

Can One Displaced Hero Save a Galaxy?

(Chapters 222-226)

Novus Peregrine

Disclaimer: I am, very tragically, not in charge of Disney. All rights to Star Wars belong to Disney (so far as I'm aware). Likewise, My Hero Academia is the creation of Kōhei Horikoshi, not me.

Chapter 122: Lost Stars of Nallastia

– Nallastia – Fondor System – 23.7 BBY –

As Aayla parried blaster fire from a trio of combat droids, she remained more than a little incredulous that she was still dealing with the machinations of a *Hutt*, clear in the Fondor System. Or, at least, that seemed to be how this mess all started.

Specifically, as far as Shaak and Asajj had been able to determine from investigation of a fake derelict pretending to be the ancient colony ship *Sun Runner*, the entire clusterfuck they were dealing with had originally been a long-term plan of Groodo the Hutt. The Hutt, a major owner of the Esseles Shipyards, had apparently intended to use the derelict in a ploy to destroy his competition in the Fondor Shipyards. A plan that might even have worked, without outside interference, but which the Hutt had abandoned after the start of the Hutt Crusade as a bit too provocative. He'd been protected from the effects of the Crusade by the fact he was a *Republic* business being, with no real connection back to the Hutt clans. His long-term plan had been derailed by common sense, an unusual amount of it for a Hutt, when he decided he didn't want that protection to be strained while Hutts were in even more bad odor than usual, galaxy wide.

That said, he'd already built the 400-meter-long fake *Sun Runner*, and Hutts weren't known for just wasting assets like that. Instead of throwing away all of his work, he'd conspired with Senator Rodd of Fondor and a droid designer from Kuat named Hurlo Holowan on an alternate use for the ship. Fondor and Nallastia had a *long* history of disliking each other, a history that started over 4,000 years ago when the moon had been sold to a wealthy party from the Darpa Sector. Said party had desired to save the moon from industrial exploitation by Fondor, and had terraformed it for human habitation.

The colony the buyer had started on his new moon, after naming said moon after his wife, had become fierce environmentalists and preservationists. The locals, in fact, took both nearly to the point of religious fervor, which put them very *firmly* at odds with the industrialists of the planet Fondor itself. In particular, it put them at frequent and heated odds with the Fondor Shipwrights Guild, who very much wanted the moon back for its mineral resources.

The moon and planet *did* have a trade agreement, with the moon providing food for Fondor and Fondor's defense fleet providing protection in return, but they very much didn't like each other. Personally, Aayla considered threatening your own food source to height of abject stupidity, but Senator Rodd had decided that the Hutt's original plan being called off presented an opportunity. If he couldn't be paid off handsomely by Groodo to help destroy the shipyards his world was known

for, then he'd just make his money another way. Specifically, by finally doing away with the small colony on Nallastia and seizing the moon for Fondor...just incidentally taking the mineral rights for himself.

Groodo had actually had the good sense to bow out, selling the *Sun Runner* to the Senator to use as he wanted. Technically perfectly legal, with the Hutt even narcing on the fool to the Jedi, via a clandestine message providing information to Shaak Ti when she'd first officially arrived in system. His game in doing so was perfectly obvious of course, particularly after Shaak Ti rather forcefully interrogated the Senator. Groodo was setting himself up as a concerned businessman who'd built a 'commissioned replica ship,' but become 'worried over what the Senator planned to use it for.' Piously reporting on him made Groodo out to be a positive saint by Hutt standards, farther insulting him from the effects of the Crusades by making himself the 'good guy.'

Aayla could begrudgingly admit that the slimy slug had done a good job of it. Nothing he'd done was technically illegal, and he'd legitimately *helped* by ratting out the Senator. So the Hutt wouldn't even face a slap on the wrist for his part in all of this.

All of this being the fact that the fake *Sun Runner* had been used as bait.

The original colony ship had been *lost*, shortly after delivering its colonists, while it was making a supply run back to their home sector. The Nallastians had been looking for it off and on, via numerous expeditions, for thousands of years since then. Understandably, when it had shown up drifting and a Fondor patrol had 'kindly' pointed it out to them in a gesture meant to 'mend bridges,' they'd had it towed to their world.

Only for battle droids to come pouring out and assault the very Fortress Aayla was now attempting to relieve.

Thankfully, Skull Fortress wasn't undefended, with fifty Nallastian warriors stationed there *at all times*. Maybe a third of them had still been alive and holding out when Aayla, who had slipped into the system separately from Shaak Ti and done the digging for the entire clusterfuck in the background, had managed to reach the volcano in a borrowed Cloakshape fighter. Less thankfully, the reason the droids were attacking *here* was because the Trinity Stones the warriors were protecting contained a gravity vortex that, if the stones were disrupted, would likely wipe out the entire population of the moon. A planned 'accident' that would have been covered up, with the Senator arranging to reclaim the moon after any survivors were dealt with.

Gritting her teeth as she channeled a trick she'd only recently picked up, she blasted the distressingly-capable combat droids with Force Ionize. It was a rare skill that most Jedi shied away from, due to its visual similarity to Force Lightning, but Aayla had searched it out after learning of the Trade Federation's secret battle droid factors. This was the first time she'd attempted to use it outside of experimental training, and she was pleased to see it worked exactly as advertised. The entire group of droids she'd struck with it seized and fried, shutting down...and reducing the incoming fire directed at her by nearly a third.

Satisfied with the success, she rushed in to repeat the maneuver on the next group. With any luck at all she could reach the defenders before too many more of them fell, and together they could either destroy the droid force in full, or else hold them off until Shaak Ti and Asajj arrived with

reinforcements. The *rest* of Fondor hadn't been in on the Senator's scheme, thankfully, and a wing of fighters was already inbound to help. With security forces troops not too far behind on shuttles. She honestly just needed to make sure the Trinity Stones remained undamaged until help arrived, but she'd always been an overachiever...

... ..

*"Beyond the skulls that scream from walls,
The first star rests where giants fell.
The second star burns under falls.
The third star lives where monsters dwell."*

Aayla, accompanied by Quenelle the Skull Queen, also known as Margravine, ruler of Nallastia, stared at the place where two ancient and giant creatures had died. The entirety of the lava tubes they were in were the result of a massive supervolcano going off in ancient days, an event which had originally rendered the moon partially uninhabitable. The fact it *originally* had been a garden moon had made terraforming it for humans again fairly easy, but the remnants of the ancient fauna trapped in the walls of lava here were certainly a creepy sight. One that, combined with the wind following through rock to create a 'howl' of sorts, gave name to the 'Cavern of Screaming Skulls.' They'd already passed the majority of the fossils, but these two were something else. Far larger and far older, the pair of giants looked to have died fighting each other.

"Well, this seems obvious for the first one. Any ideas where the gem we're looking for will be?"

The Margravine shrugged, indicating ignorance beyond the poem passed down from her ancestors. Sighing, Aayla reached out to the Force for a guidance instead, and was relieved to feel a pulse in the direction of one of the skulls. Carefully picking her way over to it, she found what she was looking for concealed in one of its eye sockets. One of the three Lost Stars of Nallastia, the ancient power gems were apparently the only thing that could unmake the Trinity Stones safely. Something that the ruler had agreed needed to happen after the attack came perilously close to damaging one of them. Only Aayla's arrival, followed twenty minutes later by starfighters and troop transports from Fondor, had prevented disaster.

Carefully picking up the power gem, Aayla studied it with curiosity. Such power gems were *immensely* rare. Even more than something like corusca gems, a single one of which could buy a city block on the highest levels of Coruscant. Power gems, being even rarer, were literally priceless...and very, very dangerous. Not in and of themselves, technically, but because they emitted an aura that could completely disrupt energy shields of virtually any kind. Ship shields, station shields, even planetary defense shields. Type or power made no difference.

The Margravine's own ancestors had amassed their fortune, the fortune with which they'd purchased Nallastia in the first place, by playing pirate with the gems. They'd used them to raid ship and stations in the Darpa sector to immense effect, the gems being able to completely bypass the typical protections of shields in their raids. The 'Lost Stars' had also, as it happened, been used to create the Trinity Stones in some fashion Aayla didn't have a prayer of understanding. Only they, or a similar set of power gems, could unmake the stones in return. Thankfully, contrary to common

belief, they hadn't *actually* been lost with the original *Sun Runner*. Instead, they'd been left on the moon and later hidden by the first Margravine's wife to prevent them from being misused again.

"Well, that's one of them, at least. I'm guessing, based on how literal the poem was, that we're looking for a set of waterfalls for the next one. Shall we?"

The Margravine nodded, and the two of them continued deeper into the caverns...

... ..

"So that's it then, but what will you do with the gems and the Trinity Stones? People know now that you still have them."

Margravine Quenelle's expression soured at that.

"The Trinity Stones are harmless without the gems to restart them. As for the gems, I had wished never to need them, precisely because they will be a target now that they've been used. I could put them back into the Cavern, but there is no certainty they will not be found, now that they are known to be on the moon at all."

Aayla nodded and *very carefully* made a suggestion. She'd been feeling the Margravine out the entire time, with a thought in mind.

"The League would love to have use of them. Specifically, to help insert teams onto the remaining Hutt worlds that have planetary shields. The Hutts have proven distressingly willing to destroy their own planets out of spite, killing millions in the process, and getting teams down to disarm their doomsday weapons has been...iffy."

The Margravine's scowl deepened at the suggestion.

"I have no love for the Hutts, who are the exact type we were trying to keep them away from. But they *are* still part of our heritage. Nor am I certain I could trust a government to use them wisely."

Thankfully, Aayla had felt the woman out about her views regarding Jedi, and they were mostly positive. Which meant her next gambit might work.

"So don't give them over to the League, but to the Jedi. Specifically into the care of myself or Shaak Ti, who you've met personally. We'll keep them out of pirate hands while interest in them dies down. If everyone *knows* you gave them to the Jedi, they won't come looking here either. When we return them in a year or two, they won't be looking your way any longer."

The other woman paused, seeming to mull that idea over. Aayla carefully sweetened the pot, with admittedly another long-term goal in mind as well.

"We can also provide protection. Fondor clearly has numerous treacherous elements, and you've been reliant on their navy. The League can post starfighters and a detachment of capital ships to protect the moon specifically. Normally, this deep into the Republic, that wouldn't be possible. Except that Nallastia is explicitly *not* part of the Republic. Meaning we can cut a deal with you directly to put a Fleet Station in around the moon. That would protect you from Fondor's machinations, if they make another attempt like this."

She could both see and sense the instant that she'd won the ruler over with that idea. The Senator of Fondor being behind all of this had shaken her confidence in their current protection, even if the navy *had* come to their aid in the end. The fact that it would give the League a Fleet Base within the Republic where they could quietly install a Jump Gate was, of course, only a secondary consideration to wanting to help...

Chapter 123: A Building Crisis

– Naboo – 23.6 BBY –

Padmé was pensive as she and Queen Réillata considered the facts. Between her own observations of the Senate, the privileged information she'd gotten from Izuku, and more that had discovered by the Queen's efforts, the outcome of the growing crisis was becoming painfully clear. Despite all her own could do, despite all the Peace Party attempted, and despite the Jedi doing their impressive best to slow the rush of events...

"There's going to be a war. There are too many powerful people on both sides that have already committed to it. The flash point has yet to be determined, and the Jedi might well hold it off for a couple of years yet, but the Separatist movement already has too much backing and too much military power waiting in the wings. Given the Republic's own quiet ship buildup, there's no way they'll just *let* all those worlds go, either. Even ignoring the insult of losing five percent or more of the Republic at once, a lot of the worlds involved are either staggeringly wealthy or control resources the Core needs badly."

Sighing, Padmé nodded along with her sovereign's conclusion. While she was *technically* the senator for all thirty-six Republic systems of the Chommell sector, there was a reason that four of the last five senators had been from Naboo. Despite their relative isolationism, Naboo was arguably the wealthiest and most prominent world in the sector. Of the other thirty-five other Republic member worlds, only Chommell Minor came close to the same level of affluence, and the one non-Naboo senator in recent decades had been from that world. There might be another 40,000 'settled dependencies' in the overall sector, but that included everything from moons, to single-asteroid mines, to tiny homesteads of a half dozen people. The number *sounded* impressive, but the reality was that their sector of the Mid Rim was somewhat sparsely populated. Only the 36 Republic member worlds really mattered, and of them, Naboo was currently by far the most prominent and influential.

Which is why Padmé was here.

Queen Réillata wasn't *technically* her boss, but she was the next best thing to it. She, at the very least, represented the single most important government in the sector. Which also happened to be Padmé's homeworld. Fair or not, the Queen of Naboo was the most able to influence policy for the sector. Not that Padmé honestly minded that. Réillata didn't agree with her on *everything*, but they generally had a similar mind toward policy, and the older woman was another keen intellect to bounce the political situation off of. Unfortunately, they both shared the current analysis of what was happening.

“Which means I can’t oppose the new Military Creation Act the way I instinctively want to. If I didn’t know about the Trade Federation’s secret buildup, or *Kuat’s* for that matter, I would be justified in calling it an unnecessary escalation. As it is, with war all but completely inevitable...”

The Queen nodded grimly.

“True. Yet, even if you can’t responsibly fight against it, you can still push for alterations to the legislation. The current version is nonsensical, little more than a massive budget splash without providing hard guidelines for what that budget will be used on. The tiny bit of framework that *does* exist only claims expenditures for hardware. There’s no provision for raising an officer core to handle the new fleets, even. That’s something that’s even more time-consuming than building the ships, and the current military academies in the Core certainly don’t turn out enough officers. If we can’t stop the bill, we can at least make the damn thing *make sense*.”

Padmé nodded. When she’d gotten past the reflex to just say ‘no’ to creating a military at all and started looking into the nuts and bolts of the bill...the damn thing was possibly the worst written piece of pseudo-legislation she’d ever see. It was like someone had been *actively trying* to make it as vague as possible. Which, of course, is almost certainly what had happened. After all, groups like Kuat were *already building* the ships which would be needed, but outlining that fact in the legislation text would give the game away, as it were.

Still, while she could understand why the powers pushing for it had tried to obfuscate things, that only made sense to a point. Not including provisions for how to raise and pay the *manpower* required for a new military was the height of abject stupidity. It was also, thankfully, an almost pathetically easy attack vector to pump the brakes a bit and force the Warhawks to come to the table and be *reasonable* if they wanted the bill to pass.

Taking a moderate position with her considerable power bloc, demanding that provisions for handling the long-term pay of an army, which would be an *ongoing cost* for the entire existence of the military? That would signal on one side that she’d be willing to help those that wanted the bill to pass to get it through, while pointing out to those resisting it that they should be demanding an explanation for how the military would *continue* to fund itself after its creation. Creating a military was expensive, yes. But *keeping one going was worse*. That had, in fact, been why the previous Republic military had been dismantled and the Judiciary Forces repeatedly downsize. Payroll and logistics were a constant ongoing drain to the Republic’s finances that needed to be justified over the *long term*. Which, given that politicians were rarely long-term thinkers, explained a lot about the current state of things.

The fact that poking those specific holes would encourage a more defense-minded military, with more reasonable expenditures, soothed her conscience. Forcing the Warhawks to explain to the fiscally conservative members of the senate how they would raise and *pay* an army would control the size and shape of the result. Beefing up nodal defenses and building defensive stations against aggression was only sensible if the Separatists really were planning to launch a war. But restricting how large they could go while getting the people who weren’t eager for new taxes onboard? That would at least limit the military size to something that wouldn’t easily allow the Republic to become the aggressors.

Come to think of it...

“We might also want to look into establishing some moral limitations into law. I’m not at all sure what is still on the books as far as War Crime law goes. Treatment of prisoners, rules against orbital bombardment of garden worlds, neutrality of medical ships, that sort of thing. I know such laws existed during the High Republic, and the League specifically made them part of their carter...but I think they went by the wayside for the Republic during the New Sith Wars. I’m unsure about what, if anything, is still on the books.”

The Queen looks startled at that, then serious as she considered the implications. She pursed her lips and nodded.

“Definitely. Even a lot of the Warhawks will likely back reinstating those if they’ve lapsed. No one sane wants orbital bombardment of garden worlds to make a return to common practice. I’ll order what currently is on the book, and what used to be, looked into by the staff. While they do that, however, we need to discuss something else. Specifically, the fact that my term limits are coming up. Given what we suspect is coming, we may want to combine our efforts to put a thumb on the scales of the next election here on Naboo, to make sure we don’t get a pacifist who will try and undo our defensive projects right at a time we might desperately need them.”

Padmé frowned unhappily at that but couldn’t disagree. She’d chosen not to try and influence the election after hers, feeling it would be an abuse of power. But she couldn’t deny how potentially disastrous it would be to get the wrong sort of Queen right when a major galactic war was about to kick off. Feeling like she had a frightening understanding of just how the current system of nepotism and good-old-boy networks might have originally started with the best of intentions, she nevertheless engaged in discussing the upcoming elections.

Even if she *did* feel a bit dirty about it...

... ..

– Raxus Secundus – 23.5 BBY –

The various representatives of galactic powers in the room, including the heads of the Trade Federation, Banking Clan, Commerce Guild, and Techno Union, sat for a moment in silence. Others present included a number of influential sector senators, or representatives from particularly wealthy individual worlds. Finally, the one who had called them all here, Count Dooku of Serreno, spoke into the silence.

“So there you have it, gentlemen. The Republic Senate has killed the Financial Reform Act, despite the cheering response to my own Raxus Address, as it is now being called. I believe the only recourse left to any of us is to officially come together. To create a new Confederacy of Independent Systems, and secede from the Republic together. If any one of our worlds were to do so alone, the Republic would punish us. But by standing together we can create a bulwark too great for them to dismantle.”

Bec Lawise, Senator for the Maldrood Sector, was the first to lean forward and respond.

“I think we are all interested, Count. There remain...questions, however. Such as how we could expect to make this stick, particularly with the Republic trying to reform their military. Even if the Military Creation Act is still stalled, just the revitalization done to the ORD systems in response to the League of Free Stars and their Crusade against the Hutts is enough to be concerning. Many of the Core Worlds have their own potent fleets, as well. Many of which have been not-so-quietly expanding beyond the strict limits of the Russan agreements.”

The statement got a dignified nod from the Count, who easily fielded the implied question. The man was a puppet asking it on his behalf, after all. A few of the groups here weren't exactly popular with the greater collection of worlds he'd put together. Time to emphasize why they should get along despite that.

“That, my friends, is why the Techno Union and Trade Federation in particular are present here today. Both have seen their interests being unfairly restricted by the Republic, and are willing to supply Droid Armies and Droid-supported Fleets for defense purposes. Something which will ensure that the Republic is unable to simply squash us with its own bloated weight.”

There was a shift among the group as he calmly delivered that statement. No doubt many or most of those present had been either already aware of the buildup to some degree, or suspicious it existed. Yet, hearing it confirmed made it far more real. The debate and questions would, of course, continue for some time. But the Count could already tell he had most of them. As for those few he had yet to convince? Well, at little bit of subtle Force would bring them into line easily enough...

... ..

– Coruscant – 23.4 BBY –

“Damn it. Why the hell did someone like Dooku have to pop up *right now* and pull the entire successionist movement together. The man was polarizing even as a Jedi, let alone now.”

His Serene Highness, Prince Bail Prestor Organa, First Chairman and Viceroy of Alderaan, whose formal name and title were entirely too long for his own liking, was the one who had given voice to the thought. Around him were other members of the Loyalist Committee, all of them equally dedicated to preventing the Republic from fracturing. Each of those seated in the comfortable meeting lounge represented still more senators through their own connections, a collective that cross the usual party lines. The total collection created one of the core power blocs, the Loyalists, who were opposing the unconstitutional succession of various systems from the Republic.

There *wasn't any provision* for leaving the Republic once you joined it, for some very good reasons. Not least of which was that many of those systems now trying to leave were *smack in the middle of the Republic*. Simply letting them leave was, all of them felt, fundamentally out of the question. Doing so would disrupt major trade lanes, potentially even the breaking critical connections along the six major superlanes. The incredibly well-scouted Corellian Run, Corellian Trade Spine, Hydian Way, Perlemian Trade Route, and Rimma Trade Run. Those six routes carried something like *seventy percent* of all trade within the Republic, and had been scouted *by the Republic* at incredible expense.

The idea of letting some idiot in charge of a single world along one of them disrupt such a lane by leaving the Republic was utterly out of the question. Doubly so when many of those supporting Dooku's new 'Confederacy of Independent Systems' were the exact sort of corrupt merchant powers and megacorporations that would attempt to put a *toll* on use of the routes. The loss of resources worlds in the Outer Rim would also be bad, of course. But, in reality, it was the risk to the superlanes and the hypercomm network both that were utterly unacceptable. Creating and maintaining such systems were fundamental reasons that the Republic *existed at all*.

"While I agree with the sentiment, what's done is done. Systems are formalizing their withdraw by the hundreds to join his movement, soon to be the thousands. The question is how we go about *stopping it*. There has to still be away, short of war. And if not...than we may need to subtly bolster the militarists' position."

Darsanna, Senator of Glee Anselm, had been the one to voice the response, though several others around the table were nodding at what he'd said. Though a few others looked unhappy with the latter part of his statement. The unhappiest of them, Mon Mothma, spoke up next.

"We can't let it come to that. Fighting over critical worlds would be even more disruptive than them leaving peacefully. We have to find *some* way to bring them back to the negotiating table."

Bail shook his head, frowning as he reluctantly spoke up with a bit more information.

"I'm afraid it might be too late for that. My contacts among the Jedi, along with some information Senator Amidala passed on to me, gives a rather strong indication that several groups were already arming heavily even before the declaration. She had proof that the Trade Federation was both building battle droids in bulk numbers...and converting some of their Lucrehulk fleet into battleships. They wouldn't be doing either if they weren't seriously preparing for a fight."

Several people around the table looked stricken...but a few others did not. Curiously, the most silent of them all was one of their number who was normally the most bombastic. Orn Free Taa had a great deal of influence in the Outer Rim, where many of the Separatists worlds were concentrated. Yet, he'd been quieter than usual in the last few months, making moves that Bail wouldn't have expected from the overweight Twi'lek. He knew it had *something* to do with the League of Free Worlds, but what it was and why the man was doing whatever it was, he had no idea.

As others began to speak, voicing their own ideas and adding any information they might have, most of them realized that they weren't going to get much sleep tonight. The Count and his rabble rousing had pushed things forward in a way that couldn't be so easily taken back as mere words, and it was up to them to figure out what to do about it...

... ..

– LIS Headquarters, Tythe – 23.3 BBY –

Figrun Aharo was a very tired Bith.

Admittedly, he was largely a satisfied one as well, given that he'd seen his life's work toward the eradication of slavery take *massive* strides forward that he couldn't have imagined possible a

decade ago. The axiom that ‘no good deed goes unpunished’ had certainly struck hard in his case, however, leaving him somehow in charge of a galactic-scale intelligence network. One that wasn’t *just* focused on slavery, but was a major organ of a new galactic power. He didn’t regret that, given what it had allowed him to become a part of, but it was a hell of a long way from his days as part of the Underground Hyperlane.

None of which changed the fact that he was approaching exhaustion, pulled in too many directions at once, trying to build up both an internal and external intelligence net on such a scale. The fact that his ultimate boss had a useful but exasperating ability to practically stumble his way into critical and galaxy-view-shattering revelations did *not*, in fact, help his state of mind. Unfortunately, as he and his people had rolled up as much of the networks connected to ‘The Prophets of the Darkside,’ it had only confirmed his own growing suspicions.

The Sith, whoever they were behind their false names, were very obviously pushing the galaxy toward full scale war by antagonizing and prodding *both* sides of the current crisis in their galactic neighbor. Very likely, they’d been doing so for centuries, making Figrun seriously question how much of the corruption since the Ruusan Reformation was corrupt, greedy, and incompetent politics...and how much had been intentionally created by malice.

It was not a comfortable thought.

Nor was the fact that following the trails and patterns from those networks had revealed some light penetration of their own space by those same groups. Already, he’d had to authorize a deniable operation to eliminate a front-runner in the elections on a former Hutt world, now that he had definitive proof in his hands that the man was a puppet for someone in the Republic. The proof wouldn’t hold up in a court system they barely even *had* yet, forcing him to handle the matter in a distasteful way that he knew he could never let his ultimate boss find out about. As good as Midoriya was as a leader, as shockingly pragmatic as he could be in a lot of ways, such political assassinations would never be something he’d authorize if he knew about them.

Just like the well-intentioned idiot-savant would likely hand over his own authority if he thought the League had become stable enough. Thankfully, the near-worship the massive populations of ex-slaves had for the man meant it would never be possible, whatever their hero clearly hoped. No, even without Figrun putting his finger on the scale, it was likely that the League would be led dynastically for at least a century or two. Assuming, of course, one of his lovers eventually had a kid.

That wasn’t critical just yet, and his closest pair in Secura and Hatsume both presented issues there. Of very different kinds, admittedly. Jedi entanglements on one side, *crazy* on the other. Eventually, he’d need an heir, though. Possibly via the Ambassador? Her Handmaiden would be better, Sabé being of a more practical basic personality. But the Ambassador was more prominent on the political side of things, and would make for a better visible power couple. Ah well, time would tell, and there was no need to push for it just yet. Better the Ambassador be over her stint as a Senator first, anyway, before he considered pressuring his ultimate boss to secure a legacy.

For now, he needed to get back to trying to sort out the clusterfuck that was going on with the Republic and its separatist faction. Count Dooku was *particularly* suspicious, in light of these Dark Side idiots having at least one fallen Jedi among their numbers. He would need to work on increasing their penetration of the various factions that made up this ‘new’ movement, to see if he could prove those suspicions correct...

Chapter 124: Clinging to Sanity

– Tythe – 23.6 BBY –

Izuku would really like to punch his past self in the face for putting his current self in this position. Admittedly, the choices that his past self had made *had* succeeded in helping billions, so that probably wasn’t fair of him. On the other hand, he was currently sitting through another working meeting of the Council of Free Worlds and trying not to die of boredom. He, thank all the fucks, wasn’t the one charged with *presiding* over the Council. That horrible fate had fallen to Azatha Vy, a Twi’lek who had started out as the first Governor of Tythe, gotten elected to represent the world on the Council, then eventually won the vote to become Grand Chairman of the Council.

The position wasn’t the same as Supreme Chancellor of the Republic.

In his position as Sovereign, Izuku himself still held the reigns of the Executive Branch of the League of Free Worlds, having intentionally split the executive and legislature in a way he was more familiar with from Earth. One of the many, *many* issues with the Galactic Republic was that the Chancellor was the ultimate stopping point for too many systems. Head of the Executive, Legislature, and Judicial all at the same time.

Having no intention of suffering that fate, Izuku had kept control of the Executive, currently including a bit too much veto power to really call the League a proper democracy. He’d intentionally set up the Legislature to run mostly on its own, and let that same Legislature have a lot of say in the construction of the Judicial Courts which, thankfully, now at least *properly existed*. This meant that he *didn’t* have to sit in on every session of the Council. Thank God, the Force, or whatever amazing evolutionary process had created Tits for that. Dealer’s choice on which you felt was the most important to thank.

Unfortunately, ‘his’ government was still very young, and as such it was still better for him to regularly attend some of the working sessions. Both to be able to slap down the occasional bit of abject stupid typical of politicians, *and* because he was the legal head of the Military as the Sovereign, and they were still at war. Sure, they’d managed to chew through nearly half of the Hutt Throne Worlds by now, but they were having serious trouble with many of those that remained, as most of them had planetary shields...and had realized they could use super weapons to hold their own populations hostage against the League.

It was a galling tactic, and one that they were working on counters for, but it meant that the Crusade hadn’t yet finished. Which, in turn, meant that many ‘working sessions’ of the Council still referenced it. Something for which he or a representative needed to be in place, and it was better off being him as often as possible. The fact that he *also* served as an expert on some of Mei’s revolutionary inventions, which were already shaping policy for trade and infrastructure within the League, only made his periodic presence at these meetings more critical. At least for now.

Intellectually, he knew that today was one of those cases, as the Council worked in closed-session to figure out just how the Quantum Comms and Mei's Jump Gates were going to affect ongoing infrastructure buildup. The Quantum Comms were *considerably better* and far more secure than current Hypercomm technologies, requiring *far* less massive energy consumption. That meant a lot of their worlds were already seeing vastly improved access to galactic datanets. Datanets which included things like learning libraries and the results of the entertainment sector that had been put together by Tythe in the years of buildup before the Crusade.

Meanwhile, the Jump Gates, which were a more tightly controlled secret at this point, were nevertheless something that needed to be discussed at least in a closed session like this one. A dozen of them were already under construction throughout their space, though the initial usage was purely military. Once that Jump Gate network *grew*, however, it would also be open to trade. Something which was going to make a lot of worlds happy by *massively* simplifying their ability to move resources between them.

The network was going to have a major and important effect on how fast many of the marginal Tier 1 worlds starting pulling their own weight more, bootstrapping their way up to at least Tier 2 standards. That made this meeting *important*, and his own ability to check for people who felt like they were going to *intentionally* leak classified information was equally important. Unfortunately, it didn't make listening to the Council argue endlessly about which worlds should get what priority for the new systems any less boring...

... ..

– Sovereign of Tythe – Orbit of Nal Hutta – 23.5 BBY –

Izuku drummed his fingers on the war room chair and hummed to himself as he considered the proposal Admiral Lin had just put in front of him. It wasn't a bad proposal, and he was inclined to green-light it. The problem was that it would *very technically* make them expansionist. Granted, the Centrality had given them every reason to strike back at them when they'd rented a major chunk of their fleet out to the Hutts. The state of the Centrality worlds meant that their absorbing it would almost be a relief effort, as well. The current 'leaders' of that section of space were despots, who were busy screwing up what little economy the locals had left after plagues and an industrial depression had hit them. The sixty-three major systems that made up the Centrality, and hundreds of marginal outposts and ragtag colonies, were suffering.

That said, none of them had applied to be part of the League of Free Worlds. Meaning the operation that Admiral Lin was proposing was very technically a war of expansion. One that could, in theory, be pointed to by alarmists elsewhere in the galaxy and used against them. Still, those worlds were tempting in more than one way. The League could help the locals a lot, the current rulers were scumbags who had been in active collaboration with the Hutts, and the major worlds *did* have significant industry. Industry that could easily bounce back with the massive influx of credits the League could supply, and which would help fuel the uplift of dozens of other worlds within former Hutt Space.

"You are aware that we are fighting one war already, Admiral. What makes you think this is the time to start another? Even if it's one that isn't likely to last very long."

The Admiral shrugged and spelled out what Izuku already suspected.

“Frankly, boss? The grinding nature of the fight against the Throne Worlds isn’t good for the Fleet. It’s ninety percent siege at this point, and we only need a fraction of our fleet to maintain all the sieges we have going. Worse, we still have new ships and crews coming online constantly from new construction. Taking out the Centrality will both secure our borders better and serve as a way to blood some of our newer crews. Given what we all suspect is coming, having fewer green crews would make me much happier.”

He nodded at that, even if he wanted to grimace at the pure pragmatism. The Admiral wasn’t wrong. The Republic and the newly formed CIS were both far larger than the League. The Confederacy might only be shaping up to be something like five percent of the Republic that was breaking away, but it was a massively wealthy and productive five percent. Enough so to probably match the building capacity of virtually any other *fifteen* percent of the Republic, at least if you ignored select worlds like Kuat or Corellia who could output truly stupid amount of industrial might if properly motivated.

If either power took exception to the League, or if the League was forced to take exception to *them*, it was only their superior technology and qualitatively better crews that would give them the throw weight to compete. Making sure more of their new crews had some legitimate combat experience would enhance their edge against virtually all comers, as the League was now the one power with the greatest amount of modern warfare experience at the galactic scale.

On the other hand, he didn’t really like using the conquering of several dozen worlds has, effectively, a massive training exercise.

Still...

“Very well, Admiral. You have the go ahead. If it were any other set of systems, I’d shoot you down, but the Centrality is a mess, and their fleet *did* already attack us first. Just try to keep the blood letting down. I’d rather the majority of the locals be *happy* they are under new management, not pissed off liabilities that might rebel.”

The Admiral snapped a salute, nodding seriously.

“Of course, sir. If I didn’t think they’d welcome the change in rule I would never have proposed this. As it is, I’m pretty sure the majority of the locals are going to see us as heroes. Apparently, there are even some home-grown rebel groups now. With the loss of a good chunk of their fleet trying to help the Hutts, the ruling scumbags don’t have the power to enforce their will as dominantly as they did before.”

Sighing again, Izuku nodded, and started asking a few follow up questions about which units she wanted to pull from League Space to take the Centrality, and who she intended to send to lead the effort. As much as this was her project, *she* was the day-to-day commander of the entire fleet. So he wasn’t going to let her run off from managing the Crusade. If he had to stay and play politics, she could bloody well stay and command some boring sieges...

... ..

– Baroonda - 23.4 BBY –

Izuku's grin was massive as he hauled his pod-racer through a tight turn. The sport had always been popular within Hutt Space, and it hadn't dropped in popularity at all with the League takeover. Which meant it hadn't actually been that hard to secure track-time to run private time trials or head-to-head races. Something which would have been insane, of course, for a human with *ordinary* reflexes. For both Izuku and Zavra, though, it was proving to be an incredible rush that pushed their enhanced reflexes and precognition to the test as they raced each other. Both of them had enhanced baseline reflexes, even before accounting for the Force. Zavra due to all her cybernetic mods, and Izuku as a side effect of not *quite* being a baseline human.

That last bit had come as quite a surprise to him when he'd first found out about it, clear back when he and Aayla had gotten a medical droid and had it do comprehensive checkups for the first time. Izuku *was* still human, his genetics not different enough to be pushed to 'near-human' or 'human-offshoot.' Yet he, and Mei too once she'd arrived and gotten her own checkup, had proven to be pretty close to at least 'offshoot' status. Apparently, a couple of hundred years of humanity having Quirks had tweaked the baseline. Izuku and Mei were a bit stronger, faster, and more durable than a baseline human. The legacy of the general superhuman nature of secondary mutations spreading through their homeworld's gene pool. Izuku privately suspected that someone like Mina, Koda, or Tokoyami likely would have crossed over the threshold into 'offshoots,' at least. But that was neither here nor there to the matter at hand, which was that his reflexes had a *starting point* significantly above human baseline.

Adding the Force to his and Zavra's already beyond-human baseline reflexes, and the result was that the normally insanely dangerous sport was just...fun. The Force would give them ample warning if their pods were about to suffer mechanical problems. Which wasn't likely in the first place, since Mei had designed the model they were using after one look at traditional slap-dash pods had offended the hell out of her. The fact that *Mei*, of all people, had considered them a 'stupidly unsafe design' said an unfortunate amount about the typical pod-racer, to be honest.

As for why they were doing this at all? Izuku had wanted to take the time to really get to know Zavra better, so he'd taken her along as he went on a tour of various League worlds to see how they were developing. Baroonda was one of the non-Republic worlds that had joined them willingly, having been just barely outside of Hutt Space on the side of Wild Space, but heavily reliant on trade with formerly Hutt worlds. It had been a great choice for getting a finger on the pulse of such worlds for Izuku...

...and it just so happen to also be known as a host to several professional pod-racing tracks. He'd known Mei had built a pod-racer, and brought both the original and a duplicate along for a date with Zavra. The Sith was *very much* an adrenaline junkie, so he'd known better than to pick a quite moonlit walk or romantic dinner. Given the sheer glee she was pulsing with as they went head-to-head this final time around the track, he knew he'd chosen well.

She was also more inherently reckless than he was, so she'd won the majority of their head-to-heads so far. This time, though, he had a secret weapon he had every intention of using. Grinning as they hit a turn that would normally force even Zavra to slow down, Izuku did nothing of the sort, leaning on his far greater control of *telekinesis* to wrench the pod around in a way just *barely* this

side of unsafe, cracks actually forming in the frame as he pushed it beyond its design tolerances. A trick he could only use *once*, on this last lap of their last run for the day.

Zavra's outraged squawk as he passed her, just heartbeats before the finish line, was music to his ears...

... ..

-Lemon Starts Here-

Zavra moaned helplessly and happily as she was pressed up against the door of the shower, breasts pressing flat against the glass as Izuku took her from behind. She'd jumped him the moment they entered the shower together, still high and horny from the rush of the final pod-race. To her absolute delight, her Master *got her*, in a way only the Empress ever had otherwise, and had forcefully turned her assault into a lesson in being a good little toy for him.

He'd started by disabling her ability to cum and turning on several of her pleasure implants at the same time, pushing her down to her knees with firm orders that she wasn't going to get relief unless she did a good job of serving first. She, of course, had immediately and happily thrown her whole effort in pleasing him, starting with the absolute bestest blowjob she could muster. She still wasn't the best with handling cocks, Mistress Ayla had her blowjob skills beat! But she was proud of being the second best behind the Mistress, and determined to improve!

Of course, with Master playing with her implants, using the Force to near constantly change which ones were on, what sensations they were delivering, and how strong they were running, she was a bit of a mess by the time she managed to make him cum. He'd pulled her up immediately afterwards and shoved her tits-first into the shower door, and was now absolutely reaming her from behind, having skipped her pussy and aimed straight at her backdoor. Though with the number of modifications the Empress had made to her, one was hardly any less pleasurable than the other...

Which was super frustrating since he still hadn't released her to cum! Her mind was starting to fray a bit from the number of times she'd be slammed hard against the edge, unable to achieve release despite the fact she should have been cumming her brains out with every other thrust! It was hitting *all* her buttons hard, in some of the best ways that Mistress had taught her to love, but what little higher-thought she could manage between moments of mind-breaking pleasure hoped he'd consider her enough of a Good Girl to let her cum.

She feared that wasn't to be the case when he blew his second load in her ass without releasing her to cum. Then, of course, he physically picked her up, threw her over his shoulder and marched her out of the shower, heading for the bedroom. The bedroom that Asora always made sure was stocked, wherever they went, with plenty of *fun things*. She could *almost* think straight again by the time he threw her onto the bed and summoned a set of shackles for her wrists and ankles.

"Hmmm, I think you've been a Good Girl, Zavra...but I haven't had enough fun yet. Let's play some more and see how close I can get your mind to breaking before I finally let you cum."

A *thrill* shot through her at the promise of something her Mistress used to do, which Zavra had dearly missed. Then, as if in response to that thought, the thread of a bond between them that

had built since her new master took ownership of her abruptly exploded into *much* more. For a moment that seemed to last the lifespan of the universe, their minds and more were *one*, a third very surprised mind linking in to join them from half a galaxy away.

Then there was only pleasure as all three minds decided they could figure out what had happened *later*. For now, all three of them were horny, and the part of them that was now Aayla was egging them on to do something about it...

... ..

Aayla didn't have a *clue* what the fuck was going on, only that whatever it was? It was both fucking amazing and incredibly frustrating! She'd been getting ready to crash, after an exhausting day, when her bond with Izuku had lit up like an entire Festival of Lights parade! They had always been able to at least *feel* each other, even at distances that spanned half the Republic. But farther than a single star system apart and they'd not been able to communicate mind-to-mind.

Why that was so, they'd never been quite sure, given that the Force shouldn't care all that much about distance. Possibly it was some limitation of Izuku's unique connection, but just as likely it was nothing more or less than a mental block. There were historical references to Jedi that could pull capital ships out of the sky, and Sith who could devour all life on entire worlds. Yet the vast majority of Force Users would struggle to lift anything larger than a starfighter and the vast majority of even the most egomaniacal Sith had been limited to personal combat. All for the simple reason that a huge chunk of being able to *do something* with the Force was *believing* you could it, and precious few sentient minds could break through the barrier of belief to perform the truly *staggering* feats. She suspected that there *were* a few modern Jedi who could pull it off, such as Masters Fay and Yoda, but even knowing it was a mostly mental block had never helped her pull something of that scale off.

Which meant she was well and truly blindsided by Izuku and Zavra suddenly being so completely linked to her, despite still being on practically the *opposite side of the kriffing galaxy from where she was on Kalee*. It didn't help that the pair had apparently been fucking like the 'bunnies' Mei had told them about, back when she first suggested the uniforms for the Lucky Rabbit! Even as she found herself abruptly swimming in multithreaded sensory confusion, she was also getting her first taste of what Zavra's implants could do to her, feeling dozens of bursts of wildly varying pleasure as if they were her own!

On a distant side note, in a part of her brain that was somehow still something at least resembling coherent, she noted she *really* wanted a set of some of those implants now. They'd already seemed like *loads of fun*, even before she'd been able to experience second-hand what they were like!

The rest of her was a little busy being more horny than she'd ever been in her life. Even on the occasions she'd been locked in a chastity belt and teased for a few days! Holy *fuck*, whatever Izu had been doing to their personal Sith fucktoy must have been *intense*. *Extremely* glad she slept in nothing but panties and a shirt when she wore anything at all, she found to her own surprise that she somehow already had two fingers buried in her pussy, which was frantically rushing to catch up

with how wet Zavra's own was. Silently, she urged the pair on, somehow instinctively knowing she wouldn't be able to cum until they did.

How did she know that? The answer drifted to her in bits of random insight, even as her fingers plunged and her other hand found a nipple to tug on harshly.

Oh, Izuku had a lock down on Zavra's ability to cum, and they were all linked so deeply right now that *none* of them were going to cum until Zavra did. Silently, she urged Izu on, mentally cheering as he skipped a few steps he'd apparently intended on, shackling Zavra spread-eagle, but mounting her and burying his cock deep in a single thrust, instead of reaching for the toys to torment her. Not that Zavra seemed to mind, despite how much Aayla could *feel* she'd been excited by their Master's teasing, the addition of Aayla and her own rapidly building arousal to the connection had done most of the work Izuku had been intent on in an instant. Their favorite Sith Slut was riding the edge of mindbreak, only staying on the coherent side due to Izuku and Aayla anchoring her there, and both of them were rapidly fraying in turn.

By the time Izuku came, releasing Zavra to do so at the same time, all three of them were far enough gone that they passed out moments after their respective climaxes. It would be interesting to discover, in the morning, that they could now reach across the galaxy to give at least *impressions* to each other, despite any distance between. It would be even more fascinating to discover that doing so while incredibly aroused made outright communication possible. Assuming they could ride the edge of aroused enough while still being coherent, at least.

Somehow Aayla didn't think their immediate determination that the phenomenon demanded *thorough* investigation would have been approved for study by the Council of First Knowledge...

-Lemon Ends Here-

Chapter 125: Connections and Butterflies

- Kalee – 23.4 BBY –

Aayla had to admit that she hadn't expected what she'd found on the planet of Kalee. Having pulled data from the Jedi and Republic archives both, she'd expected violence and some sort of Sith plot. Instead, what she'd found was a people who were starving to death, laboring under a *ridiculously* unfair set of embargoes. Apparently, the only thing that had been keeping them afloat at all was a deal with the IGBC, one that had expired with the death of their greatest warrior and his elite. That had been almost three years previous, and the planet was rapidly falling apart again.

Thankfully, it was something she could fix, though she found it annoyingly ironic that it was the very skills she'd told Izuku she wasn't suited for that she now needed to do the job.

The very first thing she had done upon realizing just how karked the situation on the planet was, was to call for multiple of the League's *Serenity-class* relief ships. They, along with a large convoy of bulk freighters normally used for League Naval logistics, brought in massive amounts of food and medical supplies. Doing that stemmed the immediate tide of problems, along with getting

the locals to actually talk with her, rather than spit at her for being a Jedi. Not that she could blame them for that, as it was becoming increasingly obvious that a horrifying miscarriage of justice had occurred here.

Sort of.

In truth, the situation was extremely complicated and messy. From what she'd been able to sort out, the expansionist Yam'rii of the planet Huk had attacked and conquered Kalee, enslaving the locals. Eventually, the locals had managed to revolt, freeing themselves...and then promptly and understandably took the war to the Yam'rii. What happened after that was a two-fold problem. First, the angry Kaleesh war leader had settled on a war of annihilation, fully intent on utterly wiping the Yam'rii from existence in revenge. Second, the Yam'rii had reached out to the Republic and lied to the Republic and Jedi's face about the cause of the war.

The fact that the Jedi hadn't properly investigated pissed her off, and she had very carefully and pointedly taken note of the Jedi involved. If she had her way, every single one of them would be before an internal tribunal *at the very least*, and possibly dragged before the Judiciary on charges of crimes against sentient kind. Yes, stepping in to prevent the Yam'rii's total destruction had been justifiable. No, what happened afterward had *not been*. Nor had the Republic's response and embargoes, which led to the second step that Aayla had needed to take.

That step was reaching out to those worlds which had sent Observers into the Crusade. Naboo and Alderaan had been two of the first, but others had eventually been authorized, and Aayla reached out to *all* of those worlds now. That got Observers and investigators moving to Kalee to look into just what had happened here and why. She, herself, would be investigating the Jedi part of what had occurred, but she trusted that the holier-than-thou Peace Party types that were behind most of the Observers would be raising a stink about the Republic side of things.

She hoped so, anyway.

Kalee was, unfortunately, much too far from the League's borders for more than a relief mission. There was no realistic way to open trade here to help them rebuild, and Izuku's expansive trade network and businesses within the Republic were subject to the embargoes. She knew he would sign off on helping get some home-grown industry going for the planet, to help offset those embargoes. But that alone wouldn't be enough, not with the crushing debt the Republic had inflicted in the way of 'reparations' to the Yam'rii. For whatever reason, the IGBC had bought those debts up and wasn't currently pursuing them very hard. But they weren't *helping* the planet, either.

Well, for whatever reason, the Force was telling her that it was important she do what she could to fix the planet. Why, she genuinely had no idea, particularly as this wasn't really her field of expertise, so much as it should have been someone like Fay's. The Force insisted it had to be *her specifically*, though, so Aayla would dig in and do the job right. She wasn't at all against helping these people, after all. She just knew that Izuku was going to endless tease her that she'd gone off to Follow the Force...and ended up doing exactly the things she claimed didn't suit her.

The Force had a strange sense of humor, at times...

... ..

– Muunilinst – 23.3 BBY –

Reconstructing the life of Hego Damask II had been a massive undertaking. Far more so than Celeste had originally anticipated. The fact that she'd been delayed for a bit by an emergency request from her apprentice for support on Dathomir against the Night Sisters hadn't helped. Admittedly, it had been a worthy distraction, as well as a bit of a revelation to discover how far some of those at the Ossus Academy had come.

A number of individuals from different Force traditions, as well as a few trained purely at the Academy itself, had also responded to the call for aid. Together, they had helped the three clans of Witches who'd forged an alliance completely erase the Night Sister cult from the planet at last. Something which had been extremely satisfying to take part in, and which had also resulted in a rush of new students from those clans for the Academy. After they'd witnessed the wide variety of things those from Ossus could do, to say that the clans had been 'interested' was a bit of a gross understatement.

Still, even if wiping out a Dark Side cult, particularly such an old and entrenched one, was always worthwhile...it had pulled her away from the cold case that was Hego Damask II for a number of months. Given that it very much *was* a cold case, it didn't matter a lot, and the Force had been insistent that helping the Witches and getting them to commit to some of their own being trained at Ossus had been more time critical. Why, she didn't know, but it wasn't her job to question the Force when it insisted that something was so.

Regardless, she'd been back to reconstructing Hego Damask's life the moment the Night Sisters were done with, and she'd made a lot of progress before being called away in the first place. The results of her efforts were somewhat instructive, as she'd been able to track at least *some* of his efforts as a Sith. In particular, she was completely certain that she'd uncovered who *his* master had been, a Bith named Darth Tenebrous, who matched descriptions of the other Sith who'd had dealings with Beldorion the Hutt.

Exactly what Tenebrous and Plagueis had gotten up to, she had only bits and pieces of information about. Sowing discontent throughout the Outer Rim territories of the galaxy seemed to be at least part of it. Though she'd also found several additional abandoned laboratories reeking of the Dark Side that indicated they'd been up to the worst sorts of foul Sith Alchemy as well. Some of it nearly as dark as what she'd experienced from the Muur Talisman.

The problem with going the other direction to find the *current* Sith Lord was that Damask's influential position meant he'd had regular contact with a *lot* of people. Many of whom remained in positions of power. Up to an including some level of association with the current Supreme Chancellor of the Republic. Just as one example of how far his connections went, the Munn had *also* apparently been critical to the negotiations of the Free Trade Zones, which resulted in the Trade Federations receiving full voting privileges in the Galactic Senate. An idiotic mistake to anyone with a functioning brain. Which, sadly, didn't include most politicians.

It highlighted the difficulty of her task neatly, however, as it meant that Damask had been in regular enough contact with higher-level members of the Trade Federation. Any one of those people could be her target. As could dozens of high-ranking members of the IGBC, who he'd had

even more frequent contact with. The Munn's circle of influence had been *irritatingly* broad, forcing her to prioritize and filter. The Veil was getting in the way of any attempt to filter the list with the Force, so she was reduced to her own critical thinking skills as an investigator. With that in mind, she settled on checking those among the Trade Federation and IGBC first. Not only could she do so with less effort than some of the others, having already penetrated the IGBC systems in particular once, but even if she turned up no Sith, she would likely find quite a number of things that Izuku and his people would want to know about.

After all, if there was one thing she was now completely certain of from tracking Damask's history, it was that the current conflict brewing in the galaxy had firm roots in Sith manipulation of events...

... ..

– Jedi Temple – 23.2 BBY –

Shaak Ti was surprised how little like home the Jedi Temple felt these days. While she'd never quite felt fully at home here, the massive city planet that was Coruscant simply too fundamentally alien to her Togrutan sensibilities, it was still somewhere she had spent a major chunk of her life. Including her formative years as a youngling, having been given over to the Temple as an infant. It had left enough of an impression that at least a part of her had always felt grounded to the Temple, even if she suspected her feelings were far weaker than for most Jedi. She had been more than a little unusual in choosing to train both of her own students on her homeworld of Shili, rather than travel the galaxy and take missions with them. Something which had been questioned more than a little by other Jedi...doubly so since both of her previous students had died not too long after they'd risen to Knighthood.

As it always did, that thought brought a pang of sadness and old pain, yet it was something she'd long ago come to terms with. The pain was easily put aside as she focused on the now. The now in which she realized that what attachment had remained to the Temple had faded even farther from her most recent round of absences. In part, she suspected that was because none of her lovers were here. Padmé and Sabé were *technically* on the same planet, but they hadn't fully connected with her the way they had Izuku and Aayla. Nor was there any real excuse to go see them.

Yet, despite that 'attachment' causing at least some of her diminished feelings, she didn't believe that such was the bulk of the reason.

No, far greater cause were the *changes* that had come about in both the Temple and the Order itself in recent years, many of which having happened while she was away. Despite recent, sustained efforts by the High Council to squash the factionalism that had been caused by the Hutt Crusade and many Jedi deciding to participate, there was less unity of purpose to be found here than ever before. Many of her fellow Jedi had...divided opinions. On the Hutt Crusade, on the Separatist movement, on the efforts being made to prune corruption from the Republic, on the new security measures and somewhat invasive security sweeps that had been done for virtually all members now.

Which didn't even account for the *damages* the discoveries made by those security sweeps had caused. At this point, over a dozen darksider practitioners had been found within the Order itself, as well as nearly twice that many Jedi who were actively corrupt and taking orders from various Senators or political parties. Five Jedi had already been expelled from the Order, at least as many more were likely to follow, and many among the lower level of Knights and Padawans were afraid of a witch hunt brewing.

Knowing what she knew, she fully understood *why* the High Council was cracking down. She even agreed that many of the actions taken had *needed* to happen. Yet, she had to admit that she was worried about what the overall effects on morale were going to end up being. The only two things keeping said morale afloat at the moment was the series of rapid successes the Order had managed in taking down corrupt elements of the Republic, and the fact that the *returning* Jedi from the Hutt Crusade were in comparatively high spirits. They, at least, were almost universally satisfied with the work they'd done in freeing tens of billions of slaves and helping build up a new Regime in former Hutt Space that seemed like it would genuinely do good by those freed worlds.

Unfortunately, the rapid, easy successes were drying up as the Veil healed from the damage done to it. Likewise, the uplifted spirits of those who had served in the Crusade were rubbing many traditionalists who still hated that they'd been allowed to leave the wrong way. Efforts were being made, by Grandmaster Yoda and others, to smooth out the rough edges. But when they were simultaneously pushing some reforms intended to tighten security and prepare the Order for war? Mixed signals were being sent, despite their best efforts.

Well, she would simply have to do her best to help repair, or at least paper over, the cracks as well as she could. Something which she was going to start today, by introducing the Holocron of Bastila Shan to a carefully selected group of individuals. Ones who crossed the divide of traditional and progressive, but whom she'd hand-picked as being individuals she thought would respond well to the story of the ancient Master's life. All delivered, of course, in the guise of revitalizing a few skills which Master Shan had been particularly adept at.

She just hoped that First Knowledge didn't get clued into her having the Holocron. It was only on *loan* to her at the moment from Aayla and Izuku after all. She suspected that the hoarders of all things shiny and Force that made up First Knowledge would not take well to the idea that the Holocron wasn't theirs to seal away in a vault somewhere...

... ..

– Antar 4 – 23.1 BBY –

Rahm Kota strode grimly by the bodies of the dead terrorists who had planned to bomb the few Antaran Ranger chapterhouses that were still on Antar 4 itself. The splinter group, Roshu Sune they'd called themselves, were apparently radicals who had formed in response to the declaration of the Confederacy of Independent Systems just a few months ago. Had security on the moon remained as light as it had once been, they might have had some chance to succeed. With the Rangers having expanded so much, and been keeping such a careful eye on the locals to ensure their shipyards were not discovered, the group had never stood a chance of remaining undiscovered.

Yet, the fact that they'd formed so *fast* in response to Dooku's move, and done so on a world that was known to be extremely friendly to the Jedi Order? It was something that Rahm refused to believe was mere coincidence. No, this was enemy action of some sort. It only remained to be seen if said action had threatened their operational security here. Something he meant to find out as he approached the Ranger Captain that was assigned to investigate after they'd cleared out this group of idiots.

"Captain Telvian. I trust you have something for me?"

The Gotal, who had looked up from studying a display over a tech's shoulder at Rahm's approach, nodded firmly.

"Yes, sir. Good news and Bad News both. The Bad News is that you and the General were right. *Someone* was backing this group. Someone with a lot of money and resources than anyone local, and they specifically picked up as many people with an axe to grind with the Jedi as possible. Including a fair few displaced mercs and bounty hunters from Hutt Space. The Good News is that they weren't expecting the sort of resistance they got. It seems whoever was backing them didn't have current intelligence on the Rangers. Not even what we'd done before you arrived and lit a fire under the General. They were working on old information that hasn't been accurate for years."

Rahm untensed a little at that. The Bad News was something he'd considered self-evident, so it wasn't a major issue. The Good News was very good, as far as he was concerned. The longer they could go without it being discovered that the Jedi were preparing for war, the better. Preferably, no one would know until the first time the new Fleet dropped in on some idiot in the process of doing something stupid.

"Excellent, Captain. I trust the Sentinels are already trying to track where the money and supplies came from?"

Telvian nodded, gesturing to the screen he'd been staring at.

"Yes, sir. Someone *tried* to make it look like it was criminal elements. But we've already turned up evidence that it was likely the IGBC paying for everything. This looks like direct action by the CIS to try sabotaging a Republic ally."

Rahm hummed a little doubtfully. This seemed a bit more *directed* than that.

"I hope you're right, Captain. If that's all they are up to, that means they don't know what we've been up to. Don't hesitate to let myself or the General know if you need anything to keep a lid on this."

With a quick affirmation from the Captain, Rahm moved off to see if he could turn up anything that the official investigation hadn't. Given that the Sentinels had been through here already, it was unlikely. But he'd do his due diligence and make sure they didn't have any leaks...

Chapter 126: Last Gasps of an Empire

– Kor Desilijic – 23.3 BBY –

Major Averin Trizt and Colonel Jozzo Deam were tense as Knight Mano brought their stealth vessel, the EX-73 Phantom, right up to the planetary shield of Kor Desilijic. The world was one of the oldest and most powerful Hutt throneworlds, with impressive defenses that would be a nightmare to pound down the hard way. It also had an *insane* power grid that would be next to impossible to disrupt. To be honest, even Nal Hutta had arguably been less well defended, and no one had been looking forward to trying to take the planet. It was one world that they didn't expect the Hutts to blow up themselves out of spite, though since they hadn't expected *any* of the Hutts to go that far, they couldn't take it for granted.

It also shouldn't have been possible to sneak a strike team in to make sure of that, as they'd managed on a number of other worlds. There had been long debates on what to do about this and a few other worlds that promised to be particularly hard nuts to crack. Many had favored the idea of just seeding the entire area of space around the planet with mines and leaving the Hutts to rot. Yet doing so would also leave the *slaves* that filled the world to rot as well, and that wasn't an idea that had set well with anyone.

Just when they were most afraid they'd have to do it anyway, Aayla Secura had produced an unexpected miracle.

Power gems were *absurdly* rare, to the point that most people thought they were outright *myths*, not something that actually existed. Yet, Secura had *somehow* found and acquired a set of three called the Lost Stars of Nallastia. Where and how, none of them had a clue. Yet she *had*, and the infamous Mei Hatsume had promptly installed them on an experimental ship that had been in testing. The EX-73 Phantom wasn't a production model, but a hand-built prototype of a 'Stealth Insertion' ship. A slightly-larger variant of the Gate equipped landing craft that had been allowing them to deploy large numbers of infantry with relatively few ships on other Hutt worlds.

The Phantom was different, of course, because it had the same sort of crystal-based stealth field as the Toru II class scout ships. The Toru IIs were *significantly* larger vessels, small frigates or oversized corvettes really, which served a more general role. The *Phantom* existed for just two things, and two things only. To sneak in and hide on a planet...then to power the Gate it carried to allow the deployment of deep strike commandos and other ground assets in significant numbers. Which was, of course, exactly what they were here to do.

Assuming that the power gems worked as advertised and let them slip unnoticed through the stupidly-powerful planetary shield, at least.

Major Trizt had faith it would work. She was one of those that had fought on Tisht and found herself awakened to the Force. Now commanding Akul Platoon of the Sovereign's Guards, she and the three squads under her were the only members of that Guard currently participating in active combat operations. They had, early on in their formation, decided that two of their three Platoons would remain with their Sovereign at all times. A personal bodyguard unit...and elite commandos that could support his operations when he inevitable put himself in the thick of it.

Seriously, politicians didn't normally charge into combat, but their boss had a disturbing habit of doing so. Even when he didn't, trouble just *found him*, instead. Heck, Platoon Nexu had ended up in a running fight alongside their Sovereign and his Sith lover just a week ago on

Circumtore. A large collection of Bounty Hunters had managed to get onto the artificial ring-world and tried to collect the massive 10 billion credit bounty that Sovereign Midoriya had on his head from the Hutts. They had failed, of course, Nexu Platoon, the boss, and Zavra being too much for the group to handle. It was, however, entirely too typical of the trouble their principle got into.

The third Platoon of the Guards would always be where the action was hottest, which explained why she was here. It was a plan intended to make sure the Guard kept their edge, with the 'Combat Platoon,' currently her Akuls, rotating out every three months. As the Elite of the Elite, there had been no question that her unit would take part in this operation, with several other more ordinary commando units, Jedi, and the entire 412th infantry division as backup. The Guards, Commandos, and Jedi would be infiltrating to both find any nasty surprises and disable the planetary shield. Then the 412th would pour through from the Gate aboard the Phantom to begin the ground assault in full just as the planetary shield came down.

Again, though, that hinged on the power gems working, and only the meditation tricks she'd been taught to help commune with the Force were keeping Averin any calmer than the white-knuckled Colonel Deam as they approached the shields. They were moving fast enough to *bounce* in a way that wouldn't be good for their continued place among the living if the gems failed, and Averin envied Knight Mano's ability to sink much deeper into the Force as she piloted them forward. In theory, the Jedi Knight would be able to sense if this wasn't going to work. Which was a nice thought, but not overly comforting given there were no real records of this having been tried before.

At least they *had* tested the ship against the Tythe planetary shields, which were every bit as potent as the ones here covering Kor Desilijic.

Unable to help herself, Averin clenched as they approached the shield...then let out a small sigh of relief as the sector of shield they'd hit *blinked* for just a moment under the influence of the power gems. The brief flicker was *just* long enough for the Phantom to pass through, specifically kept to a minimum in order to look like nothing but a momentary hiccup in the systems to the teams running the shield generators. No doubt they would run a systems test, but such momentary glitches were hardly unusual on a planetary scale shield that had been powered up *continuously* for weeks.

They were in, presumably unseen.

Now they just needed to find a nice hidey hole to operate out of while they scouted out their targets and prepared to create havoc...

... ..

Admiral Lin's smile was predatory as she watched the planetary shields of Kor Desilijic flicker...then fail. The moment they did, she barked orders.

"All units, launch your attacks! Rikman, watch the Golans, two of them have a vector on our Alpha Assault force. Crush them first."

The Fleet they'd assembled to first blockade, then assault, this particular Throneworld, was one of the largest they'd used in any single battle. Enough so that she wasn't directly commanding any single ship, or even division of ships. Commadores Rikman and Yager, by now suitably veteran

commanders themselves, were in charge of the two battlegroups now rapidly closing with the planet. Each of those battlegroups had four Paladins and a dozen Volitions each, plus an entirely array of smaller ships. Which didn't even count the truly staggering numbers of starfighters and bombers that they'd already put into space.

For good reason.

The Desilijic kajidic was one of the two wealthiest in the entire Hutt Empire, or what was left of it. One of the bare handful of clans that could trace their roots all the way back to their original homeworld of Varl, with this very world being one of those the original Hutts had fled too when Varl was rendered uninhabitable. To say the defenses were *thick* was a horrible understatement. Even now, her tactical screens were reporting over 9,000 starfighters launching from the surface, and that would likely only be *one* of several waves.

The majority of them were Vultures, likely acquired in bulk from the Trade Federation early on in the Crusade, before Trade was fully cut off. They were chaff, really. Fodder that their own fighters would cut down in mass numbers. Yet their sheer quantity made them a genuine danger, which is why she'd concentrated so much of the Fleet's fighter strength for this assault. She'd even gone so far as to use a half dozen of the Lucrehulk conversions to act as additional carriers, launching their fighters and hanging back. Those ships alone had released 6,000 fighters of their own, and over 3,000 more had launched from the two Battlegroups.

The fighter massacre was admittedly going to be spectacular, but it wasn't her primary concern.

That was the fact that Kor Desilijic had *eight* Golan Space Defense Platforms, along with a dozen other armed stations, shoals of sky mines, and a staggering number of one-shot defense satellites. Even without the planetary shields, this was going to be a brutal fight, and she hoped that the ground teams were doing well with knocking out the ground emplacements. For now, she watched as the fist shots lanced out at the Golans from the eight Paladin class ships and their particle beams. That fire concentrated on just two Golans, intent on knocking them out of action before the stations themselves could come into range. The pair were the one's she'd pointed out had a firing arc that currently covered the assault vector for the landing craft following the fighters in, making it critical to disable them before the landing craft got in range to be picked off. They needed to get some of those landing craft down, so they could support the 412th that were deploying even now through the Gate of the prototype stealth vessel that had made this assault practical.

Settling into the battle with grim determination, making sure to keep half an ear on the various callouts the Jedi and other Force users with her fleets were making, Rana watched as the final dying gasps of the Hutt Empire began...

... ..

– Tythe Central – 23.0 BBY –

Izuku smiled grimly as he read the latest reports forwarded by Admiral Lin. In the last three months, five of the remaining major Hutt throneworlds had been captured, with only four

remaining. Even now, plans were in place to crush those four as well, finally bringing the Hutt Crusade to an end. It was only a matter of freeing up enough ground forces to take worlds with millions of defending troops that had slowed the pace at this point.

The five worlds captured were still providing some degree of resistance as, hard to believe as it was, the Hutts *did* have loyalists. That meant they couldn't pull the troops used to take those worlds out just yet, and ground troop numbers had always been the League's greatest limitation. They made due with extreme Quality over extreme Quantity, though recruitment from former Hutt worlds was beginning to bring up their quantity as well. Something they could easily afford, given just how much wealth they'd looted from the Hutts.

Hell, those five throneworlds alone were *still* choking their accountants, trying to catalog all the treasure hidden in the Hutt vaults that had been seized. Even the accountants, already used to seeing absurd numbers from other Hutt worlds, had seemed a bit...faint...at what they were finding. As near as Izuku could tell, Kor Desilijic alone was richer than the entire Corellian System, and Corellia was one of the 'Big 5' economies in the entire Republic. Put all together, the money and treasure from within just the Bootana Hutta subsector likely nearly matched the *entirety of the Core*.

Even Izuku had been initially surprised by that fact, though far less so than his poor accountants. He had read his history after all, and the Hutts had been accumulating and hoarding wealth since *before the Republic existed*. Such accumulation of wealth had been the Hutt clans primary way of keeping score between themselves for *at least* 15,000 years. The Hutt Cataclysms, a civil war that had ended their imperialist empire building, had shifted the survivors to a new mode of thought. The very name 'kajidic' was a philosophy as well as what they called their various clans in Hutttese. That philosophy had rejected outright war and territorial conquest at turbolaser point as methods 'used by lesser species,' and shifted the competition between clans into one of ruthless financial and economic warfare.

In hindsight, it stood to reason that such a philosophy, executed for so long, had resulted in a truly staggering amount of wealth being squirreled away. So much wealth, in fact, that the League was genuinely going to have to *hide* a lot of it, in order not to completely fuck the galactic economy. Which didn't even account for the number of priceless artifacts and forgotten technologies which seemed to be hidden under every other rock on some of those worlds. The entire species had been massive packrats, and the clans had been given a long, *long* time to build their hoards.

Well, at least he was now one of the rare politicians in the existence of sentient kind that didn't have to worry too much about the annual budget...

<<End of Current Content>>