

Can One Displaced Hero Save a Galaxy?

(Chapters 131-135)

Novus Peregrine

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Chapter 131: Preludes

– Coruscant – 22.3 BBY –

“I have to say, I hadn’t expected it would be you, Senator Amidala, that brought my home into this discussion. Not that I don’t agree with you, indeed I praise your foresight for doing so, but this crisis does seem to be making strange bedfellows all around.”

Padmé let her lips twitch just a bit, to signal humor, at Senator Seitaron’s comment. The senator from Carida, Padmé had been surprised he *hadn’t* already been in meetings such as this one, and had brought him to the table as a gesture of good faith. The top supporters of the Military Creation Act had enthusiastically embraced his presence, her bringing the man along easing her own tentative acceptance by the group. After all, Cardia was the home of one of *the* premier military academies in the Republic. The only other that might be considered comparable was the War College of Anaxes.

“I don’t blame you for the surprise, Senator. However, I believe my reasons are obvious. After all, one of my primary concerns with the sanity of the Military Creation Act is something that your planet it, perhaps, the best suited in the galaxy to address.”

It was Onaconda Farr of Rodia, not Seitaron, who replied to that.

“Quite right. I am certain I speak for many of us in saying I am a bit embarrassed not to have considered some of the issues you’ve brought forward, Senator Amidala. We focused too much on bringing forth the military *hardware*, and forgot that training a suitable cadre of officers for a new military will be an even more critical affair. We can hardly leave it in the hands of *droids*, like the Separatists are doing.”

Another Senator, this one from Eriadu if Padmé wasn’t mistaken, nodded firmly at that.

“Perfectly correct. Not to mention that bringing it up brought attention to other issues we hadn’t considered. Such as the number of our fellow Senators who were unhappy with the thought conscription might be on the table. Word is that Bel Iblis nearly withdrew Corellia from the Republic using some ancient law, before you started insisting on inserting careful controls about voluntary service. Given the size of the Republic and the benefits we can bake into the law, we should never *need* to conscript. Writing it into the law that we *can’t* do so without a super majority vote had eased tensions we weren’t even properly aware of.”

Nodding acknowledgment of that, Padmé took the offered opening. One she was fairly certain had been offered quite intentionally.

“Precisely. The one thing the Republic doesn’t lack for is manpower. Many Core worlds have *millions* of poorer individuals who would take such an opportunity to raise their lot in life, so long as we establish proper benefits for them. Doing so would even ease crime and population issues for some worlds. Of course, *paying* for them to be properly trained is going to add an element to the fight that wasn’t present before. Yet, I think if we look to...”

Discussion began in earnest, as Padmé fought for something she, at her core, actively hated. Yet, with the knowledge she was privy to, that a war was inevitable and no one had much in the way of a chance to stop it? Making sure that said war was fought by those who *volunteered* for service, were properly trained, and were properly rewarded was paramount. Doubly so as that training could be made to include deescalation methods and urban fighting tactics that might prevent crimes against sentient kind.

She’d seen how having a highly trained, professional military had helped the League of Free Stars keep civilian casualties down. If a war she didn’t want was coming anyway, the least she could do was make certain it was fought cleanly, while creating as little additional friction within the Republic as possible...

... ..

– The Miruko: Orbit of Abrion Major – 22.2 BBY –

“Oof!”

The air exploded out of Aayla’s lungs as she thumped down hard on the sparring map, having been thrown in such a fashion that even *her* flexibility was unable to compensate. Normally, she would have pushed through it anyway, but this was the *fourth* such fall she’d taken, if not all in the same way. Giving in, she let herself flop there and gasp for breath, even as Izuku moved to make sure she was okay. As she managed to haul air back into her lungs properly, she scowled up at her lover who, assured she was fine now, was grinning down at her.

“Y-you are an unfair existence, Izu! Seriously, it took me *months* of hard training to get the basics of Matukai training down! How the *kriff* have you done the same in just a few weeks? You haven’t even had that much time for training, with all the political chaff going on!”

Izuku’s grin only grew wider, even as he reached down to pull her to her feet, using a telekinetic pull to bring her a ‘recovery’ drink at the same time. The drink itself was a creation of his own, apparently a recreation of something from his world that wasn’t an idea she’d encountered before. Since he’d first explained it, she’d looked into the idea and discovered that there *were* plenty of equivalents out there, but they were all very specific species and tended to be aimed at professional athletes. Given the Force could be used for recovery, she’d quickly realized why she hadn’t encountered the idea before.

“Aayla, love, I don’t think you’ve quite thought this through. Remember what I told you about my first serious mentor. You know, the one that really taught me how to fight, whom this *ship is named after*, and a variant of whose recovery methods you’re currently sipping on? Albeit thankfully not the carrot flavored version.”

Aayla paused said sipping, thought that through...and groaned. Izuku's eyes were dancing as he voiced her thoughts.

"Exactly, love. Miruko trained me to use my abilities *specifically through intense marital arts*. Up to and including moving meditation. I might as well have been doing the exact precursor training required for Matukai methods, from *before I even knew what the Force was*. The moment you explained their techniques, I realized I'd outright already been using a crude version of some of it by instinct. The only thing I really needed to add was the inward-focused Force component, which..."

Aayla slumped as she completed his thought.

"...was always going to be easy for you, because of the whole 'you essentially *are* a midi-chlorian' thing."

Izuku nodded, reaching out to pat her head with a playful smirk. Aayla considered batting it aside, but...headpats were nice. No point in ruining them just because she was mildly irked at the realization.

"Exactly. Don't worry, I'm going to need to put in just as much of an effort for the *advanced* uses as you currently are. It's just that the basics of physical enhancement and the 'flow state' that gives the Matukai even greater body control than a Jedi? Those were always going to come easy for me. There's a *reason* I've always been able to somewhat physically match Zavra, despite her augmentations."

Aayla groaned at having missed *that*. She, herself, had previously been able to keep up with Zavra's *speed*. But that was only because speed was the entire focus of Aayla's fighting style and she'd been sparring with Izuku for years. Their Sith lover's *physical strength*, endurance, and durability had been something Aayla couldn't keep up with until very recently. Specifically, she'd needed the intense training she'd done with the Matukai on Tython to get in shouting distance of the advantages Zavra's cybernetics and bioware had given her.

Izuku, on the other hand, had always been able to come *much* closer to Zavra's strength and endurance, with his own fighting style meaning durability was nearly a non-issue. All while still being able to keep up with both Aayla and Zavra's speed. Now that it had been pointed out to her, she felt particularly dense for not connecting the dots.

She supposed she should be grateful for it, given it meant Izuku was able to get a significant boost from the Matukai training despite all his other time commitments. She'd just *really* wanted to be able to beat him up a little bit for a while after all her effort! Oh well, at least once he got the endurance techniques down to the point of being automatic, it would translate other fun things. Liking seeing if he could fully wear both her *and* Zavra out in the bedroom...

... ..

Esu Rotsino spun a stylus through her fingers in mild agitation, using it as a focus for her whirling thoughts as she stared down on her homeworld from an observation bubble aboard the Miruko. It was a habit she'd never have allowed herself to indulge in if anyone could see her, but the observation bubble was in the VIP section of what was, currently at least, the League of Free Star's

flagship. Said VIP section was, aside from her own retinue, almost scarcely populated for the time being. Unlike most warships, battleships had internal cubage to spare, and the VIP section had enough suites and conference rooms to handle hundreds of people.

Currently, there were less than forty people using it. Supported mostly by *droid* staff and a few critical aides.

The reason for that was the same reason the meetings she'd been taking part in for the last week were being held about the Miruko in the first place, rather than down in her capital. Secrecy was *absolutely* paramount, given that what they were discussing could be...no *would* be...considered treason by many in the Republic. She herself couldn't bring herself to see it that way, nor could the others involved if she had even a half-decent read on them. But they were *all* aware how certain elements of the Republic would react to their...contingency planning.

With every passing week, the Separatist Crisis/Debate within the Republic Senate was growing more and more vociferous. Which presented a rather serious problem for the Abrion Major sector, as well as some of their neighbors. As little as a decade ago, *her sector* would have been inclined to side with the Separatists. Not out of *trust*, that was never an option when one of the leading powers was the same Trade Federation that had caused many of their issues in the first place, but out of *need*.

Like many of the Outer and Mid Rim worlds that were breaking away in increasing numbers, the Abrion Sector had been suffering from the Core suppressing their growth and draining them dry. They'd been *stuck*, with limited options, and the Separatist movement would have looked like a way out. Just as it was looking for the numerous systems clamoring to join the new Confederation of Independent Systems. Esu was self-honest enough to recognize she'd have even been leading the charge, more likely than not.

Today, that simply wasn't the case any longer. Not for their sector.

The *heavy* investments of one Izuku Midoriya, then only a businessman and 'Master of Tythe,' had dramatically altered the course of their entire region of space. The infusion of not just credits, but resources and technical expertise, had allowed Abrion Major and several of the other critical worlds of her sector to turn the corner. Her own homeworld now had its own modest and still growing shipyard, a solid system defense force, and enough industrial capacity to have nearly completely removed their reliance on technology shipments from the Core.

One hundred percent local production of all of their critical agricultural equipment needs had been achieved last year, and they even had some solid light industry. Industry that was producing the sorts of household goods and consumer electronics needs that had been a major *import* they'd been price gouged on previously. There was even a *small* domestic droid production line that had finally got up and running just last month.

The same was true for another dozen major worlds in her sector alone, and more worlds in the surrounding sectors besides.

Better yet, *what* each of those worlds was producing had been planned, again with help from Master Midoriya. That planning meant that they weren't doubling up on each other's

production more than necessary. Meaning they could now trade *between* themselves to cover still more of the needs for items that would have required import from the Core Worlds before.

Ukio had discovered and was exploiting several critical metals for shipbuilding on their moon, selling much of the resulting material to the Abrion Major shipyard. Galpos had always known one of their gas giants had Tibanna gas, but had never been able to get anyone to fork over the high costs to begin mining and processing it. Funding one of Izuku's companies had provided, with Galpos now getting increasingly rich off gas extraction and sales.

Gibad, Hefi, Intuci, Pastil, Varristad, and more. The stories were similar for most of the critical worlds in the Abrion sector, and even those that *hadn't* seen direct investment by Izuku and his holdings were *still* benefiting massively. After all, they were now able to buy from their neighbors, at *reasonable* prices, much of what they'd needed to order all the way from the Core previously. The fact that worlds like Galpos and Abrion Major, which were growing in wealth, were also smartly spreading investment to yet more worlds only farther increased the spread.

The Abrion Sector was doing *well*, for the first time in...millennia, probably. Possibly ever, in point of fact.

More to the point, *everyone knew* who was responsible for that rising affluence. Even more so after the League had come into existence and now-Sovereign Midoriya had come back through and struck dozens of major trade agreements between worlds in her sector and the League. They had new markets, ones that meant they didn't *have* to sell to the Core any longer, even if many of them still did so...just a more *fair* prices that make the Core unhappy with them.

As one of her colleagues from Varristad had crudely put it, 'The Republic has done Jack and Shit for us, but the Sovereign and the League are a different matter entirely.'

Which is why several critical leaders from worlds within the sector were among the thirty-seven people currently using the VIP suites aboard the *Miruko*. With it looking more and more like war was on the horizon, certain *contingencies* and *positions* were in need of discussing. Ones that would most certainly not have been looked upon favorably by the Republic. For that matter, they likely wouldn't be looked upon favorably by the *Separatists* either. Even knowing that, as Esu looked down on her world from orbit, she could feel in her bones that she was making the right call for her people.

She just hoped, when it came right down to it, her people agreed. Giving the suffering it had potential to bring even if she was right, she wasn't at all sure how history would see her...

... ..

– Corellia – 22.1 BBY –

"We've been able to confirm some of the data provided, then?"

The question, tired and frustrated sounding, had come from Shyla Merricope, current Diktat of Corellia. The two men in the room with her both grimaced, with the second most powerful man on Corellia, Garm Bel Iblis, waved for the other to field the question. Jedi Master Nejaa Halcyon, a representative of the Green Jedi, readily did so.

“In a word? Yes. While the Green Jedi don’t have a lot of official reach outside the Corellian Sector, we *do* have quite a few...personal contacts...we were able to subtly tap. Between us and elements of CorSec, we were able to confirm at least some of the buildups on *both* sides. Worse, while the Green don’t get along with many of the Coruscanti Jedi, some of the ones that sourced the original information *are* among those we get along with and respect. In particular, Master Tholme. As far as we can tell, the information provided is one hundred percent genuine.”

The Diktat looked troubled as she asked the all-important follow up question.

“And the Sith?”

Master Halcyon visibly sagged.

“Confirmed beyond any reasonable doubt. A Darkside Cult working for one of them was captured and we have damning proof of a full chain of at least four. Darth Plagueis, who is believed to be dead. Darth Sidious who is believed to be the current Master. Darth Tyrannus who is *suspected* to be Count Dooku, but absolute confirmation has not been gained just yet. Then, of course, there is the one that was killed on Naboo, who they finally got a name for, Darth Maul. The Sith *are* active and behind at least the Separatists. They may *also* be behind the general war buildup on *both* sides.”

Shyla slumped and Garm growled. The Senator finally spoke a moment later.

“That’s it then. If the *Sith* are involved, we can’t just stay out of it the way we wanted to. Corellia had felt their sting before, and just turtling up and *hoping* they don’t come for a founding world of the Republic would be beyond cowardice and fully into rank stupidity if they are in play.”

Master Halcyon nodded unhappily, and his Diktat sighed.

“Even so, and even with the changes being pushed on the Military Creation Act, the fact the Sith might be behind *both* buildups concerns me. I believe the proposal of our Alderanian counterparts have made may we our best choice here. Lean into forcing some specific provisions for the Creation Act, while quietly building up our own fleet assets entirely outside its framework. The Mothball Fleet has plenty of ships that can be reactivated, doubly so with Alderaan pouring money into our shipyards to get builds of ships for themselves. That money can be spent to pull larger vessels out of mothballs and modernize them. As well as reactivating older yard capacity.”

Garm nodded at that, even if the Jedi Master looked clueless. Which was fair. The Jedi weren’t involved in *running* Corellia, after all. Which meant that he wouldn’t be aware of just *how much* industrial capacity was sitting underutilized in the Corellian system at any one time. The Five Brothers were an anomaly among anomalies. A virtually-impossible occurrence of *five* habitable worlds in a single star system, with *three* separate sentient species having all developed on one of those worlds. When people quoted ‘Corellia’ as being one of the Big Five economies in the Republic, they were really talking about the *planet*.

Which means that almost everyone horrifically underestimated just how much industrial might was in the *rest* of the star system.

The last thousand years of peace actually hadn't been all that great for their system. In fact, it had honestly been fairly awful as the megacorps elsewhere did their best to strangle Corellia's trade options. In previous eras of the Republic no one would have dared try that, as the Corellian military had always been a major force to be reckoned with. With that military crippled by the Ruusan Reformation, and the New Sith Wars having seen Corellia heavily invested in a now-useless military-industrial complex, a slow slide into economic problems had begun.

Less than twenty percent of the system's industrial might was running at this point.

Which didn't mean it had ceased to exist.

A long line of Diktat's had made sure that the industrial capacity in question was mothballed in a way it could be brought back online in a hurry if needed, so long as the credits and resources were there to do so. Alderaan had *both* credits and resources, the planet having soared high through the peace in a way Corellia hadn't, and having quite a few resource-rich colony worlds to supply them. With money and resources flowing from Alderaan, they could bring up a lot more capacity quickly. Not *all* of it, not without far more money than just Alderaan's investment. But enough to make a serious go at restoring and upgrading a lot of the older ships *also* carefully kept in mothballs.

"Very well. Garm, you are hereby officially ordered to activate Operation Phoenix. Master Halcyon, I would very much like to know what the Green Jedi intend to do about the upcoming conflict. I don't need an answer *now*, but I would like one soon."

The Jedi Master nodded.

"Yes, your Grace. The Council are already debating the matter, I will make sure to prod them not to take too long about it."

Shyla smirked at the dry tone he said that in, but didn't bother to respond. It was time to get to work, not make jokes. While she had fairly broad authority as the formal head-of-state and Governor-General of the entire Sector, it wasn't absolute. She at least partially answered to the Board of Directors, which included the oldest and most powerful of the corporations that made the sector home. Thankfully, the single most influential was CEC, who were going to be *delighted* with the massive ship orders and infusion of credits about to be headed their way...

Chapter 132: Warning

– Rishi – 21.9 BBY –

Shaak Ti in absolutely nothing but a loincloth was an incredible distraction. Doubly so when she was stalking prey and Izuku was following behind her, doing his best to put her lessons in the same to good use. Despite her own incredible focus, he could *feel* from the mild amusement radiating off her that she knew what was causing his own focusing issues. More than that, he could tell part of her was *pleased* that he found her distracting, even while most of her wanted him to focus properly on the task at hand. Willing himself to do so, he had to stop himself *again* from

instinctively cheating with the Force as they crept slowly up on the Jungle Wampa that was their target.

The beast was impressive.

Where most wampa topped out at three meters, at most, a number of those they'd seen here on Tracyn Island were exceptionally larger. This one, in particular, was closer to four meters (13ft) than three. It was also, unfortunately, a rogue. While the jungle island, once an ancient volcano which had created extremely fertile soil, wasn't inhabited by people...the animal was still disrupting the natural balance of the island. Enough so for Shaak Ti, *far* more in touch with the natural Force of a world than anyone he'd met that wasn't a *Neti*, to have detected the imbalance.

It wasn't a serious issue, to be honest. Eventually the creature would have overhunted its territory, starved, and the population rebounded over the course of a few decades. At worse, as far as the Force was concerned, it might have created a small swell of darkness in the local Living Force, and never would have impacted the Cosmic Force at all. Yet, in tune with nature as she was, when Shaak Ti had expressed a desire to *hunt*, she had communed with the Force to pick out a target that would cause only good to the local balance. The removal of this rogue wampa wouldn't make any lasting or significant impact, but it *would* improve the natural balance of Tracyn Island just slightly.

Izuku understood that, even admired it. Yet he was still *seriously* unsure why the Force had decided *he* needed to come along.

Not that he minded. Even aside from getting away from politics for a bit *and* getting to see Shaak Ti in her 'back to nature' outfit, Shaak was the odd one out among his lovers that he hadn't yet spent much true one-on-one time with. Not none, of course. Despite the difficulties with all of them leading *interesting* lives, Izuku had done his best to spend both one-on-one and group time with all of the women who had inexplicably gravitated to him and his bed. The arrangement was *still* unusual to part of him, and he never wanted to make any of them feel less appreciated than the others.

The truth remained, however, that Shaak Ti had been drawn into his orbit as much or more by *Aayla* as by Izuku himself. As a result, outside of sparring and a few companionable meals here and there, he and the Togrutan Jedi Master had mostly spent time together when Aayla was also around. Something which *wasn't* the case at the moment, Aayla having been drawn into unexpected and quiet negotiations with her homeworld. At roughly the time Aayla had been pulled away, Shaak Ti had come to Izuku claiming that she had felt the itch to *hunt* in the Force, and that for some reason she felt he was supposed to go with her.

Apparently, this was a thing she did periodically, to stay in tune with nature. She nearly always went *alone*, however, unless she was taking a student to teach primitive survival or escorting a Togrutan Padawan to an Akul hunt on Shili as a rite of passage. The latter was a cultural touchpoint that was allowed by the Jedi Order, and one which Shaak often volunteered to take young Togruta on. Though Izuku suspected she *probably* wore more than a loincloth with her students or impressionable Padawans.

He hoped so, at least. Particularly as the loincloth was more *symbolic* than practical. There was *100% nothing under* said loincloth. Nor was it wrapped or tied in the way her normal cloth-underwear-wrap-thing usually was to be at all covering. A major part of Izuku's reason for distraction at the moment was getting semi-frequent peaks of his lover's intimate bits as they did their sneaking...

Speaking of which, *somehow* Shaak had brought them to within a bare three paces of the Jungle Wampa without it detecting them. *Without* use of the Force. A subtle signal from her had him shifting not to creep, but to prepare the primitive spear he was carrying for an ambush. Still *very* confused what a city boy like him was doing learning the art of stalking and hunting on a world-of-no-importance, he readied himself to wait. This beast was supposed to be his kill for...reasons? Despite the Force nudging *him* as he'd meditated with Shaak Ti, giving him a firm push to go with her in a way it rarely did for him, he still had no idea why he was here.

Well. Those thoughts would have to wait. Right now he needed to focus on getting the perfect strike in on his prey, without use of the Force to assist. An odd and dangerous challenge, but one *much* better than being stuck behind his desk doing *paperwork*...

... ..

-Lemon Starts Here-

Shaak Ti moaned freely, not even vaguely attempting to control herself, as Izuku sucked on her pulse point. He'd set his ambush well, even if he was sure she had known it was coming, and as a result he had her flat on her back and 'staked' to the ground, with her arms stretched over her head. The stake in question, to which her wrists were bound, was one designed for all-weather securing of a tent. It was a higher-tech option, which spread a magnetic containment field deep into the ground to hold through even the toughest storms. As a result, it wasn't going anywhere, even if Shaak could near-certainly have broken the far cruder leather strap he'd secured her wrists to it with.

As usual with her, it was the basic form of the thing that mattered to her instincts, and she'd only briefly tugged and yanked at the binding to discover if she was suitably 'restrained.' It was performative, in a way, but whenever Izuku did something like it with her, Shaak's more *primal* side came out. He had to admit that it was a hell of a view, too, to have her staked down and 'helpless,' in nothing but her loincloth. With one hand on a hip, he held her still, as the other reached to tweak and pull on a rock-hard nipple.

A rock-hard *pierced* nipple, which had been another thing driving him to distraction for the last week!

Unlike Padmé and Sabé, Shaak Ti had expressed no interest at all in having anything like Zavra's implants. Mei, he knew, already had several, and Aayla was *interested*, even if she hadn't yet tried any of them. Well, not beyond the bone and muscle lace that both she and he had gotten recently. Shaak, more in tune with nature than any of his other lovers, didn't click with the idea of even the laces and skin weaves...but she *had* shown clear and obvious interest when Aayla had turned up after a trip away with nipple piercings. Apparently, piercings of various kinds were a common body modification for Togruta, and Shaak had been instantly interested in the idea.

He hadn't actually known she'd *gotten* her own set until their first night of the trip to Rishi.

Made out of Akul bone instead of metal like Aayla's, the piercings only served to amplify Shaak Ti's primal aura still farther when she stripped away her Jedi behavior and embraced her heritage. Which had just made her *even more* distracting for the last week as she taught him to stalk and hunt, wearing nothing but a loincloth that suggested everything and covered nothing. The fact she'd resisted any nightly advances until he properly completed a 'hunt' had only charged the atmosphere all the more intensely.

Now, after having claimed the Jungle Wampa kill for himself, she was his prize.

He drifted away from her pulse point, using his weight to keep her from bucking so he could free up his other hand. He shifted, capturing one nipple and its piercing with his lips, sucking and tugging, delighting in her moans. One hand continued to play with the other nipple, pinching and pulling, even as his newly freed second traveled from her hip to her stomach. He traced her abs, slick with fine droplets of moisture from the humid air and just a tiny bit of sweat. He found a ticklish spot on accident, delighting in the giggle-moan that resulted, but didn't linger long.

As his wondering drifted down to her apex, the loincloth she wore impeded him not at all, easily being brushed aside to expose her dripping sex. Just like Aayla, Shaak Ti's pussy was smooth and uniform, completely lacking the clitoral hood at the top of the mons. Where Aayla had two clitoris analogues to either side of her sex once those lips were split, however, Shaak Ti had nothing *external* at all. What was *inside* as he split those lips with three fingers, was more than adequate compensation for her, and just as alien for him as the first time he'd plundered her offerings. *Hundreds* of little nubs, each a mini-clit in general purpose, lined her inner walls...and Shaak Ti came unglued the moment his questing fingers began to tease them.

Izuku had to use just a bit of the Force to keep his lover from bucking him off in reaction, even as she practically howled and attempted to get more friction. Grinning...he kept teasing her walls as he switched nipples. Shaak whimper-moaned as he refused to let her peak, keeping the action teasing and gentle enough that she couldn't *quiet* get over the edge. She'd teased him for *days*, and he wasn't going to let her cum quite *that* easily as a result.

In a few minutes he'd work his way down her body with his lips, to use his tongue to take things up a notch. But even then, he'd do his best to draw it out. Eventually, he'd let her have it properly, knowing she loved it rough and fully intending to ride her until she passed out. For now, however, she was going to pay for being such a tease...

-Lemon Ends Here-

... ..

Once Shaak Ti's more primal desires to hunt and...do other things...were resolved, she had turned into a taskmistress. One that, admittedly, Izuku was chagrined that he needed. It wasn't that he hadn't *tried* to listen to the Force's not-so-subtle hints that he needed to learn to accept its help a bit more often. He *had*, after his, Mei and Aayla's trip to Tython, put more effort into seeking insight day-to-day. It was something that had enhanced his understanding of Battle Meditation, his

Danger Sense, and more. Yet he knew he'd fallen short of getting anything more than guidance-in-the-moment.

In part, that was understandable. The nature of his connection to the Force was *different* than that of a Jedi or Sith. He was tapped in far more directly, without the benefit of a translation layer that would help filter the noise. Without cheating by reaching through his links to Aayla or, more recently Zavra, he was never going to be able to get the sort of long-term visions and guidance that Jedi chased after. Which, frankly, was fine with him anyway.

He *did* know he should be capable of using it for more middle-term tasks, though. Which is what Shaak Ti set about forcing him to employ. Which is how they found themselves deep in the jungles of Rishi, well away from where they'd been hunting, tracking down a 'feeling' Izuku had gotten while meditating on the Force for any sort of near-term guidance. With the way his connection worked, it was a bit more like fishing than hunting, throwing out a question and trying to figure out what bits of returning information were valuable.

Despite that analogy, he had to admit that there was some *mindset* relation to what he'd learned from Shaak in order to properly stalk and hunt the Jungle Wampa. Which finally explained why the Force had wanted him along for this little expedition. At least in part. His recent meditations made him aware there was something *else* they were waiting for, but neither he nor Shaak Ti were certain what that was.

As for finding near-term items of importance...there *may* have been an embarrassing first attempt that had led them to Shaak Ti's hidden stash of 'toys.' If that *had* happened, he wasn't planning to mention it. Though he had an unfortunate suspicion Aayla would learn about it from Shaak. Hopefully, the current expedition would turn up something more *generally* interesting, rather than interesting *specifically to Izuku*. Thankfully, as they finally broke through some undergrowth thick enough that it had required Shaak Ti to employ her gift with using the Force on plants to open a path through, that didn't seem to be the case.

"Interesting. This looks like a Jedi Shrine of some sort. Though not one I recognize...no, wait a moment. I believe I *do* recognize some of these symbols. They appear to match some of those from the station where you found Zavra."

Izuku blinked, having still been mostly focused on the Force. When he checked what Shaak said against his memory, though, he realized immediately that she was right. More than that...

"That symbol. It belonged to one of the Heroes of that era, I think. Someone called 'Warden of the Order' or just 'Barsen'thor'..."

Moving forward, focusing on the Force in just the immediate area now, Izuku was able to get clearer impressions. Impressions that led him to a pedestal that seemed empty...until he channeled the Force into the symbol he'd mention. An ancient mechanism, preserved through a layer of the Force laying upon it, ground to life as what was clearly a holocron rose out of the pedestal. Shaak Ti radiated pleased smugness behind him, and Izuku tried not to huff in annoyance at that.

“Okay, yes, I should be doing this more often. I *promise*, I’ll keep practicing. Now, why don’t we take this back to the ship and see what’s on it...”

Shaak Ti, just as curious as he was, was quick to agree to that plan.

... ..

– Rishi – 21.8 BBY –

“Ah. So that is why we are here.”

Izuku and Shaak had awoken from their previous day of discovery, including plentiful use of the toy stash that had been Izuku’s *first* discovery, with the certainty that the reason they were on Rishi was approaching. They had cleaned up the ‘natural’ camp that Shaak Ti had insisted on creating away from their ship, and returned to the unassuming freighter they’d used to reach Rishi in the first place. Instead of using the *Wandering Fate*, they’d come in a generic-looking Ghtroc 580, recently renamed the ‘*Wayward Turtle*.’ It was another Anash special, specifically acquired used and highly modified to impressive specs while still *looking* like the sort of tramp freighter a smuggler or wandering trader might use.

Anash’s refits were mostly used by LIS, but *Wayward Turtle* hadn’t been put into any service yet, and thus had absolutely no trail beyond that of its *original* owner. Who, in fact, *had* been a smuggler. The ship had been acquired from an impound, in point of fact. It had been a combination of warnings from the Force and basic common sense had resulted in the choice. Whatever they were on Rishi for needed them *not to be noticed*. Which, given that they both recognized the even-more-heavily modified HWK-290 that was landing as being Celeste Morne’s *Shades of the Past*, abruptly made a great deal of sense.

The pair waited calmly for the new arrival to shut down, noting as she finally disembarked that Celeste was alone this time. As well as looking quite satisfied that they were there.

“Izuku, Master Ti. I admit I was surprised, when I came into orbit, to feel Izuku’s unique effect on the Force. Without that, your Force Stealth might well have let you pass completely unnoticed.”

Intrigued, as well as idly noting that someone sufficiently familiar with him might be able to find him by a difference in *environmental* Force instead of direct sensing, Izuku smiled at her.

“It’s been a while, Celeste. I’m happy to see you, of course. Yet, I admit I’m unsure why the Force called us out here. It seemed to feel this meeting was important.”

Celeste barely blinked at that.

“I, on the other hand, have a guess. I was only stopping at Rishi on my way to investing a lead on a remote planet that has been surprisingly difficult to locate. For all that I wasn’t *looking* for you, however, I am glad to have encountered you. Both as I am following a lead that may be important...and because I have another that needs investigating in a way I cannot easily do myself. Yet any time I meditated on trying to contact you, the Force warned me off.”

Izuku frowned at that. Such a warning implied there was a chance, possibly a *high* chance, that her contacting them might have leaked information. Celeste's identity, their connection to her, or even the information passed on in the first place. Given Celeste had long since been given a Quantum Comm, it was flat out impossible that the call itself would have been intercepted. Meaning there was either an information leak in those he would have passed the information *too*, or else someone was keeping a close enough eye on him and his *through the Force*, that they may have been tipped off.

Which was...possible. More than possible, honestly. While spying on him directly with the Force would have bordered on outright impossible due to his direct connection to the Cosmic Force, sensing a danger to themselves in the possible *actions* of those *around* him might be another matter entirely. Given how much of a public figure he was now, that the Sith Celeste was chasing might be looking his way that closely was *very* possible. With him away from those he might have made aware of a report from her, such as Aayla, that sort of chance would be lessened greatly. The fact that Shaak Ti wasn't yet really known to be 'closely associated' with him might have prevented the same scrutiny from being aimed her way too. Which would explain why the Force had used her as its agent to prod him into coming.

"That is obviously alarming. But possibly also encouraging. If whatever you're onto is sufficient to cause a reaction if even a *hint* of it is caught by the enemy..."

Celeste nodded firmly.

"My thoughts precisely. Come, let us discuss this aboard my ship. My own target is a world called Kamino. But the other thing that needs following up on is a check on the Senate. I have eliminated all practical options, aside from Count Dooku who *is* almost certainly a Sith, among the CIS. Added to others I have eliminated, I am increasingly certain that the Sith Master we are after is among the Senate. Given your unique access to the Cosmic Force, it is my hope that getting you close to the bulk of possible Senators all at once will help identify our target swiftly. Or at least eliminate numerous possibilities all at once."

Shaak Ti nodded along, interjecting for the first time.

"A meeting which, with the Separatist Crisis and Izuku's position as the head of the League of Free Stars, would be entirely possible to arrange. Indeed, I understand from Padmé that there has been increasing pressure for the Sovereign of the League to appear before the Senate. Due mostly to the rapidly increasing number of systems choosing to leave the Republic via the Hutt Space loophole, or exit from Republic Influence if they weren't actual members, in favor of joining the League."

Izuku nodded at that. If he wasn't absolutely certain at this point that war was coming, he would have done his best to choke that flow so as not to aggravate the Republic. As it was, *nearly two hundred* additional Republic worlds and five times that many unaligned worlds within 'Republic Sectors' had made appeals to join the League. With Esa Rotsino intentionally dragging out the signing of a new agreement to end the 'drifting border' that the Hutt Empire and Republic had agreed to, those applications were still legal. Which was increasingly pissing off the 'Loyalist'

faction of the Republic, even if the numbers were small compared to the thousands leaving to join the CIS.

By this point, they'd made it aboard Celeste's ship, and she gestured them into seats around a holotable. Flicking it to life, the Jedi Shadow entered *multiple* passwords, then did something with the Force...triggering a mechanical switch inside the table, maybe? Whatever she'd done, the holodisplay switched from showing a Dejarik board to a custom interface displaying both a galaxy map and a list of files.

"I've been attempting to eliminate suspects from those who had frequent contact or friendships with Hego Demask, aka Darth Plagueis. Given his various positions, there were an irritating number of possibilities among the movers and shakers of the galaxy. So far, while in the process of eliminating many, I've discovered the following possible links..."

Shaak Ti and Izuku would be several hours in getting a full briefing, after which they would be both appalled at some of what Celeste had discovered, and impressed she'd manage to collect so much of it. As for *following up* on the various trails and leads, that would take quite some time to arrange.

Chapter 133: Unexpected Help

– Kamino – 21.7 BBY –

Celeste Morne blinked, an expression of surprise crossing her face as she descended toward the surface of Kamino. Rather than direct her toward the surface cities, the Force was demanding she head into the *ocean*. She pursed her lips at that realization and considered her options. Virtually all starships, including hers, were rated for at least *some* submersion in water. Yet, she was getting a sense of *depth*, and her ship wasn't rated for more than a few hundred meters. That meant she was going to have to acquire local transport. Which was a *bit* of a problem, given that she'd come in under concealment of the cloaking device that Mei had installed for her the last time she visited the strange-but-gifted girl.

Well, she supposed she was going to run into the problem of sneaking in one way or another. After all, so far as she could tell, this planet was entirely aquatic, with the only place to land being cities on the surface of the water. Still, the largest of those cities was reading to her passive scans as covering over a hundred kilometers of the equator, with numerous satellite cities around it. Nor was it the only such surface city, with several other smaller examples farther away from the equator.

Well, the primary city was out of the question. Even her passive scans were picking up a *lot* of activity from defensive systems. Only a complete idiot would try to land there when they were investigating the planet for something. Seriously, if she met a Jedi who thought *that* was a great idea, she'd have to smack some sense into them. Hopefully by assigning them somewhere that their clearly inadequate intelligence couldn't get them or someone else hurt. Perhaps the Senate, where they could be safe among their intellectual peers?

Snorting at her own dry, derisive thoughts about politicians, gained over the last year or so as she'd done deep investigations on *far* too many of them, she shifted her landing trajectory. There were a couple of cities in the southern hemisphere, which is where she'd found the Force was pointing her. Even better, as she closed in far enough to make out more detail passed the constant storms of the planet, she noted that the one nearest what she'd felt appeared mostly industrial. Slowing and hoping the stealth systems were up to this, she crept in on the city...and was even more pleased when she saw it focused on *Deep Sea Mining*. Such an operation would almost *have* to have the sort of craft she would require.

Focusing on finding somewhere inconspicuous to land and hide her ship, she idly wondered just what the Force was drawing her towards...

... ..

It had taken Celeste three full days to hide her ship, find a place with Deep Sea craft capable of going where she needed, and figure out how to make one of those craft disappear for a bit without triggering alarms. The answer, as it turned out, was to find a shop that specialized in servicing such transports. Specifically, a shop that had recently had a turn of bad fortune with improperly filed paperwork that resulted in it being temporarily shut down. The population of this planet, she had quickly realized, were downright anal retentive and obsessive compulsive about such things, to a point that hovered somewhere between Insane Bureaucrat and Sociopathic Scientist on her personal spectrum. Two groups she had, sadly, entirely too much experience with.

It wasn't an encouraging mix, as a whole, given that she'd also discovered the primary export of the planet was *Clone Armies*.

That little detail had certainly had several worrying possibilities popping into her mind, but the Force was still insisting that it was more important to go somewhere in the deep ocean of the southern hemisphere. If she was a normal investigator, or even a normal Jedi, she might well have gotten distracted on the need to find out about the Clone Army thing. But she was a Shadow, one who had been trained to operate in a time where Sith artifacts were everywhere. Her entire job, in fact, had been to hunt down those remnants and destroy or contain them. Even with the Darkside Veil in place, she could still get more guidance from the Force than nearly anyone else alive. The result of long experience dealing with Dark Side tainted locations, or artifacts that tried actively to conceal themselves from hunters.

The Veil would have likely kept another Jedi, short of someone like Fay perhaps, from noticing the current of the Force pulling them downward into the ocean.

Celeste had noticed, and now she was following that trail in a deep submersible which had been present in the shop for routine service. Routine service that she, herself, had been more than capable of completing. Now, she was approaching 10,000 meters below the surface, pushing the limits of the craft as she dove into a canyon on the ocean floor. She's been surprised at first to see various ruins, but by the point she found the canyon she'd come to the conclusion that this world must not *always* have been covered in water. Some calamity had buried whole cities, as far as she could tell, though it appeared to be an ancient calamity from the state of the ruins she'd seen.

She noticed the lights, first.

For a moment she'd thought it was a bioluminescent creature or plant of some sort, but as she closed in on it, it became obvious it was an ancient outpost of some sort. One that, somehow, still had power. Looking for a way in, she was startled, blinking, as an airlock opened...and she felt a gentle brush of Force power washing over her.

There was someone else already here.

A Force Sensitive with enough training that even *she* hadn't noticed them, despite the Force calling her here. Cautious and guarded, but not getting the feel that this was any sort of trap, she steered for the airlock. There was just one other vessel inside the lock, a *starship* of some variety, though the model wasn't one she recognized. That didn't mean much, though something about it had the feel of *age*. Not quite as much age as the facility, but she got the feeling the ship itself might be as old as she, very technically, was.

The water drained and Celeste put the submersible into standby, exiting the ship...and seeing a Kaminoan waiting for her. Abruptly, the Force Stealth the woman had been under, possibly even *better* than her own, eased...and Celeste blinked at the *sheer depth* of the Force signature. Not even Master Fay or Ood Bnar, in the few moments here and there she'd gotten glimpses of their unshielded Force signatures, matched what she was feeling. She barely had time to react before the woman, and given how little she was wearing this Kaminoan was *definitely* female, was abruptly *right next to her*.

"Oh, thank the Force, a person!"

Celeste's mind record scratched as she realized she was being *hugged*, rather than attacked. Thankfully, given she wasn't much of a hugger, the alien woman seemed to realize she'd given her guest a fright. She backed off, but was still smiling hugely. Which looked *weird*. She hadn't seen a single native smile until now!

"Ah! I'm sorry, it's just been so long since I spoke to someone! The last conversation I had was just to buy spare parts, and that was 1,200 years ago! I think I smothered that poor young one a bit, but it was just so nice to speak to a Kaminoan that wasn't so stuffy. Bit of an oddball that one, but it was a nice conversation!"

Okay...*what?*

"Errr, how long have you been down here, Master...?"

The Kaminoan Jedi Master, and Celeste was confident this person *was* a Jedi, made a noise of distress.

"Oh dear, I'm being a terrible host! My name is Kina Ha! Come, come, I felt you coming and prepared some human-friendly food! All grown here in the labs, or hunted up closer to the surface! I've had quite a long time to experiment with many aquatic dishes! I hope you like it!"

Only the unspoken question had been answered immediately, but as Celeste found herself drawn along in the wake of Kina Ha, the woman kept chattering.

"As for how long? Well, the dating system has changed a few times, so it can be a bit confusing. Somewhere closer to 4,000 years than 3,000, I think. Really, I didn't expect my watch to

be *this* long or I might have brought more entertainment! Or waited a while to come, for that matter!”

Trying *really* hard not to gape, Celeste tentatively probed.

“I can understand that, I’ve had difficulty in translating my own date of birth to modern systems. I was born on Ossus, as best I’ve been able to tell, roughly 4023 standard years ago now. Though I was in stasis for most of that time. I was a child when Exar-Kun invaded Ossus, having escaped aboard one of the evacuation ships.”

Kina Ha, if anything, seemed even more excited.

“Ah! You’re from close to my own time, then! I was active for a few decades before that, wandering the Outer Rim, then for several centuries afterward. I was just relaxing on Vorusku, a few decades after that mess with Viti and the Eternal Empire, when I had a vision that had me rushing back here. Only to find no evidence it was coming to pass just yet. I set up a watch to look out for it, only to be here ever since! But come, food first, before serious things!”

Kina had led her into a rather cozy space, with a meditation mat that looked out a porthole into the dark of the ocean, partially lit by the Outpost but still dim and murky. There was an ancient holo-projector, a rather impressive array of nicknacks from various eras...and a table set for two with food that smelled genuinely delicious. Sensing no malice and getting the idea that going along with this ancient hermit would probably get her answers faster than trying to insist on anything, Celeste took one of the seats and tentatively tried the food.

It was even better than it had smelled.

Enough so that she unconsciously let out a little moan as the fish in the dish positively melted into pure flavor in her mouth. She caught what she had done and blushed lightly, yet Kina Ha just laughed in delight, before starting to eat herself.

“I’m pleased you like it! I admit I’ve grown rather tired of anything fish related myself. But I’ve had a *lot* of time to learn various skills and try to make it as palatable as possible. There is only so much one can contemplate even something as wonderful as the Force before you need a break, after all! So little hobbies picking up various skills have been one way to stay sane. Truly, it’s lucky my batch was originally intended for long deep-space missions, or I might have not been suited for such an arduously long watch.”

Well, that bit about the Force was certainly true. Even *without* accounting for a couple of *thousand years* stuck done here with little else to do. Though it certainly explained how *deep* Kina Ha’s Force signature was. So many years spent meditating on the Force even part of the time would have a major effect. Celeste herself spent a lot of time in hyperspace, chasing between planets for leads, and even that was enough to have gained a deeper connection to the Force than most boasted. Kina Ha was *built different* if she was still sane, more or less at least, after so long. Possibly literally built different, actually, if Celeste was interpreting that comment about her ‘batch’ correctly.

“I’ve even taken to following quite a news broadcasts from this interesting League of Free Stars! I admit, I was never so tempted to end my watch for a bit. Imagine, someone actually having

the sheer grit to take on the Hutts like that! Still, I suppose I have a bit of a cost sunk fallacy in my current mission. I would purely hate to miss the danger my vision showed me after all this time.”

There was the opening she needed. The food was *spectacular*, but Celeste was certain she hadn’t been drawn here just for that.

“I suspect you have not missed it, given that the Force brought me to you, and I came tracking what I suspect are Sith dealings to this world.”

Kina Ha went still, focusing on Celeste with extreme intensity.

“Sith dealings? The vision that brought me here was of countless soldiers of the Dark Side emerging from my home and its cloning program. Yet, in all the many centuries I’ve carefully observed them, I have not yet identified such an army.”

A tingle of *absolute certainty* ran down Celeste’s spine. Something half of the Force, and half of her own intuition. She put down her fork, thankful she’d finished the amazing fish at least, and focused on the subject just as intently as Kina Ha.

“The current Sith is from a line that favors subtly and deception over all else. A single Master and Apprentice system, with no others raised to Darth status or fully trained, only occasional assassins or throw away assets. We are nearly one hundred percent certain that Count Dooku is the current apprentice, and we *are* one hundred percent sure that the previous Master was one Hego Damask. What we are missing is the link between them, who *his* Apprentice, now the current Master, is. I managed to track funds from Damask holdings through numerous cut-outs, to an order placed *here* by one Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas.”

Kina Ha jerked, a light of recognition lighting in her eyes.

“But that army was ordered *for the Republic*, by the Jedi Order!”

Celeste straightened, heart beating wildly in triumph.

“Yes! Yes, that must be the one! We’ve seen signs that the Sith may be behind *both* the military build up of the CIS *and* a quieter build up for the Republic. I’m *virtually certain* the current Master is within the Republic Senate. Which means...”

Kina Ha was sharp, if nothing else, finishing Celeste’s thought easily.

“They are playing both sides! No matter *who* wins the upcoming war, the Sith come out on top! All while they can hide any assassinations or clearing away of opponents to their rule in the chaos of the war!”

Yes. Yes, it all fit. Particularly with the way this ‘Banite’ line of Sith had been focused on manipulating things from the shadows. A war would likely even deplete the number of Jedi that they would have to face in the end, by spending Jedi lives attempting to preserve the Republic against Count Dooku. The problem, though...

“How do we stop it? There’s no way to prevent the war at this point. The issues, even if they were influenced by the Sith, are *real* now. Hundreds of trillions of credits have been spent by both sides, at *minimum*, to prepare for a war that both sides want. Even knowing that Sith have been

behind some of it, the Jedi Order has struggled to do more than slow it down and make preparations. Even if we stopped the Clone Army, who *must* be the solution that the Republic is counting on to man all the ships and such they have prepared, then it would just be *Dooku* that won. The Sith win either way, by their own plan's design."

Kina Ha's brow furrowed, clearly understanding the issue. Her long fingers thrummed on the table, before she abruptly nodded, the sharp motion almost violent with her anatomy.

"We need more information. We have the beginnings of knowing enough, and you've brought much of the who's and the why's with you. But we still don't know how the Master is, or how they intend to utilize the army. Is it just one big gamble? Set loose both sides in the galaxy, let them wear themselves down, then take over the winner from the inside? Or is there more to the plan?"

Celeste frowned at that, instantly shaking her head.

"No. Not a gamble. Not with *these* Sith. They've been working on this for literal centuries, closer to a full millennium. On the CIS side, the answer seems obvious. A fully droid army would be almost too easy to take control of once the critical point was reached. But what about the Republic side? How easy would it be to take control of the clones? Are they indoctrinated? Programmed to obey someone or something specific?"

Kina Ha blinked but provided the answer almost immediately.

"Yes to the indoctrination. All Clone Armies produced by Kamino are genetically tweaked for loyalty, then trained in such a way that refusing orders is almost impossible. It is why they are considered such a 'valuable product.'"

There was some *serious* derision in that term, coming from Kina, which Celeste could certainly understand. There was a moment of hesitation from the woman before she continued.

"Outright *control* is a different question. I wouldn't put it past my people to do such a thing, but I'm currently unaware of a means they could do so. I'm only tapped so far into their feeds, however. Enough to assess each Clone Army, but not to be aware of all of their research projects. It is possible they've found some more overt method of programming. Certainly, such methods have been found before and will be found again. I am merely unaware of any that would work on such a scale."

Celeste frowned at the odd tone in Kina's voice at that final sentence, something twiggling in her mind. The thought formed properly a second later and she found herself voicing a question almost before it fully finished forming.

"Wait, just how large *is* this army, anyway?"

Kina Ha blinked, coming out of her contemplation about possible mind control methods.

"Ah. Well, the original order was for 1 million units. A Kaminoan Clone Unit is, for clarity, a battalion of 576 troopers. Five hundred combat troops, with seventy-six combat-capable support staff. Medics, pilots, that sort of thing. Currently, only about half are ready, but the total ordered number would amount of six hundred and ninety-two million, two hundred thousand, troops."

Celeste cursed. She couldn't help it. *Logically*, it made complete sense. Even for just the core of a new Republic military, capable of fighting a droid army the size the CIS was building, you'd need extreme numbers. So much so that even close to 700 million would likely only be a fraction of the total required. But as an elite core for a conscripted or drafted army to form around, it would be enough to get a war truly moving.

Kina Ha, rather than being offended at the cursing, merely snorted, lips twitching.

"Quite. It's easily the largest army I've seen my people put together before, but their stated purpose made that logical enough, and I had detected no *direct* Dark Side influence in the process. Yet, if what you say is true about this new brand of Sith being subtle, a control mechanism of some sort would make sense. Even looking for it, the Jedi wouldn't sense the danger if the clones themselves were unaware."

Nodding grimly at that, Celeste began putting together a plan.

"Then we need to know two things. First, who can give commands to this army. That would reveal a list of the possible Sith. Second, does a control mechanism exist and, just as importantly, can it be disabled? If it can, we could at least disarm *part* of the trap. Even if the army might be fundamentally required to protect the Republic from the *other* Sith's forces."

Kina Ha nodded, her energy seeming to spike.

"Excellent! Well, not excellent, terrible of course. But, I must say, I'm pleased to finally know the threat I sensed and be acting against it! I've infiltrated enough of the systems of this world to have a good idea where we can start getting answers, too!"

Feeling as if she was both onto something important *and* racing against the clock, Jedi Master Celeste Morne settled in with her host. They knew what to look for now, and she was determined to do whatever was possible to derail the Sith plan, now that she had a piece of it right in front of her...

Chapter 134: Collision Course

– Tythe – 21.7 BBY –

Izuku and Shaak Ti had taken the long way back to Tythe, choosing to do so in order to prevent any risk of cluing people into Celeste's own mission, or even her *existence in general*. That wasn't to say that the two week loop they'd spent had been without value. Even aside from spending more time together and studying the holocron they'd found on Rishi, they had used their cover identities as a pair of smugglers to take a personal pulse of the underworld. While Izuku got regular reports from LIS, and Shaak Ti had access to similar reports from the Jedi Order, nothing quite replaced firsthand intelligence. Doubly so for Force users, who could get as much out of the emotions of a people group or place as they could out of hard numbers or data trails.

They had both come away with a matching and unfortunate assessment that tensions had reached a point that a single major flashpoint might set off the war everyone was bracing for. Everything from large illegal bounties on specific senators to a massive uptick in arms smuggling

had been noted, though for that last bit the *players* had changed in some surprising ways. Apparently, Corellia, Alderaan, and several other unexpected worlds had abruptly started buying up war materials. Not *obviously*. Corellia, in particular, was quite good at hiding such things. But it was there to be noticed if you knew where to look and what to look *for*.

It had been Shaak that had first picked out the pattern, one that they'd confirmed when they'd double checked it against LIS reports. Apparently, the Jedi Order must have spread *something* around, as it was mostly those worlds or groups with some connection to the Order that were making quiet moves. Just as one example they'd found to verify the pattern via LIS, Kashyyyk had been purchasing additional ships from the League. Not only more Defender IIs as system patrol craft, but also some of the Munifex II Heavy Frigates that the League Navy was phasing out. For the most part they were only selling those to defense forces in places like Abrion Major, but someone had approved the sale to Kashyyyk and Izuku certainly agreed with that decision.

Christophsis, Belsavis, Brentaal IV, Dac, Kalarba, Manda, Mrlsst, Nubia, Tynna, Thisspias and a two dozen more worlds besides. All of them had connections to the Jedi Order, or else connections to some other world that did like Kalarba to Alderaan. Each of them was showing quiet signs of making preparations, using assets unique to them. Mining operations, shipyards, droid manufactures and more. All were beefing up assets entirely independent of the other buildups already ongoing. Whether that was a good or bad thing, they weren't sure, but it was certainly another hydrospanner in the works.

Things were clearly coming to a head and all the galaxy could do was brace for it.

It was a reality which honestly only made it easier to start making arrangements for Izuku to travel to Coruscant to speak with the Senate. As the League had surged in size, to the point of having surpassed 2,500 major worlds and thousands of smaller settlements, he had become a figure of interest for the Galaxy at large. A figure that was wildly divisive and which all manner of groups wanted to manipulate for their own ends. In other circumstances, he'd have avoided the situation like a particularly grotesque and infectious plague.

Yet with Celeste's warning and request in mind, he had no choice but to begin making arrangements. Though it would take a few months to make everything happen via proper channels. Hopefully, the growing tensions in the galaxy didn't explode before then...

... ..

– Cularin System – 21.6 BBY –

Ayala had to admit that she hadn't expected to get pulled straight from Ryloth after talks there had ended, into another confused situation, by *Master Fay* of all people. Complete with most of her League diplomatic team, too. The fact that Master Fay had proceeded to take her to Ossus, where they picked up several additional people. Including Master Altis, Master Thorla, Knight Agai'i, and Master Plo Koon of all people. The fact that they'd then picked up a few Republic Officials, who had seemed as confused as anyone else, had only added to the mystery. At least until they'd arrived near where the Cularin System had just *flat out vanished* from the galaxy several years ago...

Just in time for the entire Star System to flicker back into existence.

Matters had gotten *complicated* shortly after that, as the system had vanished before the Separatist Crisis truly began. Hell, they'd missed the entire Hutt Crusade, too. Which, given that the system was located within The Slice, wasn't exactly a small detail. Politics within this section of the galaxy was virtually unrecognizable from when the star system had up and disappeared on everyone.

Frankly, she was *very glad* that she herself wasn't all that needed to deal with the legal and political clusterfuck that the system reappearing was causing.

No, instead, she and Plo Koon had chased after one Len Markus, who had caused the star system to jump forward in time in the first place. He'd done so with a powerful Sith artifact called the Darkstaff, an ancient relic known to be able to both meddle with time and destroy worlds. Aayla had managed to destroy it in the end with a burst of Force Light channeled through Heart of the Guardian, in much the same way she'd done with the Muur Talisman. Yet, in doing so, she and Plo Koon had stumbled into additional truths.

The first was that the native species, the Tarasins, were universally Force Sensitive. While rare, that wasn't unheard of, with other examples being the Miraluka, Iktotchi, and Neti. Thankfully, the locals were closer in general strength to the Miraluka, not the Neti. A detail which meant only their strongest members would likely have made the cut for Jedi training. Apparently, this fact had been *known* to the Alamas Jedi Academy, but they'd historically kept it quiet out of respect for the local's desires.

Thankfully, Plo Koon was of a mind to agree with that decision, so neither the local species nor the Alamas instructors would face any backlash over the issue. It also explained why Fay had, either on her own initiative or by guidance of the Force, brought more than just the two Alamas Jedi of Master Thorla and Knight Agai'i from Ossus. Representatives of the Matukai and Luka Sene, in particular, promised to be of interest to the locals. Apparently, while the Tarasins were a very curious people, their culture didn't mesh well with the Jedi most of the time. Which explained why so few of them had ended up taking Jedi training even if they *did* have the strength for it.

Aayla suspected the Ossus Academy would have another influx of recruits soon.

The *second* discovery, that there was yet another extremely powerful Force Artifact here called the Eye of the Sun, had been even more unexpected. Apparently created originally to protect the planet from the Brotherhood of Darkness during the New Sith Wars, it was a Force Amplifier of immense power. One that the Darkstaff had been trying to guide its wielder to reach. Its secret would be kept even more tightly than that of the local's Force Sensitivity...because both Aayla and Plo Koon had realized immediately what it could be used for.

Master Fay, after helping the locals work out how to reintegrate with the rest of the galaxy (which much to Aayla's shock included a deal to quietly place a Jump Gate in the system) would be taking charge of the Eye. Even more than what Celeste had discovered, what they had all instantly realized might be possible with the Eye of the Sun could well ruin the Sith's plans. Figuring out how to manage it without harming the planet or its people would be Master Fay's task for the foreseeable future...

... ..

– Tythe Central – 21.5 BBY –

“Well, the arrangements are made. We’re off to throw ourselves into a deep pool of sharks, I guess.”

Aayla snorted at that, even as she tucked into Izuku’s side as they stared out from the observation bubble attached to their personal apartments, looking over the constantly flowing traffic moving in and out of the massive space station. The bubble was, in fact, quite real rather than a projection, which might have been more secure. It *did* have multiple layers of shielding over it in the event someone tried to assassinate them through it, and the door connecting it to their rooms was a thick blast door. They’d insisted on it despite all resistance and required protection, however, having wanted the view. It was one well chosen to give them a prim view of both the stars...and one of the space docks for the station. Izuku had been fascinated with ships since his arrival in this reality, and the sheer variety of those that moved through Tythe Central these days made for great watching in idle moments. Few of those that either of them may have these days.

Tythe’s already explosive growth had only ramped up since the Hutt Crusade, Tythe Central now running at full capacity despite additional habitat stations having been built to ease the strain. The planet itself house some population as well, of course, but the fact that its ecosystem was still recovering had caused them to limit how much industry was placed on it. As well as how many people lived on the surface. There were less than a hundred and fifty million beings down on the planet...and Tythe Central alone had another twelve million. Add in the rest of the stations, habitats, and industrial complexes on the rest of the planets in the system? The total population of the Tythe system was around 225 million.

Respectable for an Outer Rim world that hadn’t possessed a native species. Yet honestly quite small compared to the population of many of the worlds they’d conquered in now-former Hutt Space. Evocar (formerly Nal Hutta) alone had a population upwards of seven billion. Nor was it the only such world they now administered. In truth, on the face of it, it was absurd that they’d managed to take over Hutt Space.

Which, of course, is exactly how they’d gotten away with it.

From the start, they’d known the only way to pull it off was to mix droids with their sentient forces...and to deny the Hutts their most critical sources of manpower on top of that. The sentient armed forces he’d had available as of Operation Ignite had only been around seven million. Five million of those had been ground forces, the other two million fleet and logistics. A tiny drop in the bucket compared to what they should have needed. If, that was, the average droid-to-organic ratio for the entire military hadn’t been *15-to-1*. Since, unlike the Trade Federation’s trash droids, the League’s were comparable to a well-trained human? That meant his *effective* numbers had been closer to 112 million.

It still shouldn’t have been enough.

It *wouldn’t* have been enough, if not for the fact the Hutts had little standing military. They’d destroyed or captured the massive mothball fleets that were supposed to be the Hutt’s strategic reserve. Initial, critical targets of Operation Ignite had been the three Hutt worlds that provided the bulk of their sentient muscle. Klatooine, Vodran, and Kintan had been contained and cut off from

supplying the Hutts, keeping them from instantly raising millions of ground troops. Kintan, in particular, was now a full member of the League. The Nikto had been most rebellious of the three slave species and, even if they hadn't been willing to commit to fighting the Hutts at first, by the time the Hutts had been finished off that had changed.

Honestly, while they'd had to be careful in inducting it, Kintan was now one of the handful of Tier 3 worlds in the League. Under a new government, caused by a not-so-quiet revolution during the latte portion of the Hutt Crusade, they were now providing the League with not just more soldiers, but quite a bit of military hardware. Nor was Kintan the only bright spot, indeed it wasn't even the most prominent. That would be Nimban, whose orbital shipyards had been fully converted to League standards and then *expanded*. Something which had made it one of the only Tier 4 worlds of the League, aside from Tythe itself.

"We're as ready as we're going to get anytime soon, Izu. I doubt we can stop the war, at this point, but if we can identify the Sith Celeste believes is within the Senate? Well, we might at least prevent them from taking over the Republic side of the war. Though I hope we can do it quietly. We might kick off the war ourselves if whoever they are is in a critical position."

Izuku nodded, then shrugged.

"Hopefully they won't be too high up the chain. The higher they are the more risk the Jedi would spot them, so they might only be in a 'power behind the throne' sort of position. In which case we might catch them out and isolate them before they can do too much additional harm. Assuming Celeste is right, of course."

Aayla snuggled into his side deeper, not saying another word. Given how closer their bond was, she didn't need to, though. He could feel her near-certainty that Celeste had been correct. While the Shadow's leads were by far the best evidence they had, there were too many other fingers pointed in the general direction of the Republic's leadership as well. If it *wasn't* a Senator, than the most likely alternative was a major Megacorp head. A high-ranking Kuati noble, for example, would have a similar level of influence compared to what Hego Damask had possessed. Though Celeste had turned up no close connections between any of that world's nobility and Damask.

Well, whatever would come, would come. Somehow, he got the feeling that it would all come to a head when he visited the Senate. He just didn't know how yet, or what the consequences for the galaxy would be...

Chapter 135: Ignition

– 500 Republica Tower – Coruscant – 22.4 BBY –

"So, what is the mood of the Senate, Princess?"

Padmé rolled her eyes at the nickname Aayla had stuck her with. She'd tried to refute the argument that Queens didn't get demoted to Princesses when they retired. Unfortunately for her, Sabé had been in hearing range and had run with it, proceeding to infect the rest of the handmaidens with the teasing nickname. One that Izuku had to admit fit. Padmé had always

possessed a certain poise, aura, and elegance in motion that certainly fit the idea of royalty better than most *actual* royals Izuku had met over the years. The fact that even *Mei* had given her a princess-related nickname in ‘Xena,’ really said a lot, come to think of it.

“A chaotic mess. If you hadn’t explained *why* you wanted to make an appearance, I would have strongly advised you to *not*. Though, honestly, I suspect you might actually have accidentally stalled out tensions coming to a head even earlier. Announcing your visit made all the other players decide they could hold off to make use of your presence.”

Padmé made an irritated gesture that resembled an annoyed cat more than anything, aiming it generally in the direction of distant Senate dome.

“The Separatists want to lean into the fact that a lot of star systems are *legally* leaving the Republic, using a loophole to join the League. Arguing that such loopholes existing at all fundamentally supports their own right to leave, whatever the laws on the books say or don’t say about the matter. The Peace Party, on the other hand, wants to point your way as proof that non-Republic governments can be a positive thing and exist alongside the Republic instead of being a direct threat to it.”

Izuku grimaced, having predicted both of those positions easily enough. The one he *didn’t* have a good handle on, though...

“And the Loyalists?”

Padmé’s expression twitched through several emotions before settling on a mix of annoyance and exasperation.

“The Loyalists are oddly split, to be honest. A lot of those from the Mid Rim, even some from the Inner Rim, have benefited from the Hutts being gone. Which means they aren’t inclined to cause trouble with the League. The *Core World* Loyalists are *pissed*, almost to the last member. With a very few exceptions like Alderaan and Corellia who don’t care either way, most of the Core is *aggravated* with the League for causing a spike in costs for things like food and metals. The way you’ve shored up the Rim around your section of the galaxy has given places like the Abrion Sector the ammunition to force fair deals that the Core hates.”

Aayla snorted derisively.

“They were used to being able to cheat the Rim worlds, with those worlds not being able to do anything about it.”

Padmé’s expression shifted to a frown, but she reluctantly nodded.

“Unfortunately, I can’t really refute that. This crisis has made it increasingly obvious that the Core Worlds were abusing the Rim, to the point that the Separatists have entirely too much ammunition for which there isn’t a real answer. The Jedi Order’s recent push against corruption helped slow the rate of those unhappy enough to leave. But it was too little, too late.”

More than one person in the room nodded at that. It was Dormé, in her role as Padmé’s social-political advisor, who spoke up next.

“There’s a second, more unusual element to it as well. Despite a large number of Loyalist worlds being non-human, the Core World subset of the faction has started to take on a somewhat worrying human-supremist bias. Some of the older worlds, like Alsakan, have always had a certain amount of that. Clear back to the Pius Dea era, really. But it hasn’t been all that strong, historically. Yet there’s been a serious upsurge of humanocentrism since the Separatist movement started, with the culprits focusing on the fact many of the larger players in the Confederacy are non-humans from the Mid and Outer Rim.”

Even Padmé looked a bit surprised at that, causing Dormé to shrug as her boss frowned at her.

“Sorry, Padmé. It’s something I was looking into, and you should have a preliminary report buried in your non-urgent briefs, but there’s been a bigger spike of it since the Sovereign’s arrival. Enough for me to finally realize it was a bigger issue than I originally thought. I’m beginning to suspect it’s a major fault line between the various Loyalist factions that we didn’t recognize until now. Worse, I have no idea who or what is fueling it. It feels too sweeping to be fully natural.”

Sabé hummed, nodding thoughtfully before speaking.

“That would fit with some of what I’ve been seeing on the intel and counter-intel side, I think. There are a couple of major powers within the Loyalist bloc jockeying for position. One of them pushing the idea as a way to boost his allies and suppress or marginalize dissenting voices might make sense. A few of those jockeying for position control major Core World news outlets too, which would make it easy to slant things.”

Cordé cleared her throat, causing the whole room to look at her. She acted mostly as an aide/secretary for Padmé’s group, typically having the least to say. So her speaking up drew attention by default.

“As important as that probably is to look into, we’re straying a bit from the question of briefing the Sovereign on what to expect from the Senate.”

That got looks of chagrin from more than one person, and Padmé semi-smoothly redirected.

“Right. On that note, there are a few specific senators that you need to be aware of. The first is Rishi Lenoan, the Senator for Kuat. He’s virtually certain to use this chance to put political pressure on the League, badly wanting details on some of your ship technology and weapons systems...”

The chat would go on for some time, as Padmé did her best to prepare Izuku for the Sarlacc Pit he was about to step into.

... ..

– Coruscant – Jedi Temple –

Jedi Master Luminara Unduli smiled every-so-slightly as she found her ever-dutiful Padawan meditating with a ball of contained Force Light in her hands. It was a skill that too few Jedi were able to use, and a major push had come down from the High Council to find any of those able

to manage it. Luminara hadn't been particularly surprised when Bariss managed it, despite the fact that Luminara herself was still struggling with the skill. She *could* use it, but not with the ease that Bariss displayed, her Padawan's natural gifts with healing aiding her.

Force Light was, for all intents and purposes, a power that attempted to *heal reality* by purging the Darkside of a localized area. The detrimental effects it had on Darksiders were, in fact, something of an incidental side effect of its intended purpose. Given the increasing issues the Jedi Order had been running into with the Dark Side of late, it was a *valuable* side effect, however. Enough so that the notoriously-stingy Council of First Knowledge had been all but whacked-over-the-head by Grandmaster Yoda and firmly told to dig up the various holocrons that could teach the Force ability. After the way a mass-usage of Force Light had weakened the Veil of the Darkside for a time, First Knowledge hadn't had a good counter argument, even if they'd grumbled about it anyway.

Sadly, it had proven not to be an easy ability to learn. Not purely from a holocron at least. Several of those that had come back from the Hutt Crusade had managed it much more easily, having encountered proper teachers of the ability. Even *with* them helping spread it, bringing up the numbers that could use it had been relatively slow, as it required methods of thought that ran counter to the calm contemplation that was the primary focus of the modern Jedi Order. Luminara was, despite her own difficulties with it, honestly faring better than most. Something she attributed to being a Guardian rather than a Consular, even if many people tended to forget that was what she was.

Shaking off her idle thoughts, she reluctantly broke into her Padawan's meditation.

"Bariss, it's time to head out. The Senate session will start in less than an hour."

For just a moment, her Padawan's facial expression twitched with displeasure, which caused Luminara herself to need to hold back a snort. Bariss was very clearly *annoyed* that they'd been shanghaied into serving as the Jedi Observers on the Senate. Luminara wasn't a huge fan of that fact either, but *someone* needed to handle it, and Luminara was a logical choice. Despite being a Guardian, she was well known as a calm and even-handed negotiator. Added to the fact that she was one of the handful of Jedi that were used as regular 'Advisors' by the High Council? With Adi Galia, who normally handled the job absent, and the High Council *incredibly busy*, she was a good fit. Being an 'Advisor' was an unofficial position, but one that almost always indicated you were being considered as a possible future member. Making her the closest thing to a High Council member available.

An unfortunate truth for both her and her poor Padawan, as neither of them particularly liked dipping their hands in the cesspool that was politics. Still, Bariss did good to display that dislike so little, even the small twitch having been something her Master caught only by dint of familiarity. The younger Mirialan let the sphere of light she'd been maintaining fade and rolled smoothly to her feet.

"Yes, Master. If duty calls, we must obey."

Failing to suppress her snort this time, Luminara decided not to chastise her Padawan for the tone she'd used. It wasn't like *she* particularly wanted this job either, after all. Though at least

today's session should be more interesting than most, with Sovereign Midoriya scheduled to speak on behalf of the League he ruled...

... ..

– Coruscant – Senate Floor – 22.4 BBY –

“...and we have with us, as a special speaker today, Sovereign of the League of Free Stars, Izuku Midoriya.”

Izuku grimaced, still filtering through the thousands of senators present. He'd hoped to do Celeste's check all in one go, but had horrifically underestimated the impact of the *sheer amount of noise* caused by Coruscant's trillions of inhabitants. He'd been on a dozen ecumenopolis worlds previously, of course. Normally, however, he just tightened the filters on the flow of data he got from the Force, excluding anything that wasn't an immediate threat to him. Trying to filter for *suspicious presences*, in a room full of thousands of sentients who were nearly *all* suspicious on account of being *politicians*? All with the immense weight of trillions of Force signatures pressing down on his filters?

Not easy, to vastly understate the issue.

He'd barely cleared a third of the Senate so far, as his Ambassador's Repulsorpod floated up to center stage. He started to shift his focus, knowing he had only a few seconds to get his mind in the right zone to make his speech and handle any questions. It was just as he had his filters properly tightened again, squaring his mind to speak...when he finally flew within fifty meters of the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic.

Izuku's brain stopped cold, eyes staring, even as his pod came to a stop perhaps two dozen meters from the man. It rotated to face the rest of the Senate who he was supposed to be addressing, but Izuku unconsciously swiveled himself, eyes locked on the Chancellor. The chamber, expecting him to speak, began to murmur as he did nothing of the sort.

What happened next, he would never be sure if even the *Force* had predicted.

Perhaps, had he not been shifting between mindsets. Perhaps if he hadn't been quite so surprised, or if the presence he'd felt hadn't been so vile. If he'd had any hint or suspicion before that moment. A list of maybes and might haves a kilometer long would occur to him later. Much later. Right now, in this moment, with his mic set to project his voice through the entire Republic Senate, Izuku Midoriya failed to filter the first thought that popped through his brain and out his mouth.

“Wait. How the hell did you guys elect a Sith Lord as your Supreme Chancellor?”

For just a heartbeat or two, every sound in the Senate Chamber stopped as people tried to process what the kriff their guest speaker had just said. Yet, even as Izuku's eyes blew wide open in realization of *what* he'd just said and whose face he'd just said it to, it was *far* too late. A certain Jedi Padawan, whose Master was currently acting as the Jedi Observer for the Senate...instinctively responded to the question by activating the ability she'd been explicitly practicing for use against Dark Siders.

A ridiculously strong pulse of Force Light, fed by the half-panicked reaction of that Padawan, filled the Senate.

Sheev Palpatine was caught completely off guard.

Already reeling from the unexpected question, having gotten *zero* warning from the Dark Side of the Force due to Izuku's unique relationship with the Cosmic Force as a whole and routine use of Force Cloak specifically, *Darth Sidious* **reacted**. Not with *reason*, which might have caused him to bluff, to act affronted at the accusation and fake the pain of the Jedi using Force Light being a direct assassination attempt by the Jedi. *That* might have let him ruin the Jedi, had he had time to think.

But he *didn't* have time to think.

Instead, as the Force Light clawed not just at his personal Force Cloak, but also at *his connection to the Veil of the Darkside*, he momentarily panicked. In a moment of sheer, visceral, reflex he couldn't have stopped in that instant of unexpected vulnerability, he reached for the Veil, grasped power from it...and launched a brutally powerful burst of Force Lightning directly at the Padawan who had triggered his pain.

A Padawan whose Master was a *Guardian*, not a Consular, and who had the brute spinal reflexes to get her lightsaber up in time to intercept the lightning. *Screams*, cries and howls burst forth from hundreds of throats, some few who actually *understood* what they were seeing, and far more who were merely thrown into panic by the abrupt chaos. Izuku's own snap reaction to throw up *another* Force Light caused Palpatine to howl...but this time he had a firm grip on the Veil to power himself and managed to get his mind working through the pain and disruption the technique caused him.

His Force Cloak had fallen with the first burst of Lightning and he knew it.

Every Jedi on the planet had likely sensed it.

For all his evil, for all that Palpatine was merely riding the wave of efforts the Sith had created over centuries of effort, the fact remained that he still a genius. Not one of Math and Science as his own Master had been, but one of social manipulation and foresight. In bare seconds his mind raced through scenarios and options. Thoughts of trying to play this off were dismissed first. If he hadn't reacted the way he had, he could have pulled off calling this a power grab by the Jedi. But Sith Lighting was just a *bit* too well known, once people started looking. He ruthlessly discarded the idea of retaining his position in a way that few Sith would have been willing to accept.

With that done, he began selecting contingencies.

Darth Sidious might not be the greatest or most powerful Sith to ever live, but he was *far* better than virtually all of them at long-term planning. Despite his own arrogance, despite the unfaltering belief that *he* would become the Immortal Emperor of the Galaxy, he had *still* planned for failure. There had *always* been a chance that, so close to the heart of Jedi Power, someone would manage to detect him. A chance that had been made more real to him by the damage to the Veil during the Hutt Crusade. Damage that had inspired Sidious to review and revise his contingences.

Now, he selected one and executed it was ruthless rage.

A bare instant before Izuku and Luminara both would have lept toward him from their pods, 'Supreme Chancellor Palaptine' triggered an override that took control of the security in the Senate Chamber. There weren't any *weapons* in the chamber, of course. Auto-Turrets or the like would have presented too tempting a target for assassins with slicing or infiltration skills. What there *were*, however, were *shields*.

Lots and lots of shields.

There were shields built into every pod, shields built into the walls, shield projectors aimed to create curtain walls, layered defensive bulwarks for the senators to hide behind and security to advance through. All of them top of the line, all of them rigged to a central system so Senate Security could remotely activate them in the event of a threat. All of them *came online all at once*, stopping Luminara and Izuku dead as they nearly slammed into the shields generated by their own pods. Pods whose controls locked at the same time. Every Pod *except* for the Chancellor's.

Even as Luminara and Izuku began trying to bring down the shields on the Pods, something both could do in a matter of seconds, Palatine was already moving. His own pod *hadn't* brought its shield up, and he channeled the Force as he lept for the only entrance his contingency hadn't just left unshielded, but outright opened. A maintenance shaft which he unerringly found, even as he parried an admittedly potent attempt by Sovereign Midoriya to grab him with Force Telekinesis, Izuku having quickly broken his pod's shield.

Diving into the shaft...it sealed behind him just as Luminara got free, only for the next wave of the contingency plan to come into effect and give them *other* problems to deal with.

Explosions ripped through support pillars far *under* the Senate, in lower levels with less security. It was a great weakness of a world like Coruscant, and Palpatine's ruthless contingency sought to exploit it. Even as he raced through a pre-cleared path that would see him clear of the disaster, the Senate Dome began to *list*. Nor was it the *only* structure so effected. Similar explosions had happened kilometers below parts of the Jedi Temple.

There, at least, the fact that the Jedi had been slowly reactivating and restoring old systems meant that the damage was far more contained than Sidious had planned for. Emergency support systems took the weight of most of the Temple, transferring it back to the mountain the core of the Temple rested on. The damage would be *serious* and several dozen Jedi would die, as not *all* of the safety systems had yet been restored. Yet the damage would be far less than he'd hoped for.

One way or another, it would keep them *far too busy* to chase him as he made his way to a ship that could get him off the planet in a hurry.

The Senate Dome was not so lucky. At one time it had possessed similar safety systems. Yet, like much that was wrong with the Republic, rot and corruption had damaged them. Even before Palpatine got to them, decades of corruption had seen the maintenance budgets for the systems skimmed off, leading to them being poorly maintained. Once Palpatine had gotten his hooks into the Chancellorship, that rot had been *shifted*, 'maintenance' done on the systems actually installed more pieces of this particular contingency instead of fixing the damage. As such,

those few systems that still worked abruptly *overloaded* and the listing of the Senate Dome became a *fall*.

Back inside that Dome Izuku, senses screaming, reached out for the Force.

At no time, since he first arrived in this galaxy, had he *truly* stretched to find just how powerful he had become. Despite both his mentor and his original idol, Izuku had never been one to solve all of his issues with brute force. Only now, when brute *FORCE* was the only option, did he *fling* himself into the embrace of the Force. Leaning on his recent improvements in letting the Force guide him, for the first time he simply *accepted* all that it gave, releasing every filter and just letting it *flood* into him in a way *far* beyond his ability to *control*. Then he asked it for help.

The Force *surged*.

Palpatine stumbled, nearly tripping as he hurried down a corridor, as the Veil wasn't so much torn as a *hole* was lanced through it. Inside the Senate Chamber *light* poured out of Izuku as he began to float, and abruptly the ponderously accelerating *fall* of the Senate Dome...stopped. There was no slowing, or deceleration. It just *stopped*, damaging a number of pods as the barely-guided Force channeling through Izuku simply *grabbed the building* and told gravity and momentum to both kindly fuck off.

Shocked silence lasted only for a moment as Luminara took advantage of the fact that the powerful projected shields protecting the outer Dome itself had failed. Buoyed by the hole in the Veil and the ridiculous amount of barely-controlled Force spilling freely from Izuku, she grabbed the free-flowing force and shouted, thrusting with a most potent telekinetic burst she'd ever come even *close* to wielding. The result *blew a hole* through a weakened section of the Dome. Brutally forcing herself not to pause, despite that action making her feel like she'd hollowed herself out, she grabbed more of the Force and seized hold of the nearest dozen pods. Even as she forced them to move, she began barking orders to her stunned Padawan.

Bariss grabbed another three of the repulsor pods and together they sent the pods, who's repulsors were thankfully still working, careening through the hole and out into the Coruscant sky. The moment those pods were clear, they did it again, and again, and *again*. A few other Jedi, young Knights who had all been assigned to protection details and hadn't managed to react half as fast, still caught on almost immediately and began mimicking her actions. One, close to the Dome and not generally skilled with telekinesis, chose to leap to the tilted surface and cut open a second corridor for the exiting pods to be forced through.

There were a total of 1,024 repulsor pods in the Senate.

Some had been damaged or destroyed, their occupants killed by debris before Izuku could arrest the fall of the building. Yet, even so, the people in over 850 of them had survived, 778 of them in pods with their repulsors still intact and functional. Proving that not *everyone* in the Senate was lacking in courage or sense, individuals such as Padmé Amidala, Bail Organa, and Senator Yaruva of Kashyyk quickly realized what the Jedi were doing. All of those individuals and half a dozen more scrambled to pull those from fallen pods into their own.

Half a dozen more senators, including Garm Bel Iblis and the representatives from Arkania, Balmorra and Umbara, managed to hotwire or override the lockout on their own pods. Garm and Mee Deechi of Umbara used theirs to rescue as many as they could before exiting, while the others showed different priorities by simply fleeing with their own parties. Working as fast as possible, all of the functioning pods were gotten to before Izuku collapsed, with Izuku himself being pulled out at the last second by Bariss after her own Master had similarly collapsed. Sabé had somehow reached the Jedi Observer pod and hotwired it while the Jedi worked, steering it out with Izuku and the Jedi aboard, as the Dome began rapidly collapsing once more.

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In the end, despite Darth Sidious's attempt to decapitate the government of the Republic and eliminate as many Jedi as possible, he accomplished neither. Less than fifty Jedi and less than ten percent of the Senate died. It was still a heavy blow that would only be made heavier when it was learned he'd successfully fled the planet...and that mere hours later, the Confederacy of Independent Systems Fleet would arrive in key systems. Systems where their fleet would smash the defenses flat before dropping armies of droids to invade.

The Sith had been discovered and routed from the Senate, but at a terrible cost, as the sprawling galactic conflict that would become known as The Clone Wars began...

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