sense that and reacted badly...

“Or do we have to board it in some fashion? It is so large, searching it would take days, even with the Force to help us,” Diabolus warned.

There was also the fact that searching the thing’s surface for any kind of entrance might awaken something they didn’t want to, some security measure or other. And the amount of Unifying Force they could sense within the object might also interfere with their ability to use the Force in such a manner.

“True. Signal the fleet. Continue to spread out around the device, keeping well away from it, at the edge of our turbolaser range. Launch the CAP, but keep them out of that area as well. In fact, spread the CAP out well around the fleet out towards the edge of the system. Sensors, I want a watch kept on the entire system, not just the monolith. Any sentient who does not keep his attention on his own sector will answer to me.”

The distance between the Confederacy ships and the monolith would hopefully let the fleet have sufficient time to retreat if something went wrong. Tyranus’ flagship, the dreadnaught *Seeker* stayed around the equator of the monolith, keeping several other ships between it and the monolith as it did.

Diabolus nodded at that, and as her Master stood up, and made to head to the meditation area, took command of the fleet, organizing the appropriate maneuvers that he had just dictated. While it was entirely possible that they had gotten away from the greater war effort cleanly, neither she nor Darth Tyranus were going to take that for granted. Not when the Force was still rippling and swirling in so chaotic a fashion that neither of them could predict the future beyond a few moments in advance.

As the ships moved, they gently probed the device with passive, and then waves of active sensors. Through this means, they discovered the material around the equator was a little different from the rest. It almost looked as if some full segments of that zone were made to move, open up perhaps in some manner. Indeed, the material was also reading a slightly different, with even more of the unknown material making up its composition. Anymore than that, the sensors could not tell. They would need actual chemical experimentation to see any more.

With that, the fleet halted its movements, and Diabolus ordered the flagship and two of the Lucrehulks to move a little closer. The two Lucrehulks were still between the monolith and the flagship as they did so of course.

However, almost as soon as those three ships had begun to move inward from the wider cordon around the monolith, Diabolus halted them in place, her scowl becoming furious as her nails began to bite into the side of her command chair. "All ships go to red alert. Prepare for battle." Even with the Force as chaotic as it was, she could see us a few minutes into the future, and she knew the Jedi were about to arrive.

OOOOOO

The Wild Blade, Anakin's vessel, Kit's vessel, and three wings of the new Zekotan starfighters, the Coraljumpers, came out of hyperspace in a simple arrow-shaped formation. Their regular engines activated the instant they did, powering them forward at a far higher speed than any of the other ships in the fleet could've matched. Most of the Coraljumpers were drones, Sekotan craft with no pilot guided by Jedi aboard their brethren, but four squadrons were not, being piloted by Mandos and Jedi.

The Mandos flew on their own, their ships paired only with one drone apiece, the limit to what the living computers of the starfighter could maintain. The Jedi were each directing multiple drones. Anakin, who had proven several times to have a flare for this, controlled a full squadron for now, with orders to take over the piloting of any drone in the battle sphere at need.

As they went, Ranma and Shaak poured over the readouts of the system, although Shaak fell silent quickly, her mind reeling as she felt the power of the Unifying Force within the monolith. This left it to Ranma to issue the first orders, even as the Wild Blade and its accompanying force opened fire on a portion of the confederacy's combat air patrol that just so happened to be around the area they had jumped into.

"Nice shooting HK. Tune, open communications." Ranma waited a second then spoke again, "Keep moving folks. Anakin, take point. The Wild Blade will be right behind you. Kit, Bo-Katan, starboard and port. The rest, behind us and above and below. Keep it tight for now and boost it forward. Remember everyone, we are on a thunder run, we hit hard but keep our distance and go fast as we freaking can. No getting bogged down for us."

That last order, Ranma knew, was mostly a waste of air. The small attack group was already going as fast as each of the ships could.

This was probably why Anakin's ship began to pull ahead. Even in comparison to Coraljumpers, Anakin's bonded ship was just **too fast!** The craft, much like the Nabooan yacht it so resembled, cut through space like a dream, which had seemingly been the reason why Anakin had named the ship Space Dreamer. The ship was also fully attuned to Anakin, showing that he had undoubtedly put on his synaptic cowl.

But that was fine by Ranma. That ship was a dog fighting demon, and as Ranma watched with approval, Anakin moved ahead of the rest of the attack group, engaged and rapidly gutted

the next group of Vultures before the rest of them were in range. Anakin was also easily the best starfighter pilot Ranma had ever seen. His connection to the Force was so profound that it helped his reflexes and ability to predict how his enemies would move to up for his overall lack of speed in comparison to Ranma.

A second later, Ranma frowned, seeing Anakin still zooming ahead of the rest of the attack force. Before he could even open his mouth, Anakin had dialed his speed back, letting the rest of the attack group rejoin him. "Are you doing that on purpose, Anakin?"

Anakin's voice came back clearly over one of the encrypted channels the fleet was using for communications. "Hell yes. If they think our cohesion isn't good, they might try to take advantage of it, and that just means we can destroy more of their Vultures before the big boys arrive."

Ranma snorted at that, then opened up the coms to everyone in the formation, making a course correction so that they weren't heading straight towards where the enemy fleet had just begun to reform into a single wall rather than a cordon around the monolith. Instead, they looked to be hitting one of its edges. "Tune, are we still communicating back to Master Yoda? And Kit, your lagging behind, dude. Your formation is also off-kilter. If that's on purpose like Anakin's, that's fine, but if not, be aware of it, okay?"

Being in range of help was a very necessary thing in order to survive a dogfight. While Kit's ship almost as powerful as the Wild Blade and therefore immune to such concerns, it was still worrisome to see Kit slowly veering out of range, since unlike Anakin, Ranma hadn't seen him actually take part in the two very brief clashes so far.

"Master, please don't ask stupid questions," Tune nearly shouted, shaking Ranma out of his concerns for his friend. "You told me to do that before we came out of hyperspace and I know the combat plan. Why would I suddenly stop doing my job?"

Tune had chosen a new audio track for this complaint a voice that sounded almost like a querulous teenager, causing Ahsoka to reach over and bop the R2 unit on the head. "No! I don't care what age you might think you are, but if you're going to act like a normal teenager, I'm going to throw you out of the airlock. I've seen how people my age were normal teenagers act without Jedi training, and I don't want any part of that nonsense."

"Sorry Tune, I know that you're doing your job, I just want to make sure that that part of the plan goes off without a hitch. Against numbers like this, we can all too easily start to get our teeth kicked in if we don't time the next wave just right," Ranma admitted, before looking over to his copilot/wife. "Shaak, I... Are you okay?"

Ranma had been so busy piloting the Wild Blade he hadn't realized that his wife had been silent since they'd entered the star system bar a small gasp after they dealt with the first

group of Vultures. Now Ranma watched as Shaak slowly shook her head, her eyes concentrating once more on him. "I am fine physically, Ranma. It is just, that, that thing..."

"What, the overcompensating diamond thing? It looks like someone took the ring that you would give a vampire or an Emo Goth and sized it up to the mass of a gas giant," Ranma quipped. It was impressive sure, but it wasn't something he was all that interested in. *Give me a good view of a natural waterfall or a forest any day.* That was the kind of exploration Ranma enjoyed. Constructs like this, well they had to be something special to get his attention. And as big as that thing was, there was nothing otherwise special about it.

It should be stated that Ranma was not the best when it came to figuring out scale in space. He was also not mentally prepared to be awed by something someone else built, regardless of what it was.

Shaak gawked at Ranma and then began to laugh, shaking her head so quickly she set her lekku to bounce. "I sometimes forget that for all the fact that we have taught you how to reach out to the Force, you do not do it as a matter of course. I won't ask you to reach out to it now, but let me just say that both Kit and myself and possibly Anakin, although he seems to have gotten over it much faster than the two of us, were a bit shocked at the astonishing amount of Unifying Force there is within that monolith. Or... Is it through it?"

Seeing Shaak slowly starts to lose herself once more, Ranma reached out and tugged lightly at her rightmost lek, letting his fingers then caress the lek's tip in a manner that would normally signal some bedroom type fun. "Enough of that. We have a war to end remember?"

Flushing slightly at the intimate touch to the tip of her lek Shaak fully came back to herself, quipping, "I thought you said you agreed that simply defeating the Sith would not end the war?"

"It won't, but it least it will bring a close to the Jedi/Sith portion of it," Ranma admitted. "But to get through the next few hours, I need you here with me, not lost in the Force, okay love?"

Shaak nodded, shaking her head with a wry little smile. "You're right of course. And to be fair, I have begun to use so much of the Living Force normally that I have moved away from using the Unifying Force both in actuality and in terms of methodology."

Ranma nodded, remembering a conversation they'd had about the different ways the Jedi sold the Force and their own place in service to it, but that was all he could do for now because another group of Vulture fighters coming out of them. This was no combat air patrol though, this was a full force of seven or eight wings of Vulture fighters, with more coming up behind them. "Huh, all this for just a chance to surround us? They can't have a good read on Anakin's ship or Bo-Katan and Kit's ships so quickly... so they think they could take the Wild Blade with just starfighters? Ugh, now I'm insulted."

“No, I can sense living minds coming in with that force, hidden behind their numbers from our physical sensors. They are hiding gunboats at the very least behind them that is why their formation is so dense,” Shaak said, now all business as she forced the curiosity and awe of the monolith she felt to one side, reaching out to Kit and finding that he had begun to do the same thanks to Ranma’s earlier words. A few of the other Jedi on the starfighters hadn’t yet, but Shaak’s desire to reach out and form a gestalt with them brought them back to the here and now.

“Course change to...” Ranma paused, and then rattled off a series of numbers, sending the attack group down and to the left. The intercepting flotilla tried to do the same and began to cut across the attacker’s course thanks to their internal starting point. But then, with Anakin in the lead, the attack group suddenly turned, racing up and back into engagement range.

What followed was a slaughter.

Anakin took the first shots as he had in the two small skirmishes before this. Thanks to the power of his lasers, he was able to outrange the Vultures by a tiny bit, firing at them before they could close. Once they closed though, the Space Dreamer proved nearly impossible to land a hit on, while the majority of Anakin’s other weapons systems found the range. The twin-linked lasers were his primary weapon, but he had two small magma projectors forward too, letting him fire at two enemies in a wide cone ahead of him. At the same time, the dovin basals on his wings messed up the enemy formations, pulling or hurling the Vultures through space as the small black holes appeared and disappeared. Before the others even arrived, he had killed six vultures and hit others so hard their shields failed, making them easy meat for the others. “WOOO!!”

Soon after Anakin began to open fire, Bo-Katan and Kit’s ships also began to light up the enemy formation. They didn’t do as well as Anakin’s Space Dreamer. Kit’s ship, Smiling Waves was much more rounded, made to fight both capital ships and starfighters. The Brokar (heartbeat) was a capital ship killer, but with Kad Solus piloting and Bo-Katan controlling the weapons, it had sufficient anti-starfighter weapons to defend itself. Both ships downing four Vultures apiece, in comparison to Anakin’s seven.

Then the Wild Blade slammed into the dogfight as more of the enemy Vultures moved over and around the tip of the arrow shape formation trying to slow the Republic ships down. For a few moments, everything was chaotic confusion as gunboats began to open fire and Vultures tried to get locks on the amazingly quick, agile Sekotan ships. They were not helped by the fact that even now, nearly three months after the Sekotan starfighters had been introduced to the war, the Vulture droids were still not used to needing to lock on to starfighters that read like particularly large animals to their systems. Systems which were not designed to lock onto such.

“You know, in a war back on my old world, you had to down five enemy fighters to become an ace. What is the number in this one, twenty, sixty?”

“We don’t tend to think about that kind of thing Master,” Talli said from behind Ranma. “It smacks too much of hubris.”

“I know that’s true for you Jedi, but is it true for other people? The reason I ask is I just think the number itself would be really ridiculous in this war considering how many Vultures there always are, and how their shields are so thin.”

“Bitter remark: indeed Master, much like the rest of the mass-produced junk that promulgate the galaxy at this time, the Vultures have never truly had an advantage against anything we’ve seen, bar those strange UGLY pirate vessels.”

“Yeah, I know what you’re talking about. And I know quantity has a quality on its own, and they were as much a strategic weapon as they were a starfighter, but still.” Snorted, shaking his head, and looked over at his wife again for just a brief second before turning back to his controls, piloting the Wild Blade up and over a series of concussion missiles that had been launched at them from a gunboat and a Vulture from the same direction. HK’s return fire destroyed the gunboat within a few seconds, its own shielding not being very much better than a Vultures. Two more Vultures fell to precise strikes from the magma cannons as the dovin basal that Ahsoka was controlling redirected still more concussion missiles. “Shaak?”

“Right. Course change...” This time Shaak rattled out a series of numbers, using the Force to direct their next course. Even as Vultures and gunboats continued to try to encircle and attack the attack group, the attack group shifts their route further away from the enemy capital ships.

Still more of the defending Vultures came out after them, along with the last gunboats. The Confederacy had yet to change their unbalanced order of battle and it showed now.

“HK, keep track of the Vultures they’ve send after us, and the ones we’ve already destroyed. We’ll need to know when to call in the rest of the fleet,” Ranma ordered.

“Eager response: yes Master! I will cheerfully tally both my kills and those of you fleshy meatbags. Currently, I am at fourteen kills in this battle, with six assists. The meat bag Skywalker is in the lead for now with...”

“That is not what I meant and you know it,” Ranma answered oppressively, as Ahsoka and Talli began to giggle behind them in a most non-Jedi manner. Shaak however did not remonstrate with them, too busy snorting in laughter herself as they took the fight to the enemy in a very specific way.

Across from them, the enemy fleet began to react the further they moved away from the monolith, and began to spread out a wall while moving towards the attackers, trying to envelop the attackers. This was the same kind of technique that had been used against the Wild Blade in the past: spread out in depth, so whichever direction the pocket battlecruiser moved, it had to

fight at least three or more times its own offensive punch, while the vultures nibble and, frankly, served as mobile navigational hazards. The dreadnaughts, which hadn't been in the previous battles, would make the tactic even more effective.

Indeed, Shaak reflected that the Confederacy would have been better served by simply pulling back and letting the dreadnaughts deal with the *Wild Blade* and its fellows. Even with Bo-Katan and Kit's ships outfitted more in keeping with the *Wild Blade*, the number of larger, more powerful vessels would have worn them down in short order but evidently the Sith had yet to realize that.

Better, the enemy had jumped the gun a bit, assuming the Vultures and gunboats would have slowed the attack group down. It hadn't, and now, the speed of the Sekotan starships allowed them to change course and get away from the enemy capital ships each time they tried to close.

The Vultures were a different story. Now, as they swarmed from above, below and from multiple directions, Coraljumpers began to die. First two, then a third, followed by three more of the Coraljumpers exploded, the drones overcome by the sheer weight of fire coming at them. Mostly drones, anyway. Two Mandalorian pilots were down as well. Soon a Jedi Knight, one who Shaak only knew by name, followed them.

But the larger Sekotan ships, even Bo-Katan's, which was not nearly as fast in a straight line as the other ships were, could keep away from the capital ships. Moreover, the Vultures simply could not lock onto the pocket capital ships long enough or with enough weapons to put them down quickly.

To the enemy, though, it looked as if the attack group had been stymied utterly. The Jedi had seemingly made a mistake, sending too small a force, or perhaps falling to arrogance, assuming the Sekotan made ships would prove their worth again in taking on many times their own tonnage.

Which was perfectly fine. Indeed, that assumption was the reason the Jedi aboard those ships were striving just as much in the Force to halt the Sith's Battle Precognition from discerning the truth as they were on piloting. It cost five more Jedi their lives in the next few moments, but overall, it looked as if the plan was working. The enemy fleet was continuing to try to spread out, was continuing to get in its own way, leaving them vulnerable to the follow on wave.

"Remind me to commend Anakin. He came up with this... what did you call it, Ranma?"

"Thunder run," Ranma answered. "Can't remember where I read about it, but the term certainly seems to have fit, even if we haven't brought the thunder on the capital ships yet. I..."

Ranma's voice broke off as he spotted Shaak stiffening out of the corner of his eye. Unknown to him, Ahsoka, Talli and every other Jedi in the attack group had done the same. "Something is going on with the monolith! Tune, call in the fleet now!" Shaak nearly shouted, the amount of Unifying Force she was feeling shifting and suddenly concentrating throwing off her normal self-control.

Instantly Ranma flipped the ship back around, coming in now towards the portion of the enemy fleet that had remained on station near the monolith.

This allowed several of the other enemy capital ships to, including two dreadnaughts, to finally enter the range necessary to fire on the attack group. Turbolaser fire began to crisscross through space after them. Another one of the piloted Coraljumpers was smashed to pieces by a lucky shot along with fourteen drones. Then Anakin, dodging and looping through the incoming fire while remaining on position near the Wild Blade reached out and took control of the other drones. Somehow, he was able to keep them going for a few moments before Kit and the other Jedi got themselves under control and reclaimed command of their assigned drones.

Meanwhile, Kit and Bo-Katan had been cut off momentarily by force of Vultures and the vagaries of the dogfight. But they had the majority of the Coraljumpers with them, so that was all right. Even now, they turned in the same direction as the others, ignoring the capital ships who were attempting to fire at them to close with those nearest the monolith. This would put them in the center of the enemy formation, just as the Sith had been trying to achieve. But whatever it was going over there was serious enough that that didn't matter.

Master Yoda had remained aboard one of the Sun Destroyers, the Adventurous. The Adventurous and Argent Light, along with the assembled eighteen Mon Calamari cruisers and sixteen makeshift carriers – refitted Mon Calamari cargo haulers - had jumped into dead space, waiting on the signal to be sent from the attack group under Shaak. The Adventurous was the newest of that class, and was a pure capital ship killer, with enough accompanying starfighters to make it the equivalent of a Lucrehulk and a dreadnaught rolled into one, with Mon Calamari shielding and Sekotan-made defenses. It could hit well above its weight class, and its weight class placed it in a different category already than even the Mandators of Kuat.

In the ship's flag bridge, Yoda had been waiting for the signal, linked into a gestalt with several hundred other Jedi scattered throughout the capital ships of the fleet. And as they waited, Yoda began to feel out the target star system, calculating their jump as precisely as only the Jedi could. Not even the best astromech droid or dedicated computer system could do what they were about to do: Calculate a jump to a very specific point within the targeted star system, one that was well within the reach of the gravity well of the star. Not just for a single ship but an entire fleet.

Feeling the urgency somehow through the communication with Tune, Yoda ordered the jump less than a millisecond after Shaak's voice echoed out of the coms.

The fleet appeared almost within the closing envelope of the Confederacy around the attack group. Indeed, most of the two fleets found themselves now intermingled, all of them well within turbolaser range. The Sun Destroyers instantly open fire, the Sekotan starships' living brains able to identify friend from foe even faster than normal computers could, and certainly able to fire before the operators of those ships could.

The Confederacy ships got off several of their own broadsides as well at the Republic fleet but it wasn't concentrated as their computers worked out ship classes and designated the most dangerous targets or simply fired at whatever they could, resulting in more than a few blue-on-blue moments. The Mon Calamari ships worked in groups of three, officers and Jedi alike buoyed by Yoda's Battle Meditation to create a far greater cohesion out of this chaos than any normal commander could have dreamed of. Three Munificent-class fell quickly, while one Mon Calamari vessel found itself too near an enemy dreadnaught. It died, but did not go down easy, and the ship was swamped by several hundred piloted Coraljumpers, as the smaller Coralskipper drones, which had jumped in with the fleet, went to work on their opposite number.

For their part, the two Sun Destroyers had targeted several ships at once. In a small parallel to the unfortunate Mon Calamari vessel, a single Lucrehulk had the very bad luck of being almost between the two massive Republic vessels as they came out of hyperspace. Two broadsides spoke as one, accompanied by the proton torpedo launchers of the larger vessels and while the other sides of each vessel had multiple targets to worry about, on their port and starboard respectively, the Adventurous and Argent Light only had one target.

A Lucrehulk had enough shields that even six or seven Mon Calamari cruisers would have trouble downing its shielding, even if they weren't dealing with any other vessels at the same time. The two Sun Destroyers, with their short ranged but powerful broadsides of magma cannons overcame the Lucrehulks shielding in segments within minutes of fire.

The enemy ship attempted to maneuver out of range, attempted to roll in space to bring more shielding to bare. But the proton torpedoes had already been launched, and now streaked through the small holes that the turbolaser and magma cannon fire had made, crashing into and exploding segments of the Lucrehulk, causing shields and weapons to fail.

The Republic fleet moved on. Their target was the same one the attack group had been making for, after Shaak's last course correction, the trio of enemy vessels. These were two Lucrehulks and a Confederacy dreadnaught, sitting together in front of the monolith.

Across from them, light began to form around the monolith's equator. It was pulsing almost along the equator, the light from one segment merging into its neighbor before that light began to pool at one corner of the equator, glowing even brighter, like a sun about to go nova.

The two Sun Destroyers finished off their first victim almost absentmindedly as they went. Then the battle began in earnest as the five other Confederacy dreadnaughts closed with

the enemy capital ships. The eighteen Mon Calamari capital ships began to exchange fire with their larger, far more powerfully armed cousins. While they had already lost one of their number, their shielding was far better than their opponents were and they were all within mutual defense range of their division counterparts. The attack group had pulled the enemy fleet out of formation, and several of the enemy dreadnaughts were not in range to support one another, leaving them with only the Lucrehulks to call upon.

The shielding of more than one Mon Cal cruiser began to shimmer and weaken, but none of them were taken out of the battle. Similarly, the Sun Destroyers began to shake off the fire coming their way, until finally someone on the other side realized they couldn't spread their fire in that way. The enemy dreadnaughts began to concentrate on the Sun Destroyers.

This was perfectly acceptable to Yoda and the captains of the two massive ships. The Sun Destroyers had the defense, both the shielding and armor - reinforced by Living Force - to withstand that pummeling. Meanwhile, the mom Mon Calamari ships, with their heavy turbolaser batteries, began to return fire quickly, accurately, continuing to work as disparate divisions to target whichever capital ship they could. Given the chaotic nature of the battlefield, they were rather spoiled for choice.

The enemy Lucrehulks attempted to back away, but space was so crowded this was proving difficult. By this point in the war, the Lucrehulks had proven that they were not ships of the line. They had the shielding to perform very well in that role, but their armament when compared to other capital ships was not all that great. They could take a massive punishment, but they couldn't deal it out. Because of this, even though they couldn't retreat and were a major threat against both of Zonama Sekot's starfighters with their now-coordinated defensive fire, the Mon Cal divisions concentrated on the Confederacy dreadnaughts.

Meanwhile Vultures and Sekotan starfighters exploded throughout the battle space. And now, the Coralskippers of the Sun Destroyers began to launch, joining the starships already in space.

At the same time, a Lucrehulk's shielding fell and the Wild Blade raced on, with Kit once more on their wing, charging up behind a Confederacy dreadnaught.

Feeling the way the battle was going, Yoda turned control of the overall gestalt over to Shaak for a moment. He could feel her shock at that but had other things on his mind.

Reaching out with his senses, he could feel one of the Sith also reaching out toward the monolith, connecting to it, pushing out his own Force presence into the gathered energies within the monolith.

Yoda attempted to cut that connection, a weave of Force Light appearing in his mind then pushed out into the Force around them to break the Sith's concentration. However it

failed, and as he and thousands across both fleets watched, the light that had been coalescing at one point along the strange diamond shape's equator group grew.

It quickly expanded outwards, becoming a cone of energy so dense it almost looked like a solar flare. That cone reached out, and seconds later, the three ships that the Republic fleet of been trying to close with through their fellows disappeared, their positions overwhelmed by the light of that device. The light faded, taking with it the built up Unifying Force, which quickly banked down to its previous level.

The three ships were gone. There was no sign of a hyperspace flash, no debris, nothing but empty space where they had once floated.

"Some kind of weapon?" muttered one of the flag officers, a Mon Calamari. "The Sith poked the sleeping rancor, then."

"A weapon, it was not. A gateway the monolith is. Go through it we must," Yoda intoned.

"Master Yoda, I hate to say it but we have to win this fight first. Going through that portal would mean nothing if when we return from wherever it takes us, that fleet out there is waiting for us, after we've already sustained losses," another officer cautioned. The overall battle was going in their favor, but there were still at least two or three Confederacy ship for every Republic one. The carousel of death was also starting to take a toll on their own starfighters quite a lot thanks to the enemy Lucrehulks. It was only a matter of time before the battle began to wear down capital ship shielding in turn.

"True, but battle, important on its own it is not. Stopping the Sith, our reason for being here it is," Yoda answered crisply. "Know, we do not, why they are here. Reason there must be. Turn the tide of the war against the Republic, they might be here to do, impossible thought it might seem. Stop them, we must!"

Despite the chaotic nature of the future, this point Yoda was very certain about. Whatever the Sith were here to do, would spell doom and destruction across the galaxy, even on a scale of the current war.

At Yoda's words, spines stiffened throughout the fleet, and everyone on the flag bridge bent back to their tasks quickly as Yoda reclaimed command of the Jedi gestalt, falling once more into his Battle Meditation. Orders went out, and those orders shifted not only the formation of the fleet, but also how the fleet was currently fighting. Normally, even capital ships would conserve weapons like concussion missiles or proton torpedoes, because mid battle you couldn't get a collier out to rearm. For the Confederacy, that kind of thinking was hardwired into each and every droid brain that made up their fleet. But the Republic could override that kind of combat doctrine.

This they now did, with orders going out to every ship within the fleet to stop conserving their missile loadout. On top of that, the Mon Calamari ships received orders to concentrate their own fire not on the enemy dreadnaughts or Lucrehulks, but entirely on the Munificent-class to the point of almost ignoring the dreadnaughts.

Six of the Munificent-class began to falter quickly.

The Munificent-class was pretty much the design antithesis to the Mon Calamari ships. All of the Munificent-class were built from the same scale model, everything about them was uniform, allowing them to be built quickly and efficiently. This was entirely unlike the Mon Calamari vessels, each of which was mostly an individual work of art. The Munificents had weak shielding for the size of the vessel, again completely contrasting that of the Mon Calamari. They could also hit extremely hard, with their spinal mounted turbolasers.

Nevertheless, the Mon Calamari ships were quick to maneuver around them, keeping them moving, unable to lock onto one specific ship for more than a single shot. That shot did quite a bit of damage to the Mon Calamari shields but it couldn't knock them out.

Further, the Confederacy vessels lacked any equivalent to the Wild Blade or Anakin or Bo-Katan or Kit's ships. Which, for all their small size, were true capital ships.

At one point, Anakin was able to get in under a Lucrehulk's shields, much like he had done in the battle of Naboo. His spinal mounted ion cannon and proton torpedoes went to work, taking out weapons then slamming into the ship in groups of four. Moments later, he was rocketing away from a broken, drifting husk. He had aimed for the neck of the vessel connecting the control hub to the point the rest of the ship, and without that segment, the rest lost power quickly, the engines exploding.

Bo-Katan was doing an even better job. Along with Kit, her ship was better designed to face other capital ships, with the heavy magma cannons and ion cannons the Brokar was armed with. Thanks to their maneuverability and the principle of power to a point their weapons loadout followed. The two of them were able to strip a dreadnaught's shielding away from one quadrant before tag teaming a Munificent, and then battering a Lucrehulk's shielding in one zone so much it tried to twist away from them, even though this allowed a Mon Cal division to hit the same section a moment later.

The Wild Blade was, well, the Wild Blade. Up to this point, Ranma and Shaak's ship had built up quite a reputation and within the next few moments, proved that reputation was not hyperbole as two more vessels went down to its fire. First, a Lucrehulk was taken from below, the Wild Blade blasting through its shielding in one segment and then performing the same trick Anakin had a moment ago, getting under the rest of its shields before the ship could turn away. And then, astonishingly, Ranma was able to maneuver the ship behind a dreadnaught, a point where most of the dreadnaught's weapons could not reach.

Even as the dreadnaught desperately began to invade, trying to get into a position where another dreadnaught could fire on the Wild Blade, the Wild Blade's weapons pummeled its shielding. Moments later, ion cannon fire blasted into its engines, shutting them down. More and more of its systems followed as the ion cannons continued their pummeling, accompanied by proton torpedoes and magma cannon blasts. Only when the dreadnaught trying to aid their stricken vessel fired on it, did the Wild Blade flip away, heading towards another Lucrehulk.

Not that the Republic was having all its own way. Three of the Mon Calamari ships had been forced to do an emergency hyperjump away, and another was a drifting wreck, joining its fellow from earlier on in the battle. Several thousand Sekotan starfighters of both types had also been destroyed, with Jedi and Mando alike dying among the mass of drones and there were still more Vultures than Republic starfighters.

But the Sun Destroyers were completely outclassing their opposite number. Eventually, when one of the Confederacy dreadnaughts was destroyed under their combined fire, the heart seemed to go out from the rest of the enemy fleet to the point the Jedi could sense it through the Force.

It was only a moment, and none but Shaak, Yoda and a few other Jedi could feel it. She let loose a gasp, raised her hands away from her controls for a moment, bowing her head.

“Shaak?/Master Ti?” Ranma and Ahsoka asked as one, with Ahsoka turning away from her weapons controls to stare at her Master and going on before Ranma could ask what was wrong. “What was that I just felt? It felt like a pulse of emotion in the Force, a, a lot of people feeling...betrayal? But from where, and who?”

“From the enemy fleet my Padawan,” Shaak said with a sigh. “You can only demand so much loyalty from sentient beings. And I am afraid that with the Sith being gone, they can no longer reinforce that loyalty through fear or personal presence.”

“But then why...” Ahsoka began.

She was interrupted by Talli, whose eyes were wide with horror as she jumped to the conclusion before her fellow padawan. “The droids! If the officers began to turn against the Sith or gave an order that the droids had been told to ignore...”

“Jaundiced response: then those poor, mass produced trash droids would follow their programming. They would turn on their meatbag officers either killing or stunning them at the very least,” HK opined. From his tone it was impossible to say if he approved or not, and even Ranma wouldn't want to put bets on one side of the other.

This was not a quick process, even though the first feeling of betrayal that washed over the Jedi might've indicated otherwise. That had only come from a few of the more manned vessels, the dreadnaughts in particular having demanded a living crew. But the Lucrehulks had

an incredibly small number of living sentients aboard them, and that continued with the newer Munificent-class vessels put into service since the beginning of the war.

Nonetheless, those tiny crews did start to break.

Master Yoda's Mastery of Battle Meditation buoyed the Republic force and they had been fighting at a far higher level than the Confederacy had from the very beginning. The living sentients aboard the Confederacy fleet knew it, and panic had been there well before they began to lose their willingness to battle.

Now the Republic fleet took advantage of it. Yoda was able to pinpoint the ships that would start to break before they did, and the enemy formation, such as it was by this point, began to disintegrate quickly under the precise punishment. Fire falters, ships paused in space, and confusion reigned as ships turned and tried to leave the battle zone in real space.

Others, the last three Munificent-class, were able to flee into hyperspace, older vessels that hadn't had the majority of their crews replaced by droids. Two of the dreadnaughts followed quickly. The officers on those ships had possibly prepared to battle their own droids prior to this campaign.

This did not influence the starfighter portion of the battle. None of the vultures faltered at all. After all, they were seen as disposable even at the best of times. Not a single officer thought to retrieve them.

The *Wild Blade* and the other midsize Sekotan starships were able to better take advantage of the ensuing breakup of the Confederacy force than an equivalent number of larger capital vessels would've been able to.

It took a while, but after another hour, the enemy fleet had lost so many ships that Yoda was able to turn his attention back to the monolith. He quickly began to understand what he needed to do in order to activate it, feeling out a set of... of controls almost, set into the Unifying Force being sent through the monolith. Once he understood what to do, Yoda issued a recall command to the *Wild Blade*, Kit and Anakin.

As their pocket capital ships joined his vessel, to push away from where the battle had slowly drifted away from the monolith, Yoda formally turned over command of the fleet to Bo-Katan. While she was not an officer of the Republic, she was by far and away the most experienced commander among them, and had previously commanded several space battles, the battle in Corellia being one of them. *My old Master, turning over in his grave he would now. The Reborn, Mandalorians regaining their position of strength, anathema to him it would have been. But times, changing they have been for years. Move with it I have been forced to.*

"Trust you I do to win the remainder of this battle for us. Go we must in order to stop the Sith," Yoda intoned aloud into the communicator.

“Get out of here and leave me and my Mandos to our fun, Jetii. Fighting in space isn’t nearly as pleasant as fighting on the ground, but it’s still fun,” Bo-Katan shot back. Yoda could sense that she was extremely irritated at not being in on the kill, not being with them when they finally confronted the last of the Sith, but there was no helping it and her battle lust overrode even that annoyance.

“My apologies, you have. My thanks as well, you have,” Yoda stated before he cut the connection. The Sun Destroyer was now hovering where the Sith Dreadnaught had been a moment ago, and Yoda reached out, connecting his own Force Senses to the motherboard that was the Unifying Force within the monolith. The strength of it nearly flooded his mind, but Yoda stood strong against the current, pushing through it and at the same time pushing out of forth into the Unifying Force, giving orders and sending those orders down the ‘control runs’ for want of a better word, within the Unifying Force. *Open, open, open the path before us you will. Obey, you will.*

As Ranma and the others watched, the energy they had previously seen around the monolith appeared again, pulsing around the equator until it began to form once more into a single ever-brightening zone, which then flashed outward. Another funnel of Unifying Force reached for them, pulling the ships through and out of the other side to... **Elsewhere.**

Within seconds of being pulled or send through whatever kind of transportation teleportation thing that had been, the four vessels were zooming forward through space once more, collating data as they went. Data, which very much upset Tune and the other astromech units. “Master, there is a planet here, but no sun! Further, there are no nebulae or other astronomical bodies within range of our sensors. This is worse than when we have been in the deep dark! I literally have no way to tell where in the galaxy we are.”

“Amused Tone: Calm yourself trashcan. There is a monolith behind us, smaller than the original by at least 40%, but that is enough to get us back.”

Tune’s own tone was tart with ridicule. “In case it slipped your mind, oh pompous ancient, we are here to combat the Sith. Who is to say that the battle against them will in some fashion effect the strange Force Teleportation Thing we just went through!? And even if it doesn’t, wouldn’t it be better to have another way of getting out of here than just the one we don’t understand?”

“Eh, that’s enough you guys, we got other things to deal with. For now, I suppose we’re stuck with it,” Ranma ordered, not really caring about that at all. If they had to retreat, how they did so wouldn’t matter, only that they could. And if they didn’t, well, they might have all the time in the world to figure out what the heck the monoliths were. Even he had felt the power of the Unifying Force reaching out to them like a giant hand fit to grasp them and he hadn’t really liked it all that much. Unlike the Living Force, the Light Side of the Force that he used, the Unifying Force was too therapeutic, too clinical, there was no sense of life within it.

Right now, the much smaller force of ships had indeed something else to concentrate on. To wit, the enemy ships coming in at them. The trio of capital ships the Sith had brought through with them were in orbit over the single planet, a planet that brimmed with the Force to the point even the Unifying Force in the monolith seemed to pale in comparison. But as their sensors told them of the Republic flotilla, they broke orbit and came right back towards them.

Two Lucrehulks to back up a dreadnaught like the Seeker would have been an amazingly potent force prior to the war, their accompanying wings of Vulture fighters enough to overwhelm many a Mid Rim world and even some Core Worlds. Against the force of Sekotan made starships under Yoda, however, they were out of their weight class. Vultures and Coralskippers flashed forward from the opposing flotillas, while Kit and the Wild Blade went with them, Anakin already out in front.

“Padawan Skywalker, swing out far to the port and down, you will,” Yoda ordered. “Cut back in from behind, you will. Knight Fisto, to the starboard and up, please. Cut back into the battle zone from those points you will. Wild Blade, straight ahead you will move.” There was urgency in his tone, and Yoda barely glanced at the trio of enemy capital ships on his tactical screen, too busy probing the distant planet with his Force senses, feeling a sense of foreboding as he did. “Finish this quickly we must, or leave the battle in space to Anakin we will have to.”

In his Space Dreamer Anakin balked at that, feeling something calling him, something demanding he go to that planet, land on its surface and be involved in whatever was to come. But after his experience with being influenced by the Dark Side, after his actions had nearly let Sidious escape, Anakin was now very leery of any time his instincts and his common sense were fighting one another. *I’m the best when it comes to controlling the drones, and I’m our best fighter pilot too. It makes sense to leave me up here.* “Master, if you think that’s the best thing to do, I say do it now.”

Moments later that was what they were forced to do. All the other Jedi with them felt the same sense of urgency Yoda felt, and when the enemy fleet, undoubtedly now led by droids with specific orders, made to engage the Sun Destroyer, Yoda quickly ordered the Wild Blade back to the larger Sekotan spaceship. The Sun Destroyer’s shields covering it, Yoda was able to transfer over to the Wild Blade, joining Keala and Fabian in the sitting area.

Moments later, the Wild Blade and Kit’s ship made a wide turn toward the right flank of the battle zone, then up and over it, heading towards the planet in the distance.

OOOOOO

As their pawns stalled the Jedi and their Republic lackeys, Darth Tyrannus and Diabolus had not been idle. Upon coming through the wormhole, they did not bother with the awe and shock the Jedi had felt from the sheer amount of Force that flowed around and through the planet. Instead, they were much more interested in that it was made of both Light, Dark, and Unifying Force. That meant they were undoubtedly in the right place.

The Sith made planetfall quickly, along with a full division of droids. These droids were not the normal B-2 battle droids. Rather the majority were made of Magna Guard and Super Droids, with a heavy leavening of tanks and artillery units. The landing force quickly moved around, setting up a defensive perimeter.

“We should have tried to use the Force to discover where to set down,” Diabolus grumbled. “I think we are too far away, from our target, the other Dark Side user is trapped here.” That was the sense she was getting through the Dark Side, but even that was quite difficult. The Light was just as strong as the Dark here, which inhibited her senses.

When he answered her, Tyranus admitted the same thing. “I could not lead us directly to our fellow Dark Side user, not from orbit. Recall how the planet seemed to be covered by a fog? It blocked not only our ship’s sensors but also my own. Now I can at least tell what direction we should go in.”

Grumbling, Diabolus nodded, her complaint more pro forma than anything else. “We need to hurry Master. I think bringing our troops along is not a good idea. Even the Magna Guard would slow us down in the long run.”

“We are not that far away. And if the Jedi keep their eyes on what they consider a prize, they will be at our heels quickly. We might need the added firepower,” Tyranus answered sharply. While he was a Sith, perhaps unique among that group, he knew his limitations and did not want to challenge the Jedi in the fleet which had come after them directly. Besides which, he had seen excerpts of the battle between his former Master and Ranma. For Diabolus it was not cowardly to admit that he did not want to fight the Chaotic Locus personally. “If nothing else, the droids can buy us time.”

Grunting this time, Diabolus looked around, taking in the planet once more. It was a sparse world, with strange crystalline-like trees that glowed with Force energies. Some were black with the Dark Side, some were a pale, weak white with the Light Side. Others, far more and always separating the other groups, were blue, filled with the Unifying Force. It was as if the Unifying Force, the Force generated by suns, stars, space and non-living things, was rejecting the two extremes.

Above from the very clouds some odd light came, imitating the light of a sun, if on a somewhat dreary day. Beyond the strange trees there were a few small lizard-like animals the Sith had spotted occasionally as the droids set up a fortification. The land itself was rocky, interposed with bits of dark brown soil and streams of slow moving water. Mountains rose in the distance, visible barely from where they were, but they seemed to have dominated the view as the Sith started to land.

The planet had a certain amount of austere beauty. But beyond the physical and far more importantly, the Force was **so** powerful here, to the Sith it was like drowning in the Force. Both Darths reveled in it, in the Dark Side, drawing it into themselves. Within moments, both

Sith knew they were more powerful now than they had been before, to a point just below where Tyranus had been when the Dark Side energies residing in Sidious had rebounded into him.

But it wasn't the Dark Side alone that was powerful here. And indeed, feeling out the fine-tuned balance, Tyranus began to smile. "I know now why we were called. The balance here, it is symbolic of the new, chaotic whirlpool between the Force as a whole and the Dark Side. Push the balance to favor the Dark Side here... all this power, would shift the balance elsewhere. If we can do that, and find the Dark Side user who is here as well, the ascension of the Force, the destruction of the Veil, can be reversed. We will be able to keep taking power from the Dark Side emotions and feelings throughout the galaxy!"

Diabolus nodded, her face twisting into a feral grin. "And the Jedi will die, once and for all! Even without the clones turning on them, if the Veil is in place, and we resume control of the Confederacy that will let us slaughter the Jedi!"

This was a bit too optimistic for Tyranus, but he did not gainsay the younger woman. Instead, he simply gestured to the southeast. "Come. Our target... our targets, rather, are in that direction. I sense the centers of the Light Side and Dark Side are both in the same general direction from here. We will be able to tell more as we close."

"And the center of the Unifying Force, too," Diabolus intoned, cutting off her near-euphoria at the thought of Jedi dying quickly. "Look at the trees. That is not natural. Someone like... like Fay or someone similar is here."

Tyranus snarled at the mention of Fay. He knew what that Dark Side cursed bitch was doing as temporary head of the Republic, and knew it would be disastrous to leave her in place. However, the Sith no longer had any resources on Coruscant which could be trusted to try to assassinate her. *But when we return, that may be the next priority going forward. In a way, that bitch is more dangerous to the cause than Yoda or anyone else short of the Locus.* "Perhaps. In addition, if dealing with the center of the Light Side would throw the balance into jeopardy, destroying whatever font of the Unifying Force would do much the same. Slaying both would be most preferred."

He then shook his head, and, without another word, began to move, racing away as fast as his Dark Side infused body could take him. Force Cloak settled around him, hiding his presence still further than the sheer amount of Force energies there were around him.

Diabolus hesitated long enough to give out orders to the droid troops. "General Droid, you are in charge. Dig in, spread out, prepare to defend from an attack from the skies. Hold until the last." The Former Dark Sister then turned to a company, a hundred and forty strong of mixed Magna Guard and droid commandoes. "You, follow after us at your best speed."

With that, Diabolus followed after her Master, out into the wilds of this strange, solitary world. The droids followed after her with mixed success, soon being left far behind.

OOOOOO.

Leaving the *Adventurous*, its accompanying starfighters, Kit and Anakin's pocket destroyers behind, the *Wild Blade* made for the planet the trio of Confederacy capital ships had left behind. A wing of Vultures kept close for defense left their position and made for them, but the *Wild Blade* juked and dodged, making it impossible for them to lock on their concussion missiles.

However, Yoda was frowning somewhat. "Stop us from landing, they will. Slow us down further it will. Time, of the essence, the Force is telling me."

"Sure they would, if we were going to land the normal way," Ranma answered almost absentmindedly. "HK, you've got the best sense of our sensors and the range of anti-air guns. Any idea how far into atmosphere we have to be before we can see anything down below?"

"Rueful Response: Master, given how dense the fog is, it is doubtful that these pathetic excuses for droids will be able to see beyond a few hundred meters. Yet I do not know their engagement algorithm. They might be willing to expend gas profligately."

"True, but it is a planet, HK, Ranma. We don't need to fight the droids, unless we sense the Sith have hunkered down in place?" Shaak questioned, although her tone made it clear that the Togrutan Jedi did not believe that would prove the case.

"Master, I hate to speak out of turn, but how the **heck** can you even speak so calmly?" Ahsoka asked, practically shivering a bit in her seat. "This planet, it, it thrums of so much power in the Force it's like were flying into a sun!"

"I know my Padawan, although I would say a falsehood like that first comment you just made should have turned you into stone," Shaak answered, shaking her head. "But we are Jedi. The strength of the Force in any given area does not matter as much to our duty to it. Be calm, center yourself. Let your anxiety flow out of you, and move beyond it and your insecurities."

Talli watched as Ahsoka did just that, feeling slightly jealous. Not that the other young girl had been able to do so, but that Master Ti had given her such... well... Jedi-like advice. The planet was bothering her a lot too, even though she didn't have as powerful a connection to the Force as the other padawan. "What about you, Master? Do you have any advice for me?" she asked, somewhat snarkily, forgetting for a moment Yoda's diminutive presence in the hatchway.

"Sure. Keep firing the Dovin Basal," Ranma answered flippantly. "I don't feel the Force like you Jedi do, so this isn't bothering me all that much. If it is you, concentrate your senses on Ahsoka instead of the Force as a whole."

“Huh? Why me/why her?” Ahsoka and Talli intoned, then looked at one another and giggled even as Ranma dodged another round of concussion missiles and Shaak and HK killed several more vultures. Such was life on the Wild Blade at times.

“Because you two and the Mando twosome are going to be staying right here. We need someone to pilot the Wild Blade when we leave, and neither of you are ready for a Mando style orbital drop.”

“Did someone say orbital drop!?” Keala called from the main sitting room. Having been left sitting this space battle out, she and Fabian were practically salivating inside their helmets to take part in the battle, and there was a note of both intense interest and annoyance in Keala’s voice as she went on. “You’re not joking are you?”

“No, and no, you are not going with us either. Talli and Ahsoka will remain up here as well, and between the four of you, you should be able to pilot the Wild Blade,” Ranma answered.

“A flaw in this plan, there is. Young I have not been for centuries. Survive a drop, I would not,” Yoda deadpanned.

“That’s one of the reasons why HK is going to be doing the drop part of this,” Shaak soothed. “Simply hang on, and HK and the reentry shield he will carry will do the rest.”

“That, and let’s face it, he’s just better at long range killing than anyone else aboard,” Ranma added, making both Fabian and Keala scowl and plot vengeance. They were not affected by the planet or the strange Force issues the Jedi were dealing with. To them, this was just perhaps the most important battle they’d ever be involved in.

“Eager response: Master, you flatter me. I can only hope that there will be meatbags to slay instead of mere droids. I prefer my enemies to squish rather than spark.”

Talli and the other youngsters all began protesting, but Ranma ignored them. The Wild Blade dove further down through the atmosphere, the vultures following after them. While the Wild Blade wasn’t very aerodynamic, the vultures weren’t either, and all of them couldn’t move very well. The Dovin Basal went to work on overtime, pulling concussion missiles away from the pocket battlecruiser, while HK and Ahsoka lashed the vultures with fire.

Not twenty minutes later, The Wild Blade hit the lower atmosphere and they discovered that astonishingly they had entered the atmosphere close enough on the Sith’s trail that the troops the Lucrehulks had offloaded could fire at them. Artillery and anti-air guns opened fire on them, but for a moment, the Wild Blade just took it, not even bothering to fire back as it zoomed away. “So, should we try to get down there, duke it out with the droids, or what? This smacks to me of a distraction,” Ranma declared. “Just like their leaving the majority of their

ships behind. These Sith seem to have a thing about sacrificing their troops, both droids and not.”

“True, but the Vultures are still an issue, as you stated before, Ranma. We can’t land with them so hot on our heels.” Shaak looked over her shoulder for a moment, a rueful smile on her lips. “Sorry, Master Yoda, but it looks like an orbital drop is the only way forward.”

“If best way it is to get to the ground, an orbital drop we will do. Direct you I will now,” Yoda said, slumping to the ground in a meditation pose in the hatch.

Thanks to the direction given by Yoda they entered the planet’s atmosphere, they didn’t run into the droid troops left behind by the Sith. Instead, they came in from the side of the Sith’s. The Vultures hit them several times with concussion missiles as they did despite Ranma’s best efforts, the atmosphere interfering with their movements and the fact there were still more than a wing of vultures behind them finally coming into play. Nevertheless, the shields merely fell into the yellow.

“We need to go now!” Ranma barked. “Ahsoka, keep us at this altitude, but try to break as many target locks as you can. Talli, you’re on the main guns. Have fun. Fabian, Keala, get up here.”

Yoda rose and wound his way around the two young Mandalorians, listening to them wining like normal teens being told they couldn’t go out for an evening. He barely made it back to the sitting room before HK caught him up, having simply lifted the two Mandos out of the way. He now reached down, grabbing up Yoda, and then one of the prepared shields nearby. Shaak and Ranma joined them quickly, and seconds later, the hatch opened.

Ranma leaped out, his shield in place ahead of him, with Shaak following quickly.

Above them, the Wild Blade broke off, flipping around and firing at the vultures now. Several of them came after the three falling towards the ground, but fired only at Ranma for a second. Ranma dodged the bolts coming his way, and a second later, HK fired back, hitting one of the vultures with his overpowered long-range rifle. The other died to a fusillade of gyro rockets, and its fellow suddenly went sideways into a third Vulture, Force Pushed by Yoda.

More died around them from the Wild Blade as they tried to dive past it to fire at the three dropping, but the Wild Blade and Yoda’s Force powers kept them at bay far more than HK’s gun. Soon the Vultures stopped trying to ignore the Wild Blade and turned their attention back on the larger vessel. Ahsoka responded by shifting back into motion, angling upwards once more.

This battle had taken Ranma and the rest almost to the the ground and Ranma began to slow down flipping and then throwing his hands and arms out, slowing his descent. With no one shooting at them from below, he could enjoy it, as could Shaak, who began to ride her own

shield like a surfboard for a moment, fighting back a feeling of euphoria, the Light Side of the Force that was part of the balance of this planet filling her and calling out to her emotions.

HK descended more like a rock than anything else but he also had thrusters. He was the last to touch down, with Yoda leaping off the back of the droid quickly, grumbling, "For the young, that kind of thing was. Doing it again I will not."

"Well hopefully ya won't have to, Froggie," Ranma quipped. "Now, where to?"

Yoda harrumphed, then filled his body with the Force reinforcing it to a degree few in the Order could have matched. The former Grand Master of the Order then turned and charged off, quickly gaining speed to the point Ranma whistled in surprise.

Shaak smiled over at Ranma, flicking her head after Yoda, her earlier euphoria changing into a sort of feral eagerness for the hunt, her Togrutan heritage coming to the fore. "Come, my love. Let us finish this."

Ranma grinned and smacked HK on the back. "You carried Yoda, now it's your turn to be carried."

Before the large assassin droid could answer, Ranma grabbed him and lifted him over his head, racing after the two Jedi as HK began to protest volubly.

As they raced on through the strange landscape of this equally strange planet, Shaak and Yoda quickly became aware that the Dark Side of the planet was turning against them. It was as if a single being was directing the Dark Side energies of the planet to try to invade their minds, trying to corrupt them. But for all its power here, the Dark Side could not simply overwhelm and wipe their minds clean. It had to be let in, it had to find a chink in their armor.

Yoda was the Grand Master of the Jedi Order. He had wrestled with his own personal demons for decades. The guilt of living so long when others died of old age, of sending Jedi out to die, the anger of not being able to change the universe, the mistakes he had made, the goals he had never reached. All of it, Yoda had felt before, and dealt with. The whispers of the Dark Side meant nothing to him. *A lie, all power is, a truer lie the Dark Side's deprivations are. False hope, never will I seek.*

Instead, Yoda was far more interested in the fact that he could sense at least three different sentient minds on this planet that were so tied to the Force that they made Master Fay and her own personal connection to the Force seem weak in comparison. Indeed, if Yoda did not know for a fact that it was impossible, he would have thought that perhaps the three were creating the energies he was feeling, the Unifying Force the Light Side, and the Dark Side, rather than simply users of those energies. However, that was impossible, wasn't it?

Between one Force assisted leap and the next, Yoda began to laugh at himself. He waved away Shaak and Ranma's questioning glance, and even ignored HK's mutter of, "Deadpan analysis: oh no, the wrinkled prune has finally lost his marbles."

The joke didn't even register to Yoda, too lost was he in his own mind. *Thought it impossible I would have, if told of Ranma's curse before meeting him. Ancient I may be, but mysteries, things I have not seen there still are in this galaxy. Must acknowledge that I do.*

With that thought, Yoda opened his mind further and almost instantly felt the Unifying Force, or the being who was creating it, reach out to him. Yoda had always been a proponent of the Unifying Force Theory among the Jedi, which espoused an equal balance in the Force, a long view of things, visions of the future and the understanding that everything a sentient did now was small change to the entirety of the galaxy, of the Force. And now it seemed as if the Unifying Force believed in him as well. It enveloped him, energizing Yoda still further, to the point where Ranma and Shaak had to really push it to keep up with him.

Similarly, Shaak had also dealt with her own personal demons. In her case, these were bouts of jealousy from when other women were around Ranma, feelings of inadequacy when seeing Ranma in combat, something she had dealt with very early on in the relationship, and feelings of anger and loathing for the Sith, which she had often felt and battled through whenever a friend had fallen in this war.

Yaddle, Giiett, Vos in a way, and last but certainly not least the brave K'Kruhk, who willingly took the power of the Thought Bomb into himself to save the Jedi Temple and the rest of Coruscant. Each time, she had wanted to hate the Dark Side itself, to loathe the Sith for what they had done. Yet Shaak knew that to do so would be to fall into the trap of the Dark Side, as the ancient Sith Ghost of Exar Kun had attempted to make her do.

Now, as then, Shaak began to summon Force Light to her. Shaak's body glowed briefly, and the Dark Side assault on her mind dispelled slowly, like a fog of darkness trying to cling to her. *There will always be shadows, there will always be a Dark Side, but the light is truer, because without it, there would be no shadows. Only internal darkness, where nothing could remain. Promises of power do not matter to me. Promises of vengeance are hollow, as are thoughts of the future if I but had the power to strike down everything in front of me. I will build something in the future with Ranma. I will build with the Light Side and with the Force, not its meaningless shadow.*

For his part, Ranma felt the pressure on his mind, as if someone was trying to get through to him via the very limited connection he had very grudgingly created between the greater Force around him and his ki. However, like his two companions, the Dark Side did not find fertile ground within him. Thanks to that small connection, Ranma was a stone, keeping all of his emotions to himself, never sharing with the greater Force or being affected by it more than he wanted to.

Moreover, to put it bluntly, Ranma had never been the kind to feel anger or hate in any event.

Elsewhere, the Dark Side's whispers found more fertile ground.

Anakin felt it. He and his Master were leading the assault on the trio of Confederacy capital ships. By this point, the two dreadnoughts had closed and were now hammering at one another like gladiators, disdaining any kind of fancy movement, simply flipping occasionally to bring other quadrants of their shields to bear. The Lucrehulks had also closed, trying to force the Sun Destroyer to split its fire, while also providing as much defense against the Republic starfighters as they could, along with their accompanying vultures. Combined with the Confederacy dreadnaught, the Lucrehulk's own anti-ship fire was only okay, but it was keeping the Adventurous' shields from regenerating as they should.

Still, it was very clear the Mon Calamari design was up to the challenge, as none of the ship's shielding had fallen yet. Both Lucrehulks' shields' were flickering already, and their armor had been blown apart in places, guns silenced. The dreadnaught wasn't yet, but it was only a matter of time.

Kit and Anakin's ships flashed through this small battle like greased lightning, killing Vultures and hitting the capital ships whenever they could. Kit tried to run the overall battle as best he could, which meant his flying began to suffer a bit, and that his connection to the Force was wide open, so to speak, covering far more than just his personal role in the battle. This in turn meant he was more vulnerable to the Dark Side's assault.

But even so, like Ranma, Kit was not the one who had ever been truly attracted to the Dark Side. Even his tests to become a Knight had barely registered.

Life was too much **fun** to feel anger or hatred toward someone else and in his own words Kit would 'rather smile at the dawn, then growl and snarl at my fellow man.' "And I, who always prefer to see the fun in everything, cannot see anything to laugh about or laugh with the Dark Side."

But it was Anakin who was the main source of the Dark Side's attack among the Jedi in the small flotilla. The Chosen One, the vergence in the Force, which the Sith had created. If things had been different, if Ranma had never shown up in this universe, it would have been Anakin who seemingly would have been the one to truly decide the fate of everything, acting all the while in a role set to him, carefully written out for him, by Sidious.

Several times in his life before this Anakin had been faced with the Dark Side, been forced to deal with its blandishments. In addition, several times he had fallen to the Dark Side though his own arrogance. Now the Dark Side whispered to Skywalker. It showed him images of the future, images with him and Padme, of a future they could have together if only he was strong enough to force the Jedi order to allow him to create that connection, to force the rest of

the universe to obey him. If he didn't Padme would be forever out of reach, or if not, she would die in some fashion.

"Anakin," the Dark Side whispered, "you could use the Dark Side for good. Eradicate the slave trade. End the war on the Republic's terms, and then change the Republic so that the underlying issues of the war never happened. If only you had more power..."

The images buffeted Anakin, causing his own flying to falter, and for his Master to call out to him through the coms. They were so real, so intense that the emotions they evoked threatened to overwhelm Anakin.

And yet at the same time, Anakin had grown with each challenge, even those he had failed. And with each challenge survived, Anakin's resistance to the Dark Side had grown, his knowledge of its falseness had grown. Gathering his will, Anakin pushed back against the Dark Side, yelling out his contempt for it, unheard by any in his cockpit. "Never! Your visions are a lie, your promises are nothing! I will build a future for myself, with Padme and I will not build it on lies, hatred or fear! I know what I am. I am a Jedi! And I will not yield!"

The Dark Side retreated from Anakin, feeling almost furious to Anakin's senses. Stymied by the rest of the Jedi in the flotilla, the Dark Side reached out to what it assumed would be even easier targets. The two younglings aboard the Wild Blade.

There, it did indeed find fertile ground. She had dealt with her guilt about feeling Master Yaddle during what her Master and Ranma called Wedding Disaster Number Two for some reason, she still felt that guilt occasionally, that self-loathing, that self-hatred. And as many a fallen Jedi had learned; self-hatred was just as easy a way to fall to the Dark Side as hatred for your fellow man.

Then there was the guilt about Master Vos. While it was extremely childish of her, Ahsoka occasionally thought that she should have been able to see that there was something wrong with him. But instead, Ahsoka had actually quite liked him when he had come by their training area. That obviously made it all the worse when he showed he was a traitor to the Jedi Order, one that had been long waiting a chance to turn on them, one that had already done quite a lot of damage to the Order. Again, Ahsoka had mostly dealt with that feeling, but some guilt still lingered within her.

Talli felt much the same, and unlike Ahsoka, she still was dealing with the few bits of self-loathing for simply not being strong enough in the Force. The power the Dark Side promised her was incredibly enticing. But its images of how she should deal with the other younglings who had become padawans before her, those whose abilities in the Force had made her jealous all the while, was a step too far. The images the Dark Side showed her of Talli standing over their bleeding broken bodies, or simply sliced into pieces with a lightsaber bodies, were too much. She wanted to beat them, but Talli wanted to beat them by becoming a Jedi.

That strange image that Talli knew she had never imagined was enough to make Talli realize that this was a real attack on their minds from the Dark Side.

She reached over and grabbed Ahsoka's wrist, squeezing briefly using only one hand to continue firing the main weapons into a cluster of vultures that were coming at them. Only two of them were hit, but one capital ship class ion cannon was more than enough to overwhelm a vulture fighters shielding and the next second the engines on both ships died and began to tumble through space.

The Wild Blade had been able to leave the strange planet's atmosphere since leaving behind its original pilot and owners.

"It's an attack! Try to pull back away from the Force, neither of us is strong enough to beat off this Dark Side attack. We have to hunker down!" Talli shouted, causing both Kiara and Fabian to turn to stare at her and then Ahsoka in worry.

Although the metaphor needed quite a bit of work, Ahsoka understood her friend's point. Grimacing, she slowly pulled away, cutting off her connection to the Force for now. That went against everything the Jedi stood for to do so, but Master Shaak had taught her to do this before just in case. Instead of concentrating on the Force as a whole, Ahsoka decided to follow Ranma's suggestion in reverse. She concentrated on, Talli's presence in the Force, pushing everything else aside including her Battle Precognition. In doing this, she limited the Force's ability to influence her.

This cost the Wild Blade in the next few moments. More of the concussion missiles and laser shots landed. Nevertheless, with Talli doing the same, the two of them were safe from the corruption of the Dark Side for now.

Back on the planet, Ranma, Shaak and Yoda were covering as many as 4 miles for every minute that passed, so fast were they moving. Yoda kept directing them, trying to cut off the Dark Side Users but already knowing they would be too late. Already, they were close to the other... presences? That word simply seemed a little too small for what he was feeling through the Force.

This was something he voiced now as they came to the top of a crest. Halting, he stared ahead at them and what looked like a large valley into which several rivers ran. "Force Fonts, three of them there are here. Unifying, Light, Dark Side they are. A family almost I sense them to be. Creating the Force, all of them are. In different colors they are."

He then looked over at Ranma and Shaak, who had halted in place alongside them for a moment. "Ancient they are, ancient beyond recognition. Locked in a contest of influence, willpower the two sides have been."

“The Light and the Dark I’m presuming?” Ranma asked. “It isn’t exactly a leap of logic, though the whole creating the Force Thing is new, since I am assuming ya mean more than a normal person like me creating Living Force.”

Yoda snorted at that, and ignored Ranma’s last sentence as he answered. “Yes. Modifying influence, the third source, the Unifying Force is. Yet also, commanding. Sense I do, from the Dark Side frustration, a desire to leave.”

“Whereas the Light Side User is tranquil, almost good-natured and currently ebullient,” Shaak added, staring in the direction they had been going. “I do not think we understand everything that is going on here. However, they do not seem to me only to be Force Fonts, creating insane amounts of their chosen type of Force in some fashion. Rather, they seem almost like... Avatars, perhaps? But regardless, the Light Side of the Force is extremely happy we are here. I do not get that impression from the Unifying Force, but feeling out the Unifying Forces feelings towards me should be impossible anyway considering the very nature of the Unifying Force itself.”

Yoda grunted in agreement, and then gestured them to get moving once more. “Move! Wasted enough time we have. Catch the Sith we must.”

OOOOOO

Well ahead of the Jedi, the Sith had decided not to go straight down into the large valley. Instead, they had skirted around it, which added to their time towards their ultimate destination, but both of them sensed that actually meeting whatever being was manipulating the Unifying Force on this planet, much less the Light Side, would end very poorly for them. For a time as they trekked across the hills, they were somewhat blind to the larger picture that the Jedi Masters had felt. It was only as they reached the halfway point around the valley that Tyranus began to understand.

Telling his apprentice what Yoda would describe to Ranma and Shaak not twenty minutes later, he finished with, “And so I believe that we are not here after a single Dark Side User, or to tip the balance here alone. No, that is a secondary mission. Our primary one, I think, will be to allow this avatar of the Dark Side to leave with us. With a creature who is made from the Dark Side, the Veil will be child’s play to reform, especially if we can kill the Light Side Avatar at the same time.”

“Alone, the Unifying Force is not strong enough to hold back the Dark Side,” Diabolus answered, seeing the point instantly.

Her eyes glowed yellow for a brief moment, as the energies of the Dark Side threatened to overwhelm her self-control. But self-control was such a mantra of the Tyranus school of the Sith that Diabolus was able to slowly regain control.

Her Master was also dealing with these flashes of hatred or rage, anger and madness, the worst affliction that could come to a user of the Dark Side. The feelings were accompanied by images pounding into their heads, bringing with them a certain dark joy, showing them images of destruction, their enemies writhing in agony or running in fear. And both Sith lapped them up like a cat faced with liquid catnip.

But like his apprentice, Tyranus knew that the true enemy of the Dark Side wasn't the Light Side so much as internal division, and, more importantly, a personal lack of direction, of control. He refused to allow himself to fall into the same trap as so many other Dark Side users had, of becoming simple, limited berserkers, becoming merely blunt objects to be wielded by those with more intelligence.

"Using the Dark Side I gain strength, but in concentration and control, I gain power, through power I will change the universe," he murmured, and then pushed on quickly.

Down in the valley, peeking out from underneath a fog bank was what looked like a large temple of some kind. It didn't match any architecture that either of them had ever seen before. It was a massive thing, with some sign of light streaming out from a few windows and the entryway, an open V-shaped entry leading deeper into the temple but that was all they could or cared to see at this point.

Because their true target was ahead of them.

This was a fortress, one made to keep out anyone who came calling, peaceable or otherwise, large, imposing, with what looked like a spire of basalt rock jutting out of the mountains around the valley. It gleamed in the Dark Side and seemed to absorb the strange light that came from the fog all around them on this world. Several windows were cut out near the top, although there was no entryway. Instead a series of small, man-sized holes led deeper, or perhaps not. It was impossible to tell as they closed, but Tyranus sensed there was only one way deeper into the fortress, and even that would be guarded in some fashion. *Strength, fury and deception, all in one.*

And as they closed, the two Dark Side users could see a balcony set on one side of the edifice. There a figure stood, one who leaped towards them landing in front of the two Sith so abruptly and from so far away both Sith twitched, backing away quickly.

The man who stared at them was tall, at least seven feet tall, looking like a cross between an ascetic and a berserker, such was the thinness of his cheekbones and the intense glare on his face. His eyes were tiny red pinpricks encompassing lifetimes of fury. It was also pasty white, as if the guy had never seen a real sun, let alone felt its rays. His face was also marked by red tattoos in the form of long slash marks over his bald pate and down from his eyes, making it look as if he was crying a river of blood.

Seeming not to notice, the being nodded grimly to the two Sith and as he did, power surged through them, the Dark Side within this figure reaching out to them, empowering the Sith further. Yet still, even with the accompanying feelings of anger, hatred and the need for violence neither Sith lost themselves.

This other creature nodded at them, then gestured them down towards the valley. "Good. I don't need to deal with berserkers right now. Come! I will explain as we go, we have no time. Your droids are battling to slow your pursuers even now. The large bulk of your army has been completely bypassed!" the being added in a sneer, before seeming to calm down, going on in an angrier but almost desperate tone. "We are running out of time for you to do what I need you two to do. I need you to free me! To finally break the balance and let the Dark Side emerge victorious!"

Neither Sith answered, simply nodding as that matched what they had sensed through the Force before this. Right now, most of their attention was on keeping their sense of selves as the Dark Side flowed through them with such force it threatened to carry their consciousness away.

If Sidious had been there, perhaps he would've done a better job of containing the Dark Side energies, of making them his own. Perhaps he would have been able to command this creature, such was the power of the Dark Side he had gathered when combined with his will.

Neither Tyranus nor Diabolus had that amount of willpower...

"I am Brother. I am a member of the Family, the original Force users, the last of the first race to ever reach out and command the Force. Needless to say, in that time we have, each of us both stratified how we use the Force and become immensely powerful through it."

As the being continued to speak, his will slowly began to supplant the two remaining Siths. Tyranus tried to fight it, tried to see through the honeyed words, to push out the subtle influence invading his mind. Yet despite his best efforts, the being's seemingly honeyed words wove their way through his mind. Slowly Tyranus's willpower faded, the being's Dark Side energies seeping into his being along with his words.

"What I have called you here to do, what we must do in order to not only turn the tide against Father and Sister but break their power forever, is to get your hands on a dagger. The Dagger of Mortis, it is an ancient creation Father used to keep me in line. I cannot lift it from its altar, but you can! It is the only thing capable of killing one of us. Use the dagger to stab Father, and the balance of the Force will be shattered, never to return. Without him, my sister will lack the strength to try and fight me and I can finally escape this world!"

There were quite a few things that struck Tyranus as wrong about this story. Or not so much wrong as off. As if, Son was leaving out significant portions of it. But all he could do right now was nod. Even as a rapidly shrinking portion of his mind continued to fight the being's

influence, Tyranus 'knew' that helping Brother simply seemed the best option not only for now, but into the future, if they wished to do anything to turn the tide against the Jedi.

Beside him, Diabolus also nodded, her mind awash with ideas of vengeance on the Jedi, of slaughtering them all. Unlike her Master, she couldn't even fight back, so subtle was the influence. She retained her mind, but her thoughts, her goals were no longer Diabolus' own. Brother had completely dominated her mind a mere few seconds into his small speech.

Now Brother smiled. "Come, we go to change the universe!"

OOOOOOO

Ranma ducked behind a boulder, then flipped himself up and over it, lashing out with a kick, the Magna Guard he was currently targeting barely got his staff up in time to block. The vibro-staff's shaft broke at the point of impact, but the vibroblades at both ends still worked, and the droid attempted to bring them to bear on Ranma, forcing them to dodge backwards a few times, then take a blow on the arm, before returning a blow that shattered the droid's chest, sending bits and pieces everywhere. This was not the time to hold back, and the vibro-weapons were no more dangerous to Ranma than an unenhanced lightsaber. They stung a little, but that was about it.

Nearby, HK dueled with several dozen commando droids. The commando droids had a good rhythm going, popping in and out of cover as if all of them were controlled by one mind and one will, firing from all around the quartet randomly. But HK, or more appropriately his targeting system was up to the task. Two of them had already fallen, to headshots from his rifle, which turned their heads to ash, and several Magna Guard who had attempted to close with him had also met their fate at the hands of his claws or gyro-rockets.

But even so, Ranma and HK were almost a sideshow. With the Force empowering them further than either had ever felt before, Shaak and Yoda were far more liberal in their usage of Force powers than either of them would normally be in a fight. The strange crystalline trees were uprooted, torn out of the ground and hurled into droids, proving that whatever they looked like, they were indeed made plant matter. Rocks and boulders were used to smash the droids from everyone, and more than once, blaster bolts halted in midair as Yoda gestured at them, then flipped the small doubts of plasma back sending them rocketing into the droids who had fired them.

The B2 super battle droid were tough opponents, with heavy weapons and armor. Despite that, they couldn't stand having their chests caved in so hard their front chassis touched their back chassis or being smashed between multi-ton rocks, or the relatively gentle touch of the lightsabers that three out of the four combatants were using.

Ranma cut down another Magna Guard, then hurled his light pike into the side of a super battle droid, watching the plasma blade sliced cleanly into the giant droid until it hit

something vital, which exploded a second later. The explosion hurled his light pike through the air. Ranma caught it easily, twirling it around and activating the other end, blocking another Magna Guard's attack.

An instant later, Shaak's lightsaber bisected the droid from crotch to top even as Shaak used a Force Push to hurl another super droid so hard into its fellow that both of their bodies bent and warped upon impact, not just the surface armor but the internal joints and bones too. They fell to the ground, and Yoda was on them, slicing them to pieces with his lightsaber before blocking it parrying and then Force Pushing plasma bolts away from him back towards the droid commandos.

The droid commandos were beginning to pull back and away, lobbing grenades at them. Distracted as they were, the Jedi still sensed them coming, and grabbed them out of the air, tossing them back. But like the Magna Guard, the commandos were able to learn as they fought. All of them had already left their former positions again, falling back further.

"Delaying us, they are trying to. Allow this, we cannot. Move on, we must," Yoda ordered.

"That's fine by me, but they've got a lot of explosives, and there is no doubt more of the commando droids out there. We need to be aware of that," Ranma warned. He didn't feel the same urgency that the Jedi very obviously felt, but he understood they were pressed for time for some reason.

"We'll be counting on you to give us some cover fire as we keep moving forward, HK. Take out any droid you see with extreme prejudice," Shaak ordered.

"Affronted response: mistress, you speak as if I need such a command, or if there is indeed any other way to deal with pathetic examples of droid kind like these," HK grumbled, hefting his blaster rifle to his shoulder again, his other hand, the large claw, clenching and unclenching.

They were indeed ambushed a few times, and at one point, they dealt with a dead drop, a large portion of the mountain above them having been inundated with explosives to create an avalanche several hundred yards wide. Once more, the sheer power of the Force flowing from this planet into Yoda and Shaak came into play. They were able to stall the falling rocks for just long enough for the three of them to get away, with HK on the other side of the avalanche.

He persevered, quickly using his jump jets to fly over the debris and land beside his Master and Mistress and the party continued.

Soon they entered the valley proper, and ahead of them in the center of the valley, where three of the rivers met before once again diverging stood a garden and a temple.

The sight of the garden caused Shaak to gasp in delight, and even Ranma paused, smiling. He wasn't one for parks or stuff that was overly controlled but this place was amazing.

Several vinelike bushes, a strange amalgamation between vine and bush, grew along the riverbanks, creating bridges across them in places. These were in turn spotted by other flowers, tiny flowers that seemed to float along on their own small wind currents. Flower bushes of various colors dotted the landscape, creating the first splash of real color beyond white gray and black they had seen. Several rocks had been painted as well or perhaps someone had used the Force to change their colors to also add splashes of red, green, and a light sky blue in sections.

Trees, real trees, not the strange local variety they'd seen elsewhere grew here as well. Some were extremely well cared for, their branches clipped and cut to resemble different images. Some were of people. In fact, one of them looked almost like Fay.

Others rose in all their wild glory in various places, untouched by further care. Arches dotted the landscape seemingly randomly, each of them different, each of them a work of art in terms of the construction or simply the form of the arch, the molding of them as if each of those arches had been constructed from a single rock, which rose out of the ground.

The garden seemed to complement the temple, but much like the strange small independent flowers that dotted the bridge vines, it was also very obviously separate from the temple. Ranma couldn't put his finger on why that was the case, perhaps it was just that none of the magnificent garden abutted directly on into the temple? All of it ended several yards away or perhaps it was just a strange feeling? He couldn't tell.

Nor did any of them, even Shaak, who longed to explore this garden further, have any time to gawk. Yoda pushed them on, racing even faster towards the temple structure. With HK again left behind them to deal with any droids that might be coming up behind them, the trio raced through the garden, being careful not to damage any of the plants, and into the temple, not even pausing to take in the architecture of it.

Inside they were met with a hallway. On either side were two small stairwells leading further up into the temple, no doubt leading to the wings of the temple that flared back from either side. Between them was a doorway that led into another room beyond. Originally, that door had been barred by a large stone door, but now that door had been shattered, the trio could hear shouting in the distance.

Grimacing, Ranma pushed ahead, pushing his ki into his legs for the first time that day. This let him gain a few yards on even the Force assisted Shaak and Yoda. As he went, Ranma switched from his light pike to a massive repeating blaster he kept in his item space. He hadn't bothered to use it during his battle with Sidious, which had become so close and so furious that he didn't have the time to. But now he did and as soon as Ranma stepped into the doorway, assessing the situation in a moment and fired at Tyranus, who he knew from seeing pictures of him.

The other woman also looked vaguely familiar, like Ranma had seen a picture of her before but the third attacker he didn't know. She was bald, with weird facial tattoos, although Ranma wasn't one to throw stones at someone's life choices like that... outside a fight anyway. In one hand she held a lightsaber, in her other a long dagger the size of her forearm, while she had a second lightsaber hilt on her belt. The blade of the dagger reminded Ranma of an Indian Katar from his old world, but the hilt was that of a normal dagger, if perhaps a bit small for the size of the blade. Regardless, his fire twitched to her next, forcing her to defend herself with her lightsaber as Tyranus already had, the bolts bouncing around the area.

Bald seemed to be an 'in thing' with Dark Side users today, since the unknown attacker was also bald, a snarl on his face as he turned the small, red lights that served as his eyes on Ranma and the two Jedi. "Give me the dagger, Diabolus!" he snarled. "I can fight better with it than you can."

Grimacing, the woman did so, tossing the dagger into the air, where it was pulled into the man's hands. Her other hand was instantly filled with the second lightsaber hilt from her belt, the blade appearing a moment later. Both blades were the shorter shoto style.

There were two other beings in the room as well. One, was an elderly man, who, had he been standing upright, would undoubtedly have been even taller than the bald man. He had a beard that reminded Ranma of the Chinese style, long and pointed, but that was about all Ranma could tell about him beyond the fact he was bleeding heavily from a wound in his side. Ranma could almost feel the Force slowly leaving him along with his blood.

Nevertheless, the bolts that would otherwise have hit him stopped in midair, redirecting into the floor around him. There was evidently life still in the old guy.

Pinned to the wall by a Force Push from Tyranus before Ranma's fire had disrupted his concentration was a woman. Ranma didn't have much time to note her features, and she was at the far end of the room in any event. But since the woman was tall as hell, at least a foot taller than Shaak and wearing what could loosely be described as summer bed wear in green and yellow, Ranma could tell her gender easily enough even as she slumped on the ground, having seemingly been cast aside before Ranma had arrived.

Her grin was also obvious, and her face, kindly but severe from what Ranma could tell, became visibly younger as she looked at him. "YES!! Ranma, get them away from Father, and I will try and heal him!"

"Easier said than done lady, but I'll try!" Ranma shouted back, his repeating blaster clicking on an empty canister. Tossing it aside, Ranma hurled a grenade forward from his weapons space, then crouched, letting the arriving Yoda and Shaak leap over him into the room, activating their light sabers attacking as one.

"You two hear that!?" Ranma asked as he charged forward under the leaping Jedi.

A Unified Force Push directed at Tyranus, the closest of the trio of Sith, Ranma was just going to assume the baldy was a Sith for now, was the only response he received, but that was enough. Having Grabbed the grenade out of the air with a Force Grab, Tyranus could only hurl it back towards Ranma before he was lifted off his feet and sent hurling back into the wall in the opposite corner from where the woman lay.

Ranma caught the unprimed grenade, stowing it in his weapons space again, then the dagger wielder was in his face, a wild, manic look in his narrow, pinched face. His eyes were tiny pinpricks of red and his teeth clenched in wrath. "RAAH!!"

By the time Tyranus got his feet under him, Yoda and Shaak had landed from their original leap and as she landed, Diabolus attacked Shaak, jumping into the air in turn, lashing out with her twin lightsabers. The Togrutan Jedi Master remained on her feet, moving swiftly from side to side and around, blocking, deflecting, attacking smoothly. She attempted to bring up Force Light, knowing how effective it was against Dark Side users, and having no need to conserve her power here.

But for some reason, it felt as if a greater power was pushing back at her, preventing her Force Light from appearing outside her body. The surprise of this nearly let Diabolus get in the first strike, but a last minute dodge let the lightsaber tip pass her stomach cleanly, searing away some of her robe from the heat but not hitting the flesh beneath.

The woman in the corner had been slowly trying to get to her feet and failing. Now she looked over at Shaak, shouting. "You will not be able to use Force Light here! My brother's influence is too strong."

"Good to know miss, thank you," Shaak drawled, knowing her lazy tone would act as a whip on Diabolus. *Never let it be said I refused to learn anything Ranma was willing to teach me. I just made his Smack Talk Technique or whatever he calls it my own.*

It worked, and Diabolus attacked with ever-increasing anger, giving Shaak the advantage with her mixed Makashi style.

Nearby, Tyranus' lightsaber flashed up to be blocked by the green blade of the aged Grand Master.

"A long time it has been, Sora Bulq. Changed much you have. For the better it has not been," Yoda said almost conversationally as he used the first strike to flip himself up through the air, then block two more blows from the first attacker, whipping his lightsaber down into a strike at Tyranus, who blocked it, then redirected a Force Push into the ground which cracked underneath him.

“The opinions of a foolish and weak Jedi do not matter at all to me!” Tyranus growled, a strange well of calm in the Dark Side. “You will fall here Master Yoda, and with you and the others here, the balance of the Force will forever be altered. The Sith will...”

That was as far as he got before Ranma got past the other one, closing and lashing out with a kick, using that to shoulder charge back into his original opponent, sending him flying. The man didn't look to have taken any damage from it but that was alright by Ranma. His goal was accomplished, further separating the three Sith. “Monologue or fight, don't do both, morons!”

Still in midair, Ranma found himself grabbed by a Force Choke, crushing his body. A ki pulse broke the grip, but it had allowed the bald Sith to close, and he slashed out swiftly with the dagger. The man was fast, faster than any opponent Ranma had fought bar Sidious before this, but Ranma dismissed his weapon as any kind of threat. It looked like a ceremonial dagger of some kind, a toy.

That was until the woman shrieked, “Don't let the Dagger cut you, Ranma!”

The familiar tone in her voice more than her warning made Ranma duck away, only taking a glancing stroke to the arm.

That was enough. The blade, which Ranma had dismissed, cut through his arm like a hot knife through butter, and with it was accompanied pain. A **lot** of pain, so much agony that it was almost as if Ranma's very soul had been attacked. “ARGGGHHHH!!!” Ranma shrieked in agony, stumbling back and nearly falling to his knees.

If not for his combat reflexes that would have ended him. Before the bald man or the nearby Diabolus, who had just leaped up and over Shaak again, could take advantage, he shifted around. A kick hammered out towards the woman who redirected herself midair air, her lightsaber still seeking Ranma. But the attack was too slow, and Ranma's own light pike was now in play, pulled out his energy space and blocking the strike.

Tyranus also was able to get by Yoda for a brief moment engaging Ranma along with the bald guy. When she tried to do the same, Diabolus found herself cut off by Shaak. For a few moments Shaak pressed her away from Ranma before the Sith responded with a Force Push that lashed out in every direction. This picked everyone up bar her allies and tried to hurl them away.

In response Yoda grounded himself, using the Force to make himself almost like a mountain that the Sith's Push broke upon. Shaak dodged almost entirely leaping up and clinging to the ceiling for a second, while the unknown local woman with the flowing taste in clothing did much the same as Yoda had.

In contrast, Ranma moved with it, flipping himself several times and landing along one wall, clinging there and looking down at his arm for a brief second. The reason for this was the fact that he couldn't feel his ki responding at all. The blade had seemingly done an injury to him that his ki couldn't recognize, or couldn't heal. Ranma wasn't certain which was worse, but either way he was bleeding now quite badly from a long, albeit not very deep, gash across the outer side of his forearm.

Luckily, his ki could still imbue him with vitality, which meant that the loss of blood didn't slow Ranma down. This was a good thing, as the knife wielder was after him, howling. Unlike before though, this time he was actually able to form words through his anger. "You! You bastard! Your very presence is an affront, ruining my plans, so many damned plans, so much that should have been! Skywalker, he should have been mine! The future, it should have belonged to the Dark Side!"

"I don't really know what you're talking about Skywalker being yours or your specific plans, but considering what I can follow from yer mad ramblings, I'm going to say good riddance, and basically ignore your shouting like you're a child throwing a tantrum," Ranma quipped, his light pike up and blocking the dagger. Whatever the dagger was made of was so thick the heat of the plasma blade didn't do anything to it, acting merely like any other blade.

The bald man shrieked in once more wordless fury, and tried to use a Force Choke, but Ranma again broke it with a ki pulse, and pushed the attack, forcing the man to concentrate more on his dagger work. He was however able to try to disrupt Ranma in the air with condensed but powerful Force Pushes, forcing Ranma to keep coming back down to the ground more often than he would have liked to. His one attempt at Sith Lightning though failed as Ranma's light pike battered it aside, and Ranma's punch nearly took the guy in the stomach. Even a glancing blow was more than enough to cause the man to grimace. It was very evident that while tough and imbued with the Dark Side to a point even Sidious hadn't been, the bald guy with the anger management issue hadn't gone through the Sith version of Ranma's toughness training.

His opponent was fast, quick, agile and besides his ability with active Force powers was creating a pressure all around them. It seemed to slow Ranma's movements as well as the two Jedi, almost like a continual Force Grab so subtle that Ranma's ki pulse couldn't break it as he had countless times before when facing Sith. He could practically spam Force Pushes and grabs, making Ranma pulse his ki out every few seconds. With the continued blood loss from the strike to his forearm, this was slowly but surely taking a toll.

Yet for all that, the bald man with the red dots for eyes lacked technique. It was as if he had spent all of his life exercising and doing calisthenics and practicing with a dummy or something rather than actually sparring against a trained opponent or learning actual combat techniques. He could throw a punch, but it wasn't a good one. He could throw a thrust, parry or dodge, but it was all telegraphed, all so easy for Ranma to predict.

Even with the pressure the man was exerting on Ranma and his Force skills, this gave Ranma the edge. He took another long cut to his side from the dagger, but was slowly pushing the other man back away from his companions, deeper into a corner.

In the center of the room, Master Yoda and Shaak were working together now, forming a Force Gestalt, bracing against the two Sith. While he had been a Jedi, Sora Bulq was a Master of the lightsaber, one of the greatest duelists in the Jedi Order. Falling had bestowed still more power upon him, more speed and a lot more experience in that the Sith always emphasized more combat training than even Guardians. It also gave him the normal Sith ability to somewhat disrupt or overwhelm a Jedi's Battle Precognition. Very few Jedi had ever been able to get used to the pressure the hatred and rage the Dark Side gave the Sith.

He pushed Yoda hard and Yoda was quickly being pushed on the defensive. No matter how hard he tried, his wild movements and use of Ataru could not break through Tyranus' defenses. Normally this would not have been the case, as Yoda was actually one of those few who could deal with the Sith version of Battle Precognition. It was the background pressure, the feeling of weight crushing down on him that the aged Jedi was having trouble dealing with.

Shaak meanwhile had found an opponent in the other lightsaber wielder that matched any Sith she'd fought previously. Diabolus was fast, agile, using a mix of several different styles, molded into the Sith equivalent of Jar'Kai, all aggression, movement and misdirection. The last was something Shaak had rarely seen in lightsaber duels, but despite that, Shaak did not fall for the misdirection, and her Mastery of a mixture of Soresu, Makashi and Shien quickly proved slightly superior in style.

But to Shaak's well-hidden astonishment the other woman was able to imbue herself with the Force to such a degree that she could match Shaak's raw physicality, built up to well beyond the norm by her time with Ranma. The first time she tried to punch the woman Diabolus simply took it, not even bothering to turn her head, and her twin lightsabers flashed into Shaak's side, causing her to grunt in pain even though they couldn't get through her training-reinforced body.

Shaak knew they would eventually if such strikes continued though. She didn't have Ranma's entire immunity to the heat of the lightsaber, after all, and eventually her body reinforcement could be overcome.

That would take quite a while though, and while the three Dark Side users fought as individuals, Yoda and Shaak fought as a unit. More than once Yoda or Shaak would block a blow meant for the other, and they kept on doing so, protecting not only themselves but also the tall woman and the old man occasionally. She had reached the even taller old man on the ground, and both Sith tried to attack her. The only one who didn't was the bald one, who was single-mindedly focusing on Ranma. Indeed, he had yet to attack anyone else.

But when they had burst out into this room, it'd been very obvious that he had been the one standing over the old man, taunting him even though Diabolus had been holding the dagger with the blood on it. Shaak wondered why that was, but couldn't spend more than a second to ponder it, and she was forced to dodge a strike to her head in the next instant, driving even that out of her mind.

Now well away from the others, Ranma and the tall bald guy were having their own personal fight. The man's continued and extremely quick uses of Force Push, Grab and Lightning kept Ranma off balance, but his lack of actual combat style eventually gave Ranma an opening. Ducking low instead of jumping up into the air, he kicked out, catching the attacker on the leg before he could shift his leg back out of range.

The strike deadened the leg from the thigh down so much that the bald man went to one knee. "ARGH!"

Ranma fell back into form then, leaping into the air and over a strike from the dagger. A Force Push hurled him into the ceiling, but he pulsed his ki again, breaking this assault. Then he fell, his light pike directed downwards in a strike.

His opponent rolled to the side, bringing his dagger up and intending to stab Ranma in the leg, his other hand crackling with lightning. But Ranma lashed out faster than he could create the lightning. A kick caught the bald man in the head, hurling him backwards and into the melee going on in the center of the room.

Seeing that, Yoda and Shaak took a chance. A joint Force Push grabbed at Tyranus, hurling him into the wall despite his best efforts to stop it, and both of them turned to engage Diabolus just as she was forced to dodge the body of the other Dark Side user.

Diabolus' twin lightsabers flashed in a defensive pattern, something she quickly fell into despite the fact that most Sith would've disdained any such stance. Both Jedi found themselves held in place but that was fine.

The next second, Diabolus gasped as Ranma's lightsaber took her in the back, a long slashing blow. He held the lightsaber there, burning through her durability, before Ranma turned around and blocked another blow from the man with the dagger.

Diabolus used her dodge to go on the attack forcing Yoda back, then switching, lashing out at Shaak with her lightsaber so fast Shaak couldn't dodge and took a blow on her forearm. Then Tyranus was back in the fight, Sith Lightning reaching out and forcing the unknown woman to defend herself while he attacked Yoda with his lightsaber.

But while that fight was still going on, the bald man had made another rookie mistake. He had overcommitted. Seeing this, Ranma pulled his light pike back into his energy pocket, causing the man facing him to stumble when his strike met with no resistance. Before he could

recover, Ranma's hands grabbed onto his wrist, twisting and with a roar, Ranma broke the man's wrist. A blow to the face shattered bone and hurled the man back through the open doorway unconscious and without his weapon.

That weapon flew into Tyranus' hands a second later, and then the Darth was on Ranma, forcing him back as a Force Push had hurled Yoda away to the back of the room. Two more strikes got through Ranma's defenses, and he was now a quite bloody mess, the wounds from that dagger not closing as they should. Tyranus' lightsaber was less threatening, but Ranma could now feel his ki starting to flow out of him, the numerous cuts causing him to fade.

Ranma launched a mini Moko at Tyranus, who negligently blocked with his lightsaber, but that pulled his arm out of position, blocking the dagger from striking at Ranma for a second. A second was all Ranma needed to once more bring out his light pike and thrust hard. Tyranus gasped as the plasma strike lanced into his chest, trying to heat up the skin around his stomach so much that his durability would fade with it.

Tyranus reacted but with a pair of Force Chokes, one grabbing at Ranma's throat and the other at his ankle, twisting and crushing. A Force Pulse broke both but also had Ranma start to feel even more unsteady.

Meanwhile, Diabolus was being overwhelmed. Numerous strikes had gotten through her defenses, every Force trick she tried was matched by her two opponents, Yoda having moved to join Shaak. And now, Shaak used a trick she'd learned from Ranma. The next strike she blocked, she struck harder than normal, then, instead of aiming at her opponent's lightsaber for the follow on strike, she aimed down at the hand holding the lightsaber. Her blade skittered along the back of Diabolus' hand before intercepting the tip of the lightsaber.

And unlike Diabolus' body, her lightsaber had not gone through any kind of special hardening treatment. The top of it sputtered out as Shaak's lightsaber sliced clean through it, the small battery within the lightsaber exploding a second later due to feedback.

Yoda gestured and hurled the stunned Diabolus back into her Master, and then leapt up and over them, his lightsaber fleshing down. Tyranus blocked, falling into a defensive stance, and then lashing out with Force Lightning up at Yoda, who deflected the Force Lightning into the ceiling.

"Use Force Light!" the woman shouted, nearly finished healing the old man from the stab wound to the side he had taken before Ranma and the others arrived. "My brother's influence faded with his consciousness!"

At that, both Sith paled, but before they could retreat or attempt to escape again, Shaak was between them and the open doorway, and from within her, a white light blazed.

Both Sith stumbled, their connection to the Dark Side and the Force in general becoming weaker before fading out entirely as the Force Light gathered strength, the woman adding her own light to Shaak's. This let their hurts and injuries to slow them down still more, until the two Sith were merely mortal once more.

"No! No!" Tyranus shouted, his self-control finally fraying as the reality of the fact they had lost filled him.

A blow took Tyranus in the thigh. He tried to shift and dodge away, his own lightsaber fleshing up towards Ranma's midriff, but Ranma interposed his staff, twisting his light pike in his hands, allowing the strike to hit a specific spot on the light pike. The Cortosis armor there caused the lightsaber to fizzle out. And then Shaak's lightsaber stabbed forward, catching Tyranus through the eye.

Diabolus screamed in fury as her Master stumbled back, falling to knees as his eye and then his brain had been stabbed clean through by Shaak's lightsaber. However, against all three of her attackers and further weakened by the Force Light, the former Witch of Dathomir could not prevail. Her end came swiftly, as her one remaining lightsaber was caught out of position by Ranma's blade, held there as Yoda leapt up behind her, his lightsaber flashing into the side and back of her neck.

She'd taken so many lightsaber blows prior to this that her durability to the heat of the blades had faded to back into normality. A second later, Darth Diabolus' head came off of her shoulders, rolling away into a corner.

For a moment, the room was silent bar the heavy breathing of the combatants and the pained grunting from the overly tall man with the China-style beard. Ranma looked around at his companions, taking stock of their injuries. The unknown woman seemed to have been choked at some point, Ranma could see several bruises around her neck and down to her collarbone. Shaak's leg was badly bruised from thigh down to her knee, and her face was also a little heat seared, but it was clear her durability training had saved her from more.

Yoda could not say the same. His arm hung limply at his side and he was very obviously limping. He'd taken no lightsaber strikes, but Tyranus had smashed him against the ceiling and wall several times.

All this meant that with his numerous cuts and the bleeding he'd been doing all over the place, Ranma had come through the most wounded. *Right, best to make certain asshole number three days down.*

Grimly, Ranma picked up his light pike, and moved towards the doorway and the unconscious form of the bald Sith. "Don't worry, this'll just take a moment," he said in a surprisingly grim tone for Ranma, "and then one of you can tell us why the fuck those two Sith came here and what the hell was going on."

“W, wait,” said a crackling, ancient voice, and Ranma, somewhat involuntarily turned to find the older man, the one with the magnificent beard standing upright. He was still bleeding from his side, but it been patched at least, and he seemed no longer any danger of dying. Yet his eyes were locked on Ranma, and although there was a look of distaste on his face as he addressed the martial artist, the being’s words and gaze seemed to freeze Ranma in place. “Killing my son will merely allow him to merge with the Force. That is the last thing anyone wants. Further, he has been beaten. That is enough, let the balance resume itself.”

Grumbling a little at that, Ranma looked over at the too-tall old guy, cocking his head. “You agree with the old man?”

“Eh, perhaps not for the reasons he does, but I believe Brother should be allowed to live. For all of his love of hatred and destruction, he is still my brother.” The woman smiled then, stepping back and away from the old man and moving towards Ranma, her hands outstretched and glowing now with concentrated Force Light. “Besides, the beating you gave him will surely stick for a few centuries. Good grief, you didn’t even give him enough time to transform!”

“Transform?” Ranma asked with Shaak and Yoda also looking interested.

“Both of us are able to transform. I can transform into a griffon and my brother a massive gargoyle. Such transformations take time. Brother might have thought of it after his initial rush of anger passed, but you never gave him time do so.” She touched Ranma’s forearm gingerly, her Force Light bringing a soothing heat with it that seemed to push back at the chill that had been slowly seeping into Ranma’s body from the various cuts he had taken from the dagger. “Never, not once, has my brother ever been beaten so badly. Yes, I think that will stick with him for a good few centuries.”

She glanced up at Ranma, whispering, “And you and I both know you have a few tricks up your sleeve that might be applicable to him, right?”

Ranma grimaced as the heat from the woman’s touch brought back the pain of his wounds. Yet at her touch, the pain faded, and the wounds very, very slowly began to knit themselves together. As they did, it was as if something had been banished from the wounds, which kept them from healing, not the Dark Side, or any kind of corruption like that but something from the Force itself. Or at least he thought so anyway.

Shaking his head at that, Ranma glanced over to the still unconscious bald guy. “What exactly are you talking about? I mean I could break his arms for him, do it in such a way that they could never be healed properly but I don’t think you’re talking about that, are you?”

“So bloodthirsty. I’m talking about your Weakness Touch, whatever it is, you oaf,” she chided gently, before looking over at Shaak, a small but noticeable blush suffusing her pale features. “I would’ve thought the downtime you two had on the living planet would’ve taken the edge off? Am I missing something, why is he so tense?”

Shaak blushed faintly, feeling as if she had been an unwitting partner to perhaps corrupt someone who should have remained innocent of such matters. "I rather think that Ranma and my general tiredness of this war and the Sith in general should be easily understandable."

"A Sith, he was not. A Dark Side user, older by far than that Order he was. Older by far than many suns, these two are," Yoda intoned, staring shrewdly up at the giant old man. At more than eight feet, he towered over Shaak and Ranma, let alone Yoda. Yet for all of that, the elderly fellow was more emaciated than fit, more stooped than tall. There was a certain pride to him, a certain gravity to his looks and his gaze, which Ranma had felt a moment ago. But it was very obvious that the years, the centuries perhaps, had begun to weigh on him just as it had Yoda, who looked back at him, unafraid.

"He was not. My Son and my Daughter and I are far older than even the earliest records of the Jedi," the old man intoned. "We've lived here for millennia now, the Dark Side of Son, the Light Side of Daughter and myself, keeping the balance."

"Keeping the balance? Here on this planet or overall? Because let me tell you, if it is overall, you have done a piss poor job of that," Ranma said bluntly, causing the Daughter to giggling a bit, once more transforming her features into that of a much younger woman. "And if you're going to give us your history, can we at least get some names? I've been calling you bald guy, old guy and blondie in my head."

"And how much worse would it have been if a being such as my Son could have escaped, could've worked with the Sith or commanded them? A being who has nigh on limit this power within the Force?" Father said tartly. "As for our names, we have long since forgotten our original names. I am simply Father, the bald one as you put it is Son and this is Daughter."

Ranma conceded the point with a grunt, and finished with using the Weakness point on Son (and what kind of stupid shit was that?) moved over, picking up the dagger from where Tyranus had dropped it. Daughter grimaced as he did, then watched wide-eyed as Ranma very carefully set it into one of the walls, where it slid like a hot knife through butter, and then kicked the side of the handle, breaking the blade. "I'm getting the impression that imagination wasn't exactly encouraged among your people whatever they were. Surely it could've come up with something else to call one another, let alone yourselves."

While Shaak looked as if she agreed with Ranma, Yoda harrumphed, gesturing Ranma to silence. "Enough banter. Know the reasoning behind this planet I would, know your pasts I would, why called here was the Sith? Why in turn were we called?"

"That is an ancient tale. First, you must understand, I have attempted to keep the peace between my Son and Daughter for far, far longer than the Jedi go back, far longer than the Republic or any of its current constituents can remember. But I am getting old. My son and Daughter knew this, and I hit upon a plan. I allowed my son to help the Sith create a vengeance in

the Force, Anakin Skywalker. But then I manipulated the Force to allow him to be found by the Jedi rather than the Sith first.”

“The Dark Side and the Sith however were also able to manipulate events and Anakin in particular,” the Daughter began.

But she was interrupted by Yoda, shaking his head. “The beginning this is not. Start at the beginning you should. Unless take the blame for the constant warfare of Dark Side and the Force you do?”

“No. The Force was around far longer than we were. I suppose you could say we were just its first disciples. We can manipulate the Force in ways that no one else can, both outside our bodies and within. All of us can shape change, manipulate our very atoms through the Force.”

“Then why don’t you just change your body to a younger guy’s?” Ranma interrupted, asking what was in his mind a very pertinent question. He knew full well what even having sufficient amounts of Living Force could do to someone’s life expectancy. *And I’ve seen Dooku is younger now than he was when we met. If Dooku can do it, this old guy and I refuse to call him Father, even in my own head it just sounds wrong, certainly should be able to.*

“Do you think I have not done so over the time I have spent here? I am **tired!**” the old man barked, the Force around them suddenly becoming heavy. “Not of body but of spirit. I told you I have been keeping the peace between my Daughter and Son. Do you think it has been an easy task? And you just destroyed the one object I had that could keep them both in line,” the old man growled, pointing at the dagger. He closed his eyes then, gesturing both pieces to him. As the others watched, they flowed into one another, as if they were mere images made of water.

When it finished, the old man was holding the same dagger as before, and he turned away, heading towards the small altar where it had been left. He seemed to work at something on the dagger for a moment, the dagger thrumming in his hand, before he slid it into its container on the altar. That done, he turned back to the others.

“That at least has been set right. But I had hoped that Skywalker would come to replace me here. A vengeance in the Force like him, created by the Dark Side but steeped in the Light Side and trained in the Unifying Force, it would’ve been a perfect match.”

Shaak and Ranma both laughed, and Yoda shook his head slightly, saying aloud that thinking Anakin of all people would keep the peace was about as funny as Ranma attempting to keep his mouth shut. This set Shaak to laughing again and Daughter joined her.

Father stared at them, then slowly shook his head from side to side. “There must be balance.”

“There isn’t, and there won’t be. Let chaos reign in the Force, my dude,” Ranma said only half-joking. “You really haven’t done that good a job of keeping this balance regardless, I’d give up on that particular ghost y’know?”

“Enough. Still, like to know the full tale I would,” Yoda grumbled, slowly making his way over towards the old man.

The two of them locked gazes for a moment, and after a second, the ancient humanoid nodded. “In the early days, we were alone, but as more sentient beings began to appear, races evolving over time on hundreds of worlds, we knew that eventually others would arise who could use the power of the Force. By that point, my son had... delved deep into the dark side.”

Yoda frowned slightly. *The truth, he is not forthcoming with. Trying to hide things he is. Or, forgotten things he has over the millennia?* Regardless, it was very clear that whatever the story behind these three work, Yoda was not going to get it from the three themselves.

“He’d come to love the power of destruction, the power of hate and anger, of controlling others, manipulating them through their own ins and out. At the same time, my Daughter had become what she is now, the embodiment of the Light Side of the Force, of nurture, love, creation. And when Son chose to destroy, she rose to defend, causing yet more destruction in the doing.”

“Embodiment? Or conduit? Or as I use the term earlier, an avatar of the Light Side?” Shaak asked, frowning slightly.

“I suppose you could call all of us avatars. The Light Side of the Force existed before I did, and it will exist after I am gone. Yet I can manipulate it, control it to a degree that no one else ever will. I can call upon its powers from here to the far side of the galaxy, further than any Jedi or Sith ever has reached. My brother could do the same with the Dark Side. It was he who helped the Sith create the Veil of the Dark Side, as he gained power from their manipulations of the Republic. Without him, the Veil could never have been created, nor could it have sustained itself over such a wide area.”

“And as my father said, he devised a scheme. A scheme to use the Sith’s arrogance against them, to create the vergence in the Force, the chosen one who would restore balance, and eventually perhaps take Father’s place. I was willing to go along with that for a time, seeing it as the best chance we had. Daughter then grinned impishly. “But then, I sensed you. I sensed your leaving your own dimension, and I sensed within you the chaotic morass of millions of possibilities, possibilities that I had never felt before!”

Daughter laughed then, a tinkling of bells, while the old man simply harrumphed, looking just as annoyed as Daughter was overjoyed. “Life is chaos, chaos leads to creation, growth and passion and you were the greatest Chaotic Locus we have ever sensed!”

“You changed so much, changed them in small ways and in large ways, that the future is so uncertain even I could not discern it. You ruined Brother’s plans, not just for Anakin, but for the Sith in general. He had essentially pushed his plan forward so much that Anakin was the only way Father and I could have stopped it, the only fulcrum remaining. And then suddenly you arrived and everything is topsy-turvy!”

The blonde woman waved her hand airily. “Oh, I helped that along, quite a bit, really. I knew the moment you appeared that you were a better shot at defeating Brother once and for all than Anakin could ever be. And so I acted on my own. I normally don’t do that, I normally act with Father away from this planet. But this time, the chance was just too good to pass up, so I went against his desires and helped a Chaotic Locus become even more effective than you could have been otherwise.”

Father growled a bit, looking angry and staring between his Daughter and Ranma. It was very easily evident that he did not appreciate the sheer chaos that had engulfed the Force of late and blamed Ranma for it.

Ranma ignored him. Instead, his eyes narrowed slightly, and he pointed at Daughter. “Let me get this straight. You’re claiming to be an avatar of the Light Side of the Force right? And you have manipulated me since I arrived in this dimension?”

Seeing her husband’s look, Shaak backed away very slightly, beginning to smile. *This could be quite good.*

“Yes! I freely admit it,” Daughter laughed. “But really, do you think I manipulated you into anything that you wouldn’t have otherwise done?”

“Several times you manipulated me into things I would’ve done in hindsight I guess, that doesn’t really matter. The point is, I am not a toy and I made a promise to myself and Shaak,” Ranma answered, suddenly grinning all teeth at the blonde woman.

She frowned at that, then began to back away rapidly, her hands starting to glow with pink and yellow energy. “Wh, what are you... oh no... no you don’t!”

Daughter was too slow. Ranma had already leapt forward, grabbing her outstretched arm before she could get away. She tried to fight, tried to activate her powers, but Ranma simply used his greater strength, and fell back onto his rear, sitting there crossed leg, pulling her down across his knees.

Father looked at this in some confusion, wondering what was going on, then his eyes widened and he began to smile. Daughter’s sudden breaking of their plan, the fact that she had backed the creation of so much chaos and what he thought of as anarchy within the Force had caused him no end of headaches. Indeed, the lack of true balance had weakened him, in point of fact, severely.

That balance was slowly resolving itself, but it wasn't a **solid** balance, one of stasis as he had always hoped it would become, with all three sides eternally equal. Rather, it was a seesawing thing, with segments of the galaxy where the Light Side was dominant and others the Dark Side. Very rarely was there true cosmic balance, as he had hoped for so long there would be once Anakin, the Vergence was here to help him maintain it.

But now, seeing his Daughter getting her just desserts, the old man only had one thing to say. "Now this, she had coming."

OOOOOOO

Of course, there were a lot more questions to be asked of Daughter and Father. Thanks to the beating Ranma had given him, Son remained unconscious for several days after the final confrontation with the Sith, letting them ask those questions in peace. Well, Yoda stayed, speaking with the father for long periods of time. Ranma aided by HK and the returned Wild Blade slaughtered the droid army the Sith had left behind.

Daughter did not readily forgive Ranma for his manhandling of her, and continually blushed and backed away from him whenever he was around, but got along well enough with Shaak and with the other Jedi as they arrived. She warned them all, however, that once they left Mortis, which was the name of the planet, none of them would remember Daughter, Father or Brother. "That is an ancient Force trick set into the planet and the monoliths. Once you pass through the other way, you will not remember anything of this planet or us. You will only understand that it was powerful in the Force, and the Sith were here to free one of their own. Everything else will be as if a shadowy dream, quickly forgotten."

"Why is that?" Shaak asked respectfully. She was always respectful to Daughter as they talked, very deliberately trying to set her at ease after Ranma's manhandling, even though Shaak did in a small way agree with Ranma's actions. And she wasn't blind to the fact that Daughter blushed just as much as she flinched when she looked at Ranma.

"While my Brother's powers have been diminished greatly, he will eventually again try to reach out and find someone who can free him from our prison." Shaak looked at her sharply, and Daughter shrugged her shoulders. "I know that Mortis is a prison. But in staying here I serve the Force as a whole throughout the galaxy and the Light Side. For if I leave, Brother can leave as well. But that does not mean it is any less of a cage. I have just made myself comfortable with it whereas it has always chafed Brother."

Shaak nodded at that, although she was still wondering about some of the contradictions in the Family's story. Were they truly embodiments of the Force, created by it somehow? Or were they simply super powerful Force users...with admittedly very limited combat experience? To be honest, Shaak had thought this final battle would make the worst fight she'd ever had before seem tame. What had occurred was much less dangerous, in her opinion.

Or were they in fact the source of the Force in some fashion, the catalyst, which created it in the first place and its myriad forms? Shaak didn't know, and frankly didn't think that the family knew either. Not after so many millennia.

"Better to contain our little wars here," Daughter went on, unaware of Shaak's inner thoughts. "So any knowledge of us would make my Brother's task of luring people able to help him escape that much easier. Such is my father's decree at any rate, and in this I have to agree with him." She rubbed her rear absentmindedly, glaring over at Ranma, yet to Shaak the look was badly degraded by the way she was biting her lip. "And it has to be said, that visitors can bring much irritation with them even with the best of intentions."

Ranma rolled his eyes, but didn't respond further to that one. The walk through the gardens continued, with both Shaak and Ranma telling the embodiment of the Light Side if they were to believe her words, some of their adventures. She could only feel them so much, direct their actions to a certain degree, which did not equate to actually seeing those actions in first person, or the environments that they occurred in.

And despite her earlier words, Daughter too longed to leave this planet one day. But even weakened thanks to Ranma's use of his ultimate weakness moxibustion point, the Brother would one day regain his full power in the Dark Side, and she would need to be there to battle him, just like Father would need to be there to restrain them both and try to keep the peace.

The day after their confrontation with the Sith the trio's time on Mortis ended abruptly. The father, with Yoda beside him, walked up to where Daughter, Ranma and Shaak were sitting in the garden talking about fish of all things. When he had their attention, the large old man gestured them to the sky. "It is time for you to leave. My son will eventually recover today, and I would rather you'll be gone rather than become an object for his ire."

Ranma shrugged his shoulders. "If the guy wants another beating, that's fine by me. But you're right, this place is kind of boring. No offense Daughter, your garden is amazing, but gardens alone does not make a life for me."

Daughter grinned at him, nodding her head understanding that Ranma wanted to explore, and did not want to stop him from doing so. Indeed, she was eagerly looking forward to once more living vicariously through him and through Shaak again. *In that and perhaps in other ways...*

She shook that thought off, trying hard not to let it show, but she knew from the wave of disapproval she felt from him, her Father understood her hidden thoughts. Still, with the war slowly winding down in many ways, Ranma and his wife would undoubtedly be free to chart their own course entirely now, which would make it all the better for Daughter when she looked in their direction.

“And if you stay any longer you will become an object of my ire,” Father declared deadpan as he turned to glare at Ranma. “I have mentioned how I prefer a much an ordered means of keeping a balance between the Dark and the Light have I not? You are anything but. And while I will have to live with you and your influence on the Force and everything you have changed already, that it does not mean I am happy with your presence here in front of me.”

Ranma mind being hurt by that as he clutched his chest, then Shaak splashed in with some water she had from her canteen, smiling innocently as he glared at her and Daughter fell into a merry giggle collapsing to her knees as the Avatar of the Unifying Force simply groaned, shaking his head from side to side. “What? If you are going to grab your chest like that is if you are wounded Ranma, you might as well have a chest that is worth grabbing.”

“Given how handsy you become at night, I suppose there is some truth to that,” Ranma drawled, causing Shaak to blush a little, her skin turning paler in the manner of Togrutans.

“That is another reason the two of you should leave. Your hormones are bothering both of us,” Father said, although Daughter looked as if she didn’t agree with that, having recovered from her bout of giggles, she was now looking at them with feminine interest as well as a childlike curiosity, a very strange combination. “We are beings where an individual’s gender is simply something of choice, rather than a necessity of biology. And your emotions and feelings in the Force are disturbing me.”

Rolling her eyes at that, Shaak decided not to get into that conversation, although she put it down as another point in favor of these family members having forgotten their own past at some point. She very much doubted that they would even have a family dynamic if gender and sexuality was such a foreign idea to them. Why then would the Son and Daughter be called that, if they were not biologically related to the Father, and why would they have even fallen into using familial terms for one another in the first place unless that was really what they were?

Even Yoda didn’t really have any objections to leaving. They had left Anakin, Kit and the others in orbit after communicating with them that they had defeated the Sith, and were researching what they had been here for, but eventually Anakin and the two younger padawans at the very least would become a little too antsy being up in orbit. Best to stop that in its tracks. Yoda was a little leery of letting Anakin down here at all, given the fact that the father very much seemed as if he would attempt to manipulate Anakin into staying even now with the rest of his plan in shambles.

Leaving the area where the Family stayed, the trio retraced their steps until they arrived back where they had been dropped off. Soon, they joined up with the others, communicating in broad terms about their time on the planet, saying that there had been an ancient Sith walked away here, much like the Anzati Volfe Karkko, which Count Dooku had slain on a mission with Master Tholme after the battle of Naboo. There were a lot of questions about the planet itself

that they fielded, but they fielded them heading towards the monolith, which was already powering up and waiting for them by the time they arrived.

An instant later, they were back where they had been in the Chrelythium system, and as Daughter had told them, their time on Mortis simply became a dream, and a distant one at that. None of them could rightly recall when they met with other Jedi or even Bo-Katan what had happened. All they remembered was the fight, and that was it. They didn't even remember Father and Daughter being there at all, just another Dark Side user, one even more powerful than the two Sith.

That was enough for everyone else, and as more and more of the details of even the fight faded from their minds, it was enough for Ranma and Shaak too, because it was over. The long conflict with the Sith was done for now. Neither of them was naïve enough that they felt it would remain so, obviously. Nevertheless, the Rule of Two was finished.

The Confederacy was also finished, splintering rapidly into separate entities. While the Confederacy's high command remained, and the Dark Side twins remained in place over that high command, numerous commanders like the Harch, Trench, had taken steps to make certain that an overriding order could not reach their droid troops. And as the attack force returned to Zonama Sekot for repairs and refit, violence broke out on Raxus Secundus.

The public had decided that the story of Republic Intelligence having killed in the high command was so much marsh gas despite the state-controlled media telling them otherwise. On the heels of the battle against Tyranus and the rest, several hundred thousand in the capital had decided to take matters into their own hands, demanding answers and a change in leadership.

It was not easy and it was not bloodless. While Karoc and Vinoc were probably the weakest of the accolades that Tyranus had gathered to him, the droids were no joke in a battle. The majority of the Confederacy didn't have any kind of standing army beyond the droids. This uprising amounted to police and common citizens rising up against a trained, ruthless military force. One that had absolutely no compunction whatsoever about shooting into crowds of men women and children if someone from within the crowd fired at them.

Master Rancisis had been ready. The moment the capital of the Confederacy fell into anarchy, a unit of Jedi revealed themselves. Master Windu and Master Plo Koon led a crack team into the Confederacy's Council building, the only governmental building still standing. The team killed the two Dark Side Twins and claimed the override codes from the droids.

After that, the war, now being called the 'Grand Manipulator's War', was over. Billions had died, and there was still a lot of tension between various groups. Not all of the Confederacy planets were groups that made up the Confederacy were willing to return to the fold. None of them had the power without the droid armies to fight the Republic, certainly not on the scale

that the war had been fought on previously, but they would fight to retain their independence, and would undoubtedly act aggressively against their neighbors.

Hearing all this, Shaak and Ranma felt grief for the death of so many, and yet, thankful that it was over. Their role in things certainly anyway.

Two days after they returned to the living planet, Ranma and Shaak had finished their goodbyes to Kit, Anakin, Yoda and, through the Hypercom, Master Fay. Yoda was going to stay on Zonama Sekot, becoming the first HeadMaster to the temple there. Kit and Anakin were heading back to the main temple at Coruscant. As two of the best fighters the Order had, they would be given missions along with Master Windu and others of that stripe to shut down a few rogue warlords and splinter groups that had been able to restart their droid armies on local command. They weren't a threat on the galactic scale, but that didn't mean the Republic Navy and the Jedi Order was willing to let them go. And of course, the Republic still had several hundred clone armies to employ...

As if to emphasize that, the Order hadn't even tried to ask Ranma or Shaak to join any of these missions. It was thanks to their efforts the war had ended as it had, and that was enough. The Republic could not rely on them for everything, and using The Jedi Order and their own forces would show the Republic was strong despite the ongoing turmoil at the top. A turmoil that Fay was using to clean house from top to bottom.

Which, to put it very clearly, was a task even Shaak did not want any part of. "Perhaps in another life I could have been a Consular, and would be right next to Master Fay, helping her heal the Republic through words, law and debate. Yet, I am not a Consular in this life. I am a Guardian and a wife. And I feel the best way I can help is to teach two of the next generation. And keep my husband well away from the halls of power lest he speak too much truth to those who are currently choking on it already."

Fay had laughed like a little girl at that, while Ranma mused, "I do believe I have been insulted somehow... yet wasn't alone in being so. Hmm... be proud at the zing, or tickle my wife for it... decisions, decisions..."

Thus the two of them were free. Free of war, free of obligation for now. They could just go wherever they wished, although Ranma knew that wasn't the same thing as not finding trouble, wrongs to right, or people being oppressed. Or, as HK put it, "Humorous announcement: trouble magnets never go on vacation Master. We might have stopped looking for trouble, and won't find anything huge, but trouble will find us. It is as inevitable as my making such trouble making meatbags

The *Wild Blade* was leaving its home planet once more, heading for the outer edge of the system. They weren't alone. They still had their apprentices, Fabian and Keala.

Kad Solus and Dralshy'a were no longer with them. Both had evinced some measure of ki during their stay on Sekot waiting for Yoda and the other Jedi to figure out where they were going from there. Dralshy'a had gone right back to Mandalore on a quest for a certain blue-skinned woman. And Kad had been made into some kind of long Mandalorian name, which translated to Commander Air Wing apparently. He would be leading the starfighters alongside Bo-Katan from now on.

"So, guy and girls. Any requests on what kind of planet ya want our first stop to be? My vote'd be for a mountain type planet," Ranma opined as they reached the regular hyperspace limit.

"If you're taking requests, Ranma, I'd like a planet that has some pod races," Fabian answered first.

"Eager response: a planet with a larger criminal population, Master. Undoubtedly we will run into them at some point, they will annoy you and I can make more meatbags burst," HK nearly cackled.

"Beach planet!" Ahsoka and Keala said as one. Talli looked surprised at that, but as Ahsoka went on, she nodded in eager agreement. "We deserve a few days swimming around and working on our tans. Besides Master, we haven't been able to swim in months."

"Huh... a good tan and some time in the hot and sun does sound fun," Ranma mused then reached over and twined his fingers with Shaak's. "What about you, Shaak?"

"Hmm... I think we should just let the Force decide, Ranma. Pick a direction randomly, and let us see what happens if we choose a planet along that route," Shaak said squeezing back and leaning over, her head resting on Ranma's shoulder.

Despite the familiar and welcoming feeling of Shaak's montral rubbing against his cheek and temple, something about that idea made Ranma frown for a moment. For just a moment, he thought he remembered the sound of girlish laughter, laughter at his expense for some reason.

Then he shook it off. "Sure. Why not? We've got a whole galaxy to explore and that sounds just as good a way of starting as any."

End

Ding Dong the Sith Are Gone. A tough fight, but nowhere near as tough as the Sidious fight. I hope the reasons for that made sense in the battle. I really didn't think that even Tyranus, at the height of his power, could match Sidious in terms of raw danger. So that's how this went.

A small Epilogue, with very little in the main having been solved in terms of the whole Republic CIS fragments thing. Let's face facts, there are so many problems and issues with the Republic that Ranma simply is incapable of solving. So with the Sith stamped out, for now, the bigger problems can be best solved by a lot of hands to point at the problems and a lot of people who can solve problems with their words instead of fists. And frankly, it just seemed right to let Ranma and Shaak exit stage right. The happiest the pair of them have ever been is when they were on their own, learning new martial arts or exploring, with no big problems to deal with. I think they've earned a decade or so away from the limelight.

And so ends this tale, guys and girls. I hope you enjoyed the ride, even if it might not have gone on as long as you might have thought.