

## Can One Displaced Hero Save a Galaxy?

(Chapters 118-121)

Novus Peregrine

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### Chapter 118: Light in the Darkness

#### – Dromund System – 24.2 BBY –

“Oh, *bleck*, I need like *all the showers*. Also a milkshake. The Dark Side always tastes so foul! Oh! Do we have any more blue milk? Bantha milkshakes are super yummy!”

Everyone else in the briefing room look on with a bit of disbelief as Zavra’s eyes, which had slowly turned red as she kept up the interaction with the Dark Side Nexus on Dromund Kaas, went back to their normal glowing gold. They shifted far faster than they’d turned in the first place, though veins of red remained.

“Ew, ew, ew. Can one of you channel some Force Light? Seriously, it’s hard to get rid of this much *gunk* when the whole star system is kinda thick with it.”

Shaking himself, Izuku held up a hand and did just that, letting a blast of Force Light cascade over Zavra. Rather than cringing away from it the way Dark Siders typically did, Zavra practically *basked* in it, somehow giving off the exact aura of a cat sunbathing. Bemused, they all watched as her eyes rapidly lose even the remaining veins of red. They didn’t quite get *all* the way back to her normal baseline, remaining a bit darker and murkier than usual, but it was close by the time she sighed and relaxed.

“Oh, much better! Thanks, Master! It’ll take me a few days, once we’re away from the system, to purge the little bits left, but that already cleansed most of it!”

Despite knowing they had so *much else* they needed to cover at the moment, Aayla clearly couldn’t resist asking the obvious, voice more than a bit incredulous.

“Did you just...what...*detox* from the Dark Side?”

Zavra, far from being put out by the question, beamed and nodded like a proud puppy.

“Yeppers! I had to figure that out, so I didn’t always reek of the Dark Side when dealing with Jedi! Plus, after I did figure it out, I realized the Dark Side totally *tastes* awful. Like you’ve got ashes in your mouth and are covered in the not-fun-kinds of mud! *Seriously*, most people thought Sith liking spicy shit was normal. But the first time I purged the Dark Side out, I realized it was *totally* fucking my tastebuds! It’s a lot harder to cleanse if I generate the Dark Side *myself*, but if I’m just channeling ambient Dark Side energies from something like a Nexus, it’s pretty easy to purge. Totally worth the effort for the better tasting food, too!”

Izuku did not think that it was supposed to be that easy. From the utterly incredulous looks on Aayla and Shaak Ti's faces, he was pretty sure they didn't think so either. Deciding that plumbing the depths of what Zavra had just done was going to be migraine inducing, doubly so given her basic personality, he decided to put a pin in it for later and focus on more immediate concerns.

"Okay, absolutely need to get back to that later, but for now we have potentially time-critical information that we pulled out of both these 'Prophets of the Darkside' and their base computers. I'm fairly sure the one I interrogated, Murkuo Corbin, was the highest ranking of the group on site, so I'll start with an overview. Then you can fill in anything else you got from the others, Zavra."

Their personal Sith nodded happily and Izuku refocused. Thankfully, Izuku's particular brand of telepathy was *much* more refined than either the Jedi *or* Sith had ever managed. Corbin's sleeping mind hadn't been able to resist him lifting anything and everything useful from it.

"Right. First, these 'Prophets of the Darkside' *are* connected to our Banite Sith, twice over in fact. One ancient connection and one quite recent. The recent connection, which was more of a takeover really, is where the modern base came from. The Banites put it in, rather than the original group. Said original group here on Dromund Kaas was founded by a Darth Millennial. Millennial was an *early* Banite. As in, within two steps down the lineage. He ended up rejecting Bane's ideas and latched onto Skere Kaan's Rule of the Strong, instead. He fucked off from the Banites and came here to found a Dark Side religion named the Dark Force."

All three of the girls made interesting expressions at that, either at the name or the fact that cults were so often the result of someone falling to the Dark Side that it was nearly a stereotype. Izuku sympathized with the name thing, at least. 'Dark Force' was just about the most unoriginal name for a Dark Side cult Izuku could imagine. Not that 'Prophets of the Dark Side' was much better. Seriously, there were probably illiterate street gangs on Nar Shadda with better naming sense than that.

"Anyway, followers of the 'Dark Force' religion became known collectively as the Prophets of the Dark Side and remained here in seclusion for centuries. Their primary focus and expertise has mostly revolved around scrying the future, which is often how they found recruits, as well as how they silenced anyone that would discover them. They were helped in their efforts by living atop a Dark Side Nexus to enhance their own Force usage, as well as unbothered by the Veil since it's a Dark Side construct that wouldn't impair their own foresight in the least. It was only a few years ago, around the time of the Invasion of Naboo in fact, that they were rediscovered. We *do* finally have a name that I believe to be a current Darth, as a Darth Sidious discovered them here and managed to convince them he was some sort of destined champion of the Dark Side."

Izuku paused to let *that* particular revelation set in. The discovery of a name, even one that was likely a hidden name rather than a public name, was more than they'd had to work with so far. So far as they knew, it was more than anyone else had just yet either. Unfortunately, despite that reveal, Izuku had to give bad news with the good.

"Regrettably, only the current leader of the Prophets has actually met with this Sidious in person, and he wasn't here. Sidious killed the original leader of the group and appointed his own

minion as their head. A fallen Jedi named Kadann, who is often off planet serving their collective master.”

Shaak Ti jerked at the name of the Jedi, causing them all to look her way.

“Knight Kadann is on the list of Jedi who have left the order in the past decade. Someone was sent to track him and found nothing. He wasn’t considered a high priority as his record shows him to have been mostly an intellectual and philosopher, not a fighter. His only truly notable gift was...foresight.”

The rest of the group groaned, instantly making the connection between someone with a gift for foresight and a group that specialized in Dark Side prophecy. Of course he’d make a perfect recruit for them. Doubly so if he’d already fallen. Something which his unusual strength with foresight while still in the Jedi Order might be indicative of. The Order had been increasingly blinded by the Veil, but if he’d been drawing on the Dark Side to fuel his own foresight, it would have been far less impacted by the Veil. Once they all processed that, it was Aayla who spoke up before Izuku could continue.

“Kriff. This group might explain why everyone has had such a hard time tracking the Banites, even after discovering there were Sith out there to find at all. An entire group that specializes in visions of the future to help them force dead ends to every investigation.”

Izuku nodded at that, having already had the same thought.

“We likely only managed to sneak up on them to the degree we did due to a combination of my own unique connection to the Force, and us spending *days* leading up to entering the system under Force Cloak. That would have made getting any visions of us extremely difficult, even if it wasn’t why we were doing it. A side effect of us attempting to hide from more direct detection.”

All three women nodded thoughtfully at that, though it was Zavra who pointed out something else.

“It also might explain why Celeste seems to have found a lead where no one else did. She’s an Old School Shadow, and they practically *live* under Force Cloak. Though, I’ve only met her in passing so far, is that the case with her?”

Aayla and Izuku, the only two present who’d spent a lot of time with the woman, frowned and considered it. Slowly Aayla nodded.

“Very true. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen her fully drop it, actually. If she’s around only other Jedi, she tones it down, sort of relaxing it a bit, but it’s never fully *off*, I don’t think?”

Izuku nodded his agreement.

“The only time I can remember it being completely off was right after she woke from stasis and was fighting with the Muur Talisman. For those few moments before you destroyed it. I think she even unconsciously brought it up while she was passed out afterward.”

Zavra hummed and interjected her own experience.

“That’s paranoid even by Shadow standards. But it’s also probably why she’s making progress. These Prophets would likely be totally blind to her actions, unless she did something which shifted the timeline in a major way. Even then, they might not be able to track what caused it if she’s *near constantly* been under a Force Cloak since she *woke from stasis*. She’s more or less an out-of-context issue for them, not appearing in their timeline at all.”

Izuku sighed.

“Which, given that their leader is still out there, means we should all start trying to keep up a low level of Force Cloak as often as we can stand. As well as alert the Jedi Order that they might need to expand how frequently that trick is taught. Though that has its own issues...”

Shaak Ti, in particular, winced at that. One of the primary, but typically unstated, reasons it *wasn’t* taught more often was because Jedi *did* periodically fall. While it *wasn’t frequent*, per say, it was a rare decade where *someone* didn’t fall. Even if that someone was often just a Padawan or Initiate failing a test. The fact that most of them couldn’t hide their Force presence, and the subsequent stain of the Dark Side on that presence, meant they were mostly caught early. Frequently, it was even early enough to manage rehabilitating the younger ones. Though such a fall as a Padawan or Initiate virtually always resulted in the individual being shunted into one of the service corps, barring extreme circumstances. Teaching Force Cloak more broadly risked more such individuals managing to get last long enough to do serious damage instead.

“Getting back to what I discovered, I’m afraid there was no real hint to Darth Sidious’s identity. Other than that he was, in fact, referred to by male pronouns. Which doesn’t exactly narrow down our galaxy full of suspects much. The only other real clue is the heavy automation of the outpost, which is using a lot of Trade Federation sourced materials. I’m virtually certain that’s a useless trail, though. It’s too easy for other groups to bribe their way into getting Trade Federation hardware. Zavra, did your...victims...have anything else useful?”

The three of them that *weren’t* Zavra were visibly uncomfortable at the reminder, but Zavra didn’t seem bothered by *them* being a bit bothered. Instead, she simply nodded and launched into what she’d discovered.

“You covered most of it already, but there were a couple of useful bits I got! One of the ones I strip mined for useful data was formerly a member of some other Dark Side group called the Sorcerers of Rhand. Apparently, aside from this dude, none of them ever leave some place called the Nihil Retreat out in the Unknown Regions. So, not an immediate problem, but probably something to follow up on. The edgy fruitcakes are some sort of nihilists, believing in a ‘void that consumes all’ being stronger than even the Force.”

Shaak, Izuku and Aayla groaned at the news that there was *yet another* Dark Side group out there. Though at least this one was out in the Unknown Regions, which explained why it had been missed. Unlike Wildspace, which was merely a poorly mapped frontier, the Unknown Regions to the galactic west was bordered around and littered throughout by hyperspace anomalies. So many, in fact, that there were legitimate scientific theories that someone in the far distant past had outright *created* the web of anomalies, most commonly known as ‘The Tangle,’ intentionally.

It wasn't *impossible* to get into the Unknown Regions. The Jedi world of Ilum was within its borders, and there were a few known powers like the Chiss Ascendancy out there. It was extremely difficult, however, and any discovered hyperlanes tended to be unstable and prone to random collapse. Iillum, for example, was secured not just by being unknown, but by virtually *requiring* a Force Sensitive navigator to calculate the jump to reach it. It wasn't honestly all that surprising that there could or would be a Dark Cult or two out there, as it was the one part of the galaxy that had generally been left untouched by the efforts of the Jedi to cull such groups.

"Aside from that, most of the rest I got was incidental. Two of them were field agents, and there's some intelligence about various assassinations and operations on behalf of the Banites to pass onto LIS to see if they can make anything of the pattern. That might be useful to roll up some of the Sith intelligence agents, but I doubt we'll get too far up the chain before running into a few suicides or dead man's switches to cut the attempt off."

That got scowls and nods from all of them. That was exactly the sort of thing that both they and the Jedi had run into in attempting to backtrack the current Sith who was causing issues. Even if you found a genuine trail to follow, somehow, it always got lopped off before leading anywhere too important. Of course, now they knew that part of that culling of their leads might be because of these 'Prophets.' The rest was simply ruthless mundane counterintelligence measures, unfortunately. So eliminating this group was unlikely to entirely solve the issue.

When Zavra didn't add anything more, Izuku sighed and took over again.

"Right. Well, record everything you can and we'll see if anyone makes anything of it. I'll do the same and we can pass on what we've found to the various teams. The idiots here didn't get a warning out, so we can post one of the Volitions and the interdictor here to try and grab any more of the prophets returning. Given their specialization, though, it's likely they already know the base is lost. Aside from that, I think we've done all we can here. Aside from possibly coming back later to remove the locals so they aren't living on a Dark Side hellworld."

His last sardonic comment got snorts and nods. Though Shaak Ti spoke up with an additional suggestion a minute later.

"I think we need to *not* pass on what we know through the usual channels. Instead, I think this would be a good time to follow up on another idea. Specifically, making more *direct* contact with the Jedi Order. As I understand it, Grand Master Yoda is currently on Ossus. Passing this information directly to him would be a good way to both see it past on securely, as well as set a good impression with the head of the Order for you, Izuku. We can also hand our captive over to him. The Jedi *do* have a prison for captured Dark Siders, even if I've never quite agreed with how the place is run."

*That* statement got attention, and the lively debate on if it was a good suggestion or a terrible one would keep them busy until well after they exited the Dromund System...

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Dark Sidious seethed as he slammed the sparking head of a training droid out of his way, the head landing among a pile of its decimated fellows. His *rage* when he'd gotten the report, delivered from a safe distance by Supreme Prophet Kadann, that the man had felt most of the fellow Prophets dying, had nearly gotten the best of him. He'd only barely made it to the protective camouflage of the hidden Sith Temple before losing control and wrecking virtually every droid in the facility, including some that were important enough that they'd have to be swiftly replaced.

He *hated* that loss of control.

What separated true Sith from fools that merely fell to the Dark Side, at least to Sidious's mind, was *control*. Dark Jedi were typically defeated quickly precisely because they lacked it. Most Jedi, unused to handling the darker emotions in any manner but 'giving them up to the Force,' couldn't handle the influx when they fell. They ended up as rampaging barbarians, little better than drug addicts seeking out stronger and stronger highs. *Sith*, on the other hand, could control the Dark Side without letting *it* control them. *They* bent the *Force itself* to do *their* bidding, instead of mindlessly flailing about with it like a primitive that had just discovered fire and thought themselves powerful.

It was his own anger as his rage, combined with the brutal self-control that let him play the part of the kindly Chancellor, that had allowed him to reign the rage in eventually. At least after draining some of it off via his rampage against the droids. The fact that he had ended the 'training session' panting also greatly annoyed him, as it meant he hadn't been putting in enough hours to maintain the perfection he demanded of himself. Nor was, given the potential scale of the disaster, he likely to get the time to correct that flaw as soon as he'd like.

Making his way to his personal throne, he at last managed to shift the hot rage to cold, dispassionate anger well enough to finally assess the dangers to his plans. He already knew that he was still personally secure. If he hadn't been sure of *that*, he'd have activated one of the numerous contingencies he had for his discovery. No, he kept Kadann close, either here on Coruscant or else on Wayland, specifically as insulation against discovery. The 'Supreme Prophet' was the *only* one of the Prophets of the Dark Side who had personally met with Sidious and, consequently, the only one who knew more than his chosen name.

"There is nothing that will lead them directly back to me on Dromund Kaas, at least. I was cautious, as always, and laid a dozen false trails. If they attempt to trace the equipment of the outpost there, it will lead only to the Separatists. At worst, they will suspect Dooku earlier than was intended. That would be irritating, but ultimately survivable."

The reminder of his own preparations helped shift his anger from hot and demanding to cold and calculating.

"They may have gained my Sith name, if any of the fools talked. But that won't get them far. The records of various missions might help them break up some of the secondary and tertiary intelligence networks, but those were always disposable."

It was annoying to replace them, particularly when there were so many other demands on his time already. But Kinman could be placed on that. The man was more than capable of handling the bulk of the shift of assets. Sidious himself would merely need to order any assets that

connected to the Prophets be liquidated and replaced, or else removed somewhere they weren't exposed if they were otherwise valuable. There would be a brief gap in coverage in some areas, perhaps a few months, and then the damage would be largely repaired with new assets.

"No, the greater annoyance is the loss of their use as researchers and extra sets of eyes to prune undesirable timelines. My own foresight is, of course, far superior to theirs. But their numbers were useful to culling chaotic elements. With fewer sets of eyes on the future, more unforeseen minor waves will be left to build. Unfortunate, irritating, but ultimately not crippling. The Sith did without their aid for centuries, after all."

No, the far more concerning thing was that he hadn't been warned. More accurately, the Dark Side had tried to tell him something was wrong, but had been so unspecific that he'd settled on it being the Dathomiri Witches and the new Force Academy the League had built. Despite an enemy he still hadn't even *identified* managing to penetrate what should have been among his most secure facilities, the Dark Side hadn't been able to directly show him the threat. That was...concerning. It was something that shouldn't have been possible.

"The turbulence? It must be. The Force is still far more unsettled after the destruction of Beldorion and tearing of parts of the Veil. The Veil is regaining strength and the currents are settling, but the blasted Jedi have managed to keep it from doing so entirely by striking while the iron was hot. I must be more aware that Foresight will not pick up every distant threat accurately among the turbulence until the Veil reaches its previous strength again."

As Sidious worked to repair the damage losing the Prophets might cause, he never even realized his error. He was simply too fundamentally arrogant to believe that someone could *hide* from him, attributing the event escaping his notice to other factors. Something which would give more than one of his enemies the chance to act in ways he would never see coming...

## **Chapter 119: It Isn't Easy, Being Green**

### **– Ossus – 23.9 BBY –**

Izuku had to admit to a slight bit of tension as they were ushered into a meditation/meeting room at the Ossus Academy. They'd had a tour first, with only Shaak Ti having really had the time to check out the Academy since it went operational. He had been impressed, as had Aayla, though Zavra had seemed a bit more ambivalent. Then again, this wasn't even close to the first 'Academy' for Force Sensitives that she'd been too. It wasn't Aayla's either, if you counted the Jedi Temple, but Aayla at least knew just how little of what they'd seen had been here just a few years ago.

Ood Bnar had done a *fantastic* job of not only building up the physical academy, but doing it in such a way that it felt like a natural extension of the world. The entire canyon that had previously only held the Great Jedi Library now held a sprawling compound of buildings, ones that were carefully positioned and designed to fit in with the revived greenery that the Neti had been encouraging to grow. An attempt rebuild Ossus's ecosystem which seemed to be going well.

The main library building, unadorned stone with four great towers, had also been carefully and respectfully restored. The library remained exactly that, a library, with archives, reading rooms

and vaults. Meanwhile the newer buildings housed classrooms, open-air meeting halls, and residential facilities for the population of the planet. There were over four hundred students here, now, and far more support staff.

Add in a League garrison ‘just in case,’ and the population of the world now rested at over ten thousand, despite the success at keeping the place largely secret. A population that got significantly larger, admittedly, if you included the Ysanna, survivors of the supernova that had destroyed the Cron Drift and pushed Ossus out of its original star system. At least a dozen students were now from those tribes of Force Sensitive descendants, though finding those that were of the right attitude for training was apparently not easy. The primitive nature of the tribes and their belief of the Force being magic making it a bit difficult. As did their comparatively weak connections to the Force, though *that* part was less an issue for this Academy than for the Jedi or Sith. They had both examples of ‘normal’ people waking to Force Sensitivity...and a couple of groups present that knew a bit about how to enhance such connections naturally.

Still, massive progress was being made here, and quite a few teachers Izuku hadn’t known about had turned up. A few were Jedi that had joined the Crusade, called to teach here by the Force, once the Crusade started to drift towards a conclusion. Others were more unexpected, being from different Force traditions entirely. Master Fay had, apparently, been collecting Force Users without anyone bothering to report that fact. Which was fair enough since, while the League was supporting and protecting the Academy, Izuku had been determined to avoid the mistakes of the Jedi and kept the Academy separated from the League’s political structure. He’d been a bit annoyed to discover he was technically listed as an senior instructor here, actually, as it went somewhat against that idea. Somewhat irritatingly, Ood Bnar had shook off his protest, claiming he still believed Izuku had a role to play, just as each of the others that had first met here and woken him from hibernation did.

As for Master Fay’s recruiting efforts, Izuku had to admit he was impressed by how she’d managed to drag members of a dozen different Force organization here, with a goal more similar to the ancient Je’daii than the modern Jedi Order. They were here to study and understand the Force, not to become warriors. Combat abilities *were* taught to those who felt called toward making a difference in that way, but it was *not* universal the way it was for the Jedi Order. Instead, many studied other aspects of the Force.

The Luka Sene, in particular, had been on board with helping make that true. Master Fay had convinced a dozen or so of that Miralukan Force faction to help structure the Academy, the Luka Sene having already treated study of the Force much like a university course. A very academic approach to the Force, but one which was also firmly rooted in the Light Side.

In addition to the Luka Sene and the Jedi, there were others offering teachings. Somehow, Master Fay had brought members of the Disciples of Twilight, Guardians of the Whills, Jal Shey, Witches of Dahtomir, Wardens of the Sky, Matukai, Baran Do, and even as single Voss Mystic. It was a ridiculously diverse set of Force traditions, who were all learning from each other, and *somehow* the whole thing hadn’t imploded, exploded, or had its existence leaked yet. Izuku figured that was down to Master Fay and Master Bnar somehow, but wasn’t about to try and sort out how.

Particularly not *right now*, since he was rather busy trying not to worry as he entered a room he knew held the Grand Master of the Jedi Order, with a lot to talk to him about. Doing his best to center himself, he led the way into the room, with Aayla, Shaak Ti, and Zavra following behind. Asajj was on planet with them, but had declined to be a part of the meeting, instead having been drawn to a demonstration being put on by one of the Matukai. Shaak Ti, thankfully, took the lead once she entered, a smile in her voice as she greeted the head of her Order.

“Master Yoda, it is good to see you have escaped the Temple for a while. Have you been enjoying your visit to Ossus?”

The Grand Master, who had been studying Izuku intently since *before* he opened the door, turned a smile on Shaak.

“Enlightening it has been, Master Ti. Many new perspectives on the Force, refreshing they are. Learn new tricks, even an old dog can.”

There was humor and a certain lightness in the ancient Master’s voice, as if the idea of that was akin to putting down a heavy burden. Perhaps it was, though Izuku still had trouble wrapping his head around individuals as old as Master Fay, Master Bnar, and Master Yoda were. Shaak Ti took it in stride, even as Izuku felt a twitch of surprise from Aayla over their bond.

“I found something of that sort out myself, when I first visited. There weren’t quite so many different groups here, yet. But even just speaking to Master Bnar led to quite a few changes in my own mindset.”

Yoda peered at her, seeming to scrutinize more than just her appearance, nodding as he did.

“Sense as much, I do. Connected to the Force, stronger than ever you are. Even if rules you have been breaking.”

There was too much humor in the waggle of Yoda’s gimer stick for that to be a proper accusation, and Shaak Ti’s response was equally unbothered.

“Yes. After much mediation and speaking with Master Bnar, I discovered I could no longer agree with the way the code has often been interpreted in modern times. Nor with all the changes the Ruusan Reformation left the Order struggling under.”

There was no hint of recrimination in Shaak’s voice, but Yoda sagged a little anyway. Whatever lightening of his burdens from being here he had felt, clearly they were not gone entirely.

“Learned, I have as well. Certain that many mistakes have been made. Imperfect beings are we, and grave have been some of those mistakes. Corrected, they must be.”

Before anyone could comment farther, the ancient Master’s gaze returned to Izuku, a focused intent that silenced casual conversation.

“Agent of chaos that has stirred these changes, you are. For good or ill we have yet to see.”

Izuku found all the polite nothings and pointless introductions fleeing his head under that gaze, yet he didn’t wilt or falter at all.

“Sometimes, chaos is terrible. Other times it is merely the rightful enemy of stagnation. The Force is *life*. It will not be stagnant, nor will the future remain the same as the past, no matter who desire it to be or who hard they wish and strive to prevent the currents from shifting course. Our only true choice is to attempt to make the most of the inevitable change as it comes. Always forward, always seeking to improve, rather than trying to hold back the very tide out of fear.”

Yoda held his gaze locked with Izuku’s for long moments, before nodding and smiling again.

“Rough, your metaphors are. Wrong, they are not. Work on your inscrutability, you should.”

A twinkle of the eye as Izuku blinked, trying to process that comment, turned to a serious expression as the aged Master panned his gaze over all of them.

“Sense I do, that pleasant debate is not your purpose here. Brought troubles to me, you have.”

Shaak Ti sighed, even as they all finally took seats on various cushions around the meditation chamber. As the most familiar with the Grand Master, she took point as they finally got to the crux of the matter.

“Yes, Master Yoda. We’ve had some disturbing breakthroughs on the matter of the Sith. First on the moon of Dxun, where we learned something of their past. More recently and critically, however, we ended up on the ancient Sith world of Dromund Kaas...”

... ..

Their meeting with the Grand Master had gone surprisingly well. At least as well as it *could* go, given the nature of the intelligence they’d had to share. Not that they had stuck *entirely* to that. Yoda had, to Izuku’s surprise but no one else’s, shifted from extremely serious to equally curious once the news about the Sith was over. He’d prodded not just Izuku, but Zavra as well, somehow doing it in a way that didn’t come off as prying but had them both sharing more than they’d expected to. The Jedi Master had been utterly fascinated by Izuku’s unique connection to the Force, and very nearly as interested in what Zavra could tell him about both the Sith and the Jedi of the ancient past.

Actually, Yoda and Zavra had gotten on almost *disturbingly* well, the irreverent cheerful personality of Zavra drawing out a startling mischievous streak from the aged Jedi. Aayla and Shaak hadn’t seemed *overly* phased by that, admitting later that the only reason they were surprised at all was the Yoda mostly showed that side of her personality mostly to Initiates, Younglings, and younger Padawans. Apparently, he was well known to have a lively sense of play and humor with the younger generations, but it was much rarer to see it in more than fits and starts with adults.

To Izuku, it actually made sense that he’d clicked so well with Zavra after they’d explained that. Zavra wasn’t *childish*, but she was happy-go-lucky. Not just in personality, but even in her approach to the Force itself. In point of fact, she had an odd effect of her own on the Living Force in particular, with it occasionally seeming to race playfully around her like an eager puppy. It was, in fact, a characteristic that had helped a great deal in defusing tension with various Jedi about her race and past. Zavra was just so genuinely *likeable* and friendly that, in combination with how the Force responded to her, it was genuinely difficult to associate her with the Sith stereotype.

In the end, the meeting had stretched over nearly four hours, and two of those had been discussion completely unrelated to the Banite Sith or the brewing conflicts within the galaxy. Which wasn't to say that Yoda hadn't taken them at their word, or promised action. He'd done both. He'd just also proven to be far more...flexible...than Izuku had honestly expected of him, given what he knew of the Jedi Order as a whole. He'd asked Aayla and Shaak about it afterward, and the pair had admitted that, while Master Yoda had always been one of the more adaptable and reasonable Jedi, even they were surprised how flexible he seemed to be prepared to be.

Shaak, who knew him a bit better than Aayla, suggested that it was probably a result of him adjusting to the various revelations that had hit the Order in the last few years. Along with, possibly, the effect of visiting Ossus and getting some perspective. That much, at least, Izuku could believe. It was pretty obvious from a few of his comments that Master Yoda greatly respected Ood Bnar, and Izuku knew the Neti's opinions on how the Jedi had changed since his time weren't exactly wholly positive.

Whatever the cause was, that flexibility had led to what was, perhaps, the best possible introduction and first interaction he could have imagined between him and the Jedi Order's leadership. With a bonus of Zavra not seeming to bother Yoda at all. Now, to take a few days to properly see just what Ossus had to offer. He had to admit that he was intrigued by the demonstrations of a few Force Powers he hadn't even realized were possible...

... ..

"You want to...what?"

Izuku knew he sounded unhappy, which was a bit unfair of him. On the other hand, he wasn't overly pleased any time he and Aayla were forced to separate for longer than a day or two. Not that he would stop her from doing what she felt she needed to, but he had to admit that he was struggling to figure out why it needed to be *her* this time. Nor was it what he'd expected to discover she'd talked about with Yoda after he left, with both her and Shaak Ti having stayed behind to talk 'Jedi Business' when he and Zavra had left.

"Izu, we both know I'm not *really* best fitted for running wars, politics, or logistics. I can and do help, sure, but we both know my training was far more focused on being a spy, undercover agent, or a dozen other kinds of underworld specialist. Between Master Vos and Master Tholme, who *both* specialize or specialized in that sort of thing, it was inevitable to my skillset would lean that direction. For that matter, I was taken as a Padawan *by* Master Vos precisely because I was a good fit."

Of course Izuku knew that. He could also, at least somewhat legitimately, claim that he wasn't predisposed toward any of those things either. He got by in such a broad range of fields due to the trick he'd learned back on Earth, that allowed him to use his extremely-developed telepathy to outright copy knowledge and understand from experts. Not the rote skill of someone who had engrained a skillset into instinct, and certainly not the *talent* for the skills either. But the *knowledge and understanding*, at least. Which was enough to let him properly manage those like Shill Tervo and Esa Rotsino who *did* have genuine talents in various fields. He could, essentially, act as the ultimate facilitator and let that carry him forward on the larger galactic stage.

In truth, natively he was a front-line combatant. A hero who, minus that being an actual profession, would probably better be compared to an elite commando. He'd grown *far* past that role by now, of course. Things like strategy and tactics had been relatively seamless additions, while politics and business had not been anything of the sort, and logistics and leadership were somewhere in the middle. Aayla was underselling the amount she'd adapted herself, he knew, having gained quite a bit of skill in several of those areas herself. If pressed, however, he would reluctantly admit that she functioned closer to the level of a capable aide to him, rather than being good at covering most areas beyond her original skillset entirely on her own.

That did not mean he really enjoyed the idea of her taking what might be a prolonged set of espionage or outreach missions. Ones that would take her away from him for *at least* several months. Possibly longer. Clearly, she recognized that. Given how calm she was about it, though, she also clearly felt strongly about the topic.

"Izuku...I know, even as bad as you are at letting the Force guide you, I *know* you haven't missed the fact that something big is coming. Even aside from the Force, just our various intelligence reports are looking ugly. Worse, now we're properly aware that the Sith have been *actively* seeding the conflict we can all see coming. Pruning and directing events to their liking with groups like the Prophets. That they have, in fact, likely been doing so for a *minimum* of decades. With *centuries* being more likely."

Izuku scowled at that, knowing she was right. As much as he'd been trying to focus on getting the Crusade finished up, in pursuit of his original goal of tackling galactic slavery, as the ultimate person in charge of the League, he was increasingly aware of the threat building. A threat that, *as that leader*, he was now obligated to protect his people from. It wasn't the Hutt Remnant that he'd authorized the Miruko-class to be built against. Nor was a battleship an effective tool for chasing down the remaining galactic slaver groups. No, he'd authorized its development because a war was coming, probably a galactic-scale war, and he now had something like a hundred and ten billion people under his protection. Still...

"And it needs to be *you*, why? We have an entire intelligence service. Not to mention that the Jedi likely have *hundreds* of their own looking into it. Even Master Tholme is likely focused as much on the upcoming conflict as he is finding the Sith, if only because the two are almost certainly connected."

Aayla sighed, closed her eyes for a moment, and took a deep breath to center herself.

"You already know the answer to that, love. When I got the chance to meditate here on Ossus, focusing on how I can best make an impact, I saw visions of me infiltrating several worlds and retrieving information. I've already identified two of those worlds. One is the Fondor System, where some disaster apparently needs to be averted. Another is, I think, the Wild Space world of Kalee. Though I'm less sure what it is I need to discover there. At least two other worlds I have yet to identify."

Izuku groaned. Despite several years to adjust at this point, including a few adventures where he and Aayla had been led by the Force to major discoveries like the Infinite Engine Seeds, he *still* wasn't quite used to 'I had a vision' being a valid reason to do things. Unfortunately, he *did*

have those experiences. Which meant he could hardly say it wasn't, in fact, a completely reasonable reason. He also knew that the Jedi had been struggling more and more to get such coherent visions, even with the recent damage done to the Veil that was blinding them. For Aayla, getting such clear insight wasn't something she could ignore.

"Alright. You said that you wouldn't be going alone, at least?"

Aayla smiled, understanding that he'd accepted her choice, and nodded.

"Shaak and Asajj are going with me. Since they are still officially part of the Jedi Order, while I am sort of in limbo, it might help if we need to play the authority card. Shaak also wants to get Asajj some training on the less *straightforward* sort of missions, which I can help provide, since it's not really Shaak's specialty. With them arriving 'officially' and me sneaking it, it also provides a neat bit of slight-of-hand at Fondor, at least."

Izuku's lips pursed, but he nodded. It meant that Shaak would *also* be leaving, but such was honestly more expected than Aayla doing the same. Despite her getting involved with them, including Yoda mentioning the possibility of naming her as an official liaison in the future, she was in a position somewhat more like Padmé's. A position which meant her duties were just as likely to call her away as keep her near. Doubly so, since she still had Asajj's training to finish, and what her Padawan needed was mostly practical experience in various non-combat roles.

"Well, at least you'll look out for each other. Just try not to keep her poor Padawan up at night with your enthusiasm at getting some alone time with Shaak."

Grinning, not embarrassed at all by the fact she most certainly *was* looking forward to that, Aayla retorted.

"Asajj's a big girl, she can do with less sleep if she needs to! Don't worry, though! I'll make sure to record some videos you and Zavra can watch of us having fun~."

Izuku snorted at Aayla's complete lack of denial and upping of the ante. On the other hand, he also caught the pointed hint that he really should spend more time with Zavra while he could. Probably with Mei, too, come to think of it. Just because they were both incredibly low-maintenance, didn't mean he shouldn't make a point to spend time with them. Especially Zavra, who he was still somewhat getting to know, despite how easily she'd slipped into the more intimate part of their lives. He was going to miss Aayla for however long she was gone, but it hardly meant he'd be left entirely alone and sulking...

## **Chapter 120: Updating the Armory**

### **– Nelvaan Shipyard Complex – 23.8 BBY –**

A month after Ossus, Izuku was very much feeling the absence of Aayla, who hadn't been away from him for longer than a few weeks in years. Yet, he had to admit that the distraction he'd been presented with at the moment was certainly spectacular. While he had stepped back as much as possible from the remaining, grinding, war effort against the Hutts, the same was very much *not* the case when it came to new developments from their Research and Development

teams. He, more than anyone else, was still the one deciding which projects to prioritize. The logical result of both being involved from the start...and being in the unique position of having used his telepathy to absorb a massive number of skillsets over the years.

He, unlike the vast majority of both the politicians and military minds involved in organizing both the Fleet and Army, actually understood most of the tech involved.

He wouldn't have been able to *create* it. There was a vast gulf of difference between simple understanding and the sort of creative talent needed to make even something as seemingly small as a new starfighter project work. Let alone more massive undertakings like a new battleship class, or finding ways to utilize esoteric new energies like those involved in Mei's Jump Gates or the null torpedoes. Even Mei was, in truth, a nearly horrifying anomaly in just how far she could get almost entirely on her own. Normally, something like her Jump Gates would have taken a dedicated team of anywhere from dozens to hundreds to make happen. Most of his other researchers and engineers were more than a little intimidated by her, truth be told. Nor had Zavra popping up and being nearly as bad, if thankfully in far more limited fields, done their egos any good.

Still, the truth remained that Izuku himself was the right mixture of able to understand the tech, while also having the tactical and strategic skills needed to assess what was needed and set development goals. Which is why he'd been spending the last several days reviewing their various projects and prototypes, making decisions related to them. A few had barely needed more than a rubber stamp. The Hero and Sidekick MK IIs, for example, had been specifically designed to address issues discovered when they'd hit the front lines. While the extended range of the plasma railguns was a fantastic addition, the energy torpedoes had proven to be a bit of a dud. Unlike proton torpedoes and concussion missiles, energy torpedoes couldn't track targets and, as a result, were a poor fit for fighter-to-fighter engagements. The plasma railguns also performed poorly in atmosphere, but that part at least, they'd known going in.

A new iteration of both the fighter and its drone wingman counterpart had those been rapidly worked up as a result of pilot and commander feedback. The Model IIs retained the two plasma railguns, but dropped the energy torpedo generator for a single proton torpedo launcher and a pair of more traditional laser canons. The single launcher was firing a new generation of proton torpedoes, with better tracking heads and longer ranges which made them a great fit for the interceptor role the Hero/Sidekick combo was intended to fill. Meanwhile, removing the energy torpedo had left more than enough power budget for a rapid-firing set of linked laser canons that could swivel in a 35-degree forward arc. That swivel ability made them deadly when ranges closed to traditional dogfighting distances and gave them an in-atmosphere option as well. It cost a bit of their total punch, making them no longer as well-suited for runs against capital ships, but that was fine.

After all, the H-7 bombers *existed*, and were much better fit for that role, with the Heroes and Sidekicks acting as a screen for them. Better yet, they'd recently managed to cut a deal with Sienar Fleet System for the GAT-12 Skipray Blastboat design. A new team was busily shrinking that design down into a new gunboat/heavy fighter concept that looked promising. If it worked out, it would farther fill the role of a high-mobility threat to capital ships. Specializing the Hero/Sidekick designs as closer to a pure interceptor was perfectly reasonable, in light of that.

Not that the starfighters he'd practically rubber-stamped were what he was looking at now.

No, what Shil Tervo and his aide, a Rodian who seemed quite competent if a bit on the young side, were presenting now? It was the first serious mockup of the new Miruko-class. Having only been under development for around eight months at this point, it was nowhere near a final, polished design. Details like crew quarters or proper mapping of hangar space were barely sketched in. Yet the core of the ship, its frame, engines, shields, weapons systems, energy runs, and other critical pieces? Those were laid out in the mockup with enough detail to stand up to serious inspection.

"I take it the narrower profile is in the hope that Mei manages to expand the Jump Gates to a size that can handle such ships eventually?"

While the 5.2km monster he was looking at *wasn't* particularly narrow of profile, it was proportionally more so than the Paladin or Volition classes were. It was still just a touch wider than the aforementioned battlecruiser class, the sheer scale making that inevitable, but it was a lot closer than it would have been, sticking to their previous design paradigms.

"A bit of possible future-proofing, yes. Even if Miss Hatsume has currently hit a wall with upscaling the Gates, that might not be the case forever. Thankfully, with the rather brilliant idea of the ring, we were able to slim down the profile without losing anything. In fact, building it this way will allow a much better firing arc for the Silencer battery. It's certainly non-traditional, but someone got the idea after digging deep and turning up the Hapan Battle Dragon design."

Izuku nodded, even if he wasn't familiar with that ship. The unusually circular rear of the Miruko-class *was* a little odd looking for a warship. Yet, he'd already grasped what was going on. The clever designer who'd come up with the idea had realized that the actual barrel of the Silencer wasn't all that demanding, length-wise. So they'd put all the actual power generation and complex plasma interactions in the center of the ring, where it would be better armored and protected anyway, then created a number of emitters that could *rotate* around the central section. While the rotation wasn't fast enough to track rapidly-moving ships, it *was* fast enough to track on other capital ships, or to allow the gunners to shift which angle their fire was coming from in order to keep the emitters under the healthiest section of shields.

The same trick wouldn't work with their particle beam emitters, since those *did* require a pretty massive emitter and much longer barrel. Yet the sheer size of the ship meant there was still space for four particle beam emitters along the forward 'tines' of the vessel. Between those four particle beams and the rotating battery of Silencer emitters, the Miruko-class was exactly what it was supposed to be, a battleship killer. It had been designed from the start as an answer to other ships in the same class as it, with Izuku under no delusion that something like a Mandator would go down the same way those refit Lucrehulks had over Toydaria. Perhaps, had the rest of the galaxy not looked to be busily arming itself to the teeth, they wouldn't have committed to such a heavy weight design.

As it was, making sure they had something that could and would devour even other Battleships was only common sense. After all, they would never be able to match the sheer

*numbers* someone like the Republic could pump out, once the sleeping giant got its industrial capacity spun up for a serious war effort.

“Very well. The design looks good to me, Shill. I’m authorizing you to get a basic hull under production as a testbed, as soon as you’re satisfied that you’ve got the fundamentals of the frame down. You’ll used the new Blacksite Gamma for the prototyping.”

Tervo straightened, looking warily at his aide, and was *very careful* when he responded.

“The Blacksites are ready for construction?”

Izuku’s smirk had teeth as he nodded in confirmation.

“Alpha and Gamma are, at least. Beta hit a bit of a snag, but will be online in another two months.”

Tervo looked ecstatic, even as Greenscale looked confused. Not that he could blame either of them. Shill Tervo was one of the very, *very* few people cleared to know about the Infinite Engine Seeds, while his aide most certainly wasn’t. He was also, as it happened, one of the even fewer that knew ten percent of the output from the previous IESs had, for over a year, been dedicated to producing a new set of the IES cores.

Such cores were almost ruinously energy intensive to create, with the amount of raw energy going into one of them enough to wipe out a significant chunk of a moon. Worse, there was a lot of *Force* energy involved, and you had to be incredibly careful and methodical in how that was gathered, lest you end up with something reeking of the Dark Side like the Star Forge had. That was, in fact, what had temporarily halted Beta. All three new IES cores had been created by siphoning Force from worlds with a Force Nexus. The one Beta had been moved over had proven not to be as neutral as they’d thought, and the handful of people working with them, almost all of them Iron Knights, had needed to do some careful work to stabilize that seed.

Now, however, they had three new IES cores. Smaller than the original set, but more than capable of expanding *themselves*, as well as serving as the core of a new set of shipyards. Specifically, a trio of new ‘Blacksite’ hidden shipyards, which were being constructed around the seeds. Though the shipyard that would go with Beta was lagging behind a few months at the moment. Each of the new shipyards were currently much smaller than the sprawling pair that were connected to two of the original Infinite Engine Seeds. One of which was providing for the experimental designs yard right here in Nelvaan, which produced all of their Toru IIs, among other things. They would expand rapidly now that they were online at all, however, and Gamma had been intended from the start to house initial production of the Miruko class. Right now, the yard only had space to lay down a single massive hull, and barely at that. Yet that was all Tervo needed to get a prototype under production.

“I’ll get with the Gamma team immediately. There are a lot of custom hardware designs we’ll need to transfer from the...special core...here on Nelvaan. But I’m pleased to hear that they’ll be available. We might just see some of the new class coming online within a year, possibly a year and a half, with one of the Blacksite yards to work with.”

Izuku nodded, pleased to hear it. He could feel it in his bones that they were going to need as many of them as they could get. Which, given just how scary the design was, was not a comforting thought. Sadly, he was fairly certain the feeling was coming from the Force, which meant smooth sailing wasn't yet ahead of them, even after they slogged through the remainder of their Crusade against the Hutts...

... ..

"Okay girls, what have you got for me?"

Izuku had handled all the new decisions regarding the Fleet and Army over the last few days, but Mei and Zavra had requested a block of his time as well. Frankly, since it was a legitimate reason to get away from the more political aspects, he'd been happy enough to give them a sizable time slot in his official schedule. He hadn't been particularly surprised when he'd ended up on Mei's private space station, though he actually hadn't known that Zavra had been given space here. He'd been aware she and Mei had put their heads together on a few projects, but not that Mei had carved out some of her jealously-guarded private workshop space for the Sith woman.

Said space was an odd mix, half armory and half medical lab.

"Me first!"

Mei, excited as always when it came to new 'babies,' pulled back an oil-stained sheet from...a thick belt?

"This is my Personal Energy Shield Baby! Zavra knew the basic designs for the old Mandalorian versions, and I was able to use portal technology to update them to eliminate the fleshy organics problem!"

Izuku blinked, running that through both his Mei Translation Matrix and his own knowledge of personal energy shield tech. He had, of course, looked into it. Aside from the Gungan-made hand-held shields, though, the smallest thing they'd been able to get a personal shield to work safely on was certain mech designs. The problem with them, if he remembered right...

"You found a way to vent the radiation they create through a portal?"

Mei's head nodded fast enough to resemble a bobblehead doll, and she immediately launched into an explanation.

"Yes! While I *still* can't find a way to transfer power via the portals without them collapsing, I realized that radiation didn't have the same problem! You've seen from my first prototype that it only takes a modestly sized battery to keep a *small* quantum tunnel open for extended periods. So, by creating a system that actively collects and channels the radiation that fries fleshy humans when you use a full-cover shield powerful enough to matter, I eliminated the major issue! Now, you can wear an active Shield Belt Baby for *days* without getting enough rads to induce medical issue!"

Izuku stared at the belt Mei was now holding up and shaking appreciatively. One of the major tenants of the League's armed forces from the start had been to keep their soldiers alive and accruing experience. The ratio of droids to organics, as well as good armor and other tactics, had paid dividends in producing a lot of combat veterans for them. A soldier who *survived* a dozen

battles became far more deadly than a raw recruit with only bloodless training and enthusiasm. Since they'd known their armed forces were always going to be outnumbered, they'd designed their combat loadouts and doctrine to emphasize preserving experienced fighters. Something that had worked out well for them so far.

Another way to improve the odds that accrued experience would survive each battlefield would be amazing.

"How much damage can the shield take, how long does it last on battery power, and how expensive will they be to mass manufacture?"

Mei bounced in place a bit as she continued to present the shield belt, turning it this way and that. The movement did fun things to her chest, since she'd clearly not bothered with a bra, and Izuku had to tear his eyes away in order to properly focus on her explanation.

"A lot of that depends on how its mounted, of course! This belt can only stop maybe three or four shots from your average blaster pistol, two from a carbine, and just one from a sniper. Which is still enough to let you react! But it gets better with more space for capacitors and emitters. I've already reworked the Jedi Bunny armor design with one about twice that strong, and your own hardsuit can easily power a shield three times what the belt can provide, with minimal weight addition!"

Lips twitching at Mei's name for the girls' armor, Izuku nevertheless managed to give Mei an impressed look. Mostly because he *was* impressed.

"Fantastic work, Mei! And the duration and cost?"

Mei rolled her eyes as he focused on the parts she didn't really care about, even if she knew they were sort of important.

"Duration depends on usage. If nothing actually hits the shields? Then the belt can power them for up to twelve hours before there's a fall off in how much they'll block, and they can be recharged quickly from most vehicle or combat mech power plants. The Bunny armor is about the same, as there isn't room for a proper power plant in them. *Your* hardsuit has its own micro powerplant, not just capacitors. It can power the shield indefinitely at standby, even recharge it slowly, assuming you aren't sucking up the power with some of its other high-energy functions."

Izuku made an appreciative noise at that. There were reasons he'd stuck to his hardsuit, despite having needed at least a little reworking of his original combat style for it. Mei, given the higher tech base to work from, had taken the already-impressive equipment she'd made for him as a Hero and turned the dial until it broke right off. If not for most of it being produced by one of the IES cores, the current iteration would legitimately cost enough to buy a light cruiser.

Sure, most of that was because of the Phrik used in it, but not all of it. Mei had, for example, gotten her hands on some of the rare nanotech from a Core World and designed in a medical suite that could to a remarkable amount to keep him alive if something overcame the armor. Nor had she skimped on finding a miniature reactor for the suit. It wasn't *quite* small enough to squeeze into the 'Jedi Bunny' armor, which was lighter and more agility-focused. But his hardsuit had enough space for it, which was also part of why it had a multi-day vacuum rating.

“*Excellent* work, Mei. Though I note you still haven’t covered the cost.”

Mei sighed, looking cross. It was actually Zavra that answered.

“Unfortunately, the portal tech requires incredibly high precision parts. That drives costs up, to the point that even the shield belt is easily 15,000 credits per unit. On the plus side, the cost is all in the miniaturization. So scaling it up for use by at least our Power Suit troops is completely reasonable. The Power Suits easily cost in the 35,000 credit range already, so adding something that will increase their survivability will be a net positive despite the extra cost. Same for the Strikers, and the larger mechs already have shield systems that cost just as much. This will just be an improvement on those.”

Izuku winced, doing his best to hide the disappointment. It wasn’t *awful*, but it wasn’t cheap enough to justify every flesh and blood soldier getting one. They already spent *far* more than any normal army did on loadout for their troops, in order to push the quality over quantity aspect with their actual sentient soldiers. Still, it would be a justifiable extra expense for at least their commandos and other elite troopers, and they might eventually find ways to bring the cost down. Mei never focused on *that* part of things. As a result, focused research teams that took up her projects and adjusted them for mass manufacturing often managed to find cheaper ways to make her designs. Though he firmly insisted any such design changes still met spec. Cutting corners was *not* the way to preserve your fighting strength, and virtually always cost you more in the end than you saved.

“Anyway, my turn!”

Brain whiplashing as he went from thinking logistics back to Zavra as the Sith woman’s energy started to match Mei’s when she had a neat ‘baby’ to show off, Izuku let himself be dragged off toward the medical part of the workshop. There, Zavra pulled another, far cleaner and fancier looking, sheet off an entire workbench. The results of the reveal made Izuku blink, then have an ‘ah-ha’ moment as he computed what he was looking at.

Cybernetics.

Not *all* of it was obvious cybernetics, a fair few things he had no idea what they were. Particularly a set of horrifyingly large injectors he personally wanted nowhere near him. Still, the fact that there were cyberarms, legs, a spine, and several other bits, made it clear what the theme was. Zavra was looking just as proud as Mei always did as she started talking them up.

“Combat cybernetics! It’s taken me some serious time to update the designs I was familiar with...as well as updating the *horrible mockery* of the many augments that barely exist in this time period! Seriously, a lot of the modern stuff is *so much worse* than what I was used to working with! Still, there were certainly some material science and processing power improvements that let me take a lot of these designs to new heights. As well as, admittedly, some better medical tech that prevented them from being horrible war crimes to install in people!”

Izuku cringed at that reminder, having fully read the details about how chancy some of the Sith designed cybernetics had been. Not Zavra’s. As the Empress’s Hand she’d gotten the best of the best. Though even hers had frequently involved a great deal of *pain* when they were installed,

with someone often needing to be *awake* during the procedure to help map nerve graft reactions. Thankfully, from what he knew of modern prosthetics, that at least was no longer needed.

“Synthetic bone grafts, hormone regulators, biomonitors, muscle and bone lace, skin weaves, subdermal armor, reflex enhancers! Then there’s the more serious packages that also include cyber-eyes, spinal replacement to handle nervous system acceleration, and arm and leg replacements that add anything ranging from strength to hidden weapons! I’m not done yet, I think I can make a lot of these better still, but what we have already offers the chance to turn some of our elite units into true super soldiers!”

Izuku was...torn. On the one hand, this might be crossing some ethical lines. On the *other*, if they used only volunteers and the project was *safe*, they could genuinely create a terrifying special forces group using augmented cyborgs. It was something he was going to have to get expert advice on. Both from the military and the League’s ethical operations department. At least the renderings of the complete installations that were showing on the screen above the bench of cybernetics showed that thought had been put into the cybernetics being aesthetically pleasing.

Which honestly put them above what a lot of existing replacements that were available outside the Core Worlds were like. At the very least, civilian versions of Zavra’s designs would be a massive boon to the League’s medical community. Slaves missing random body parts, often the result of either horrible working conditions or being ‘punished’ by their masters, weren’t exactly rare in now-former Hutt Space. If they could set up mass manufacture of civilian versions, they could even become an export that many worlds in the Republic would be interested in.

#### **- Lime Starts Here! -**

Of course, just as Izuku was mulling that over, Zavra piped up again with a huge smile on her face.

“Oh! And I had the chance to reproduce some of my *fun* implants, too! Watch!”

Zavra produced a controller *from her cleavage* and pointed it at Mei...who immediately moaned and grabbed at her groin. Not that the action would *do* much, of course. Unlike even Aayla, who considered her collection of chastity belts a fun ‘sometimes adventure,’ Mei had retained her portal chastity belt. With more forgiving settings, yes, but she’d insisted on continuing to wear it, declaring it ‘much more efficient’ than other methods. Personally, Izuku suspected a huge chunk of her reasoning was the *very* Mei-like desire to ignore certain hygiene and personal needs.

The box for his end of the portal device she’d connected her long-distance chastity belt to kept her intimate bits clean with regular sonic blasts. Not to mention that it dealt with waste by vanishing it into the reverse-side of the portal, which effectively banished it out of reality in a similar way to how null torpedoes worked. Mei, predictably, loved the ability to skip bathroom breaks and keep inventing. Not to mention that the belt was still set up with a ‘reward’ system that helped her focus on her inventing tasks. That she was also the most frequently separated from the rest of them and it let them have ‘fun’ at long range certainly didn’t hurt, either.

Of course, the medical droids now had an override code.

Which was presumably how they'd put whatever implant was currently making Mei moan in place without Izuku getting involved.

"Mei was super interested in my fun bits implants! She volunteered to test the modern versions we made for human use, though now that you're here I'll have to switch them from the remote control to your Force signature like mine are! It will be more secure that way."

Half ignoring Mei, who now had her hands under her tank top and was mauling her own tits, Zavra turned to bring up a nude image of Mei. With a few commands, the image was overlain with details of multiple implants that had been installed. The first thing he noted, to his own considerable relief, was what was *absent*. They pair had not, in fact, jumped straight to the specialized nervous system graft/neural blocker that acted as a control on Zavra's ability to cum. *That* particular implant was incredibly finely tuned to Zavra's biology *and* connected directly into her brain. Duplicating it for any other race would mean starting from nearly first principles and working forward, and the thought of them recklessly installing a prototype of such a thing in Mei was stressful enough that he'd looked for it *first*.

Thankfully, it wasn't present, and he focused on what actually *was* after he confirmed as much.

The answer, as it happened, was that most of Zavra's piercings and their related implants had been duplicated. Nipple and clit piercings, connected to implants that, combined, could induce temperature changes, vibrations, and a wide range of direct nerve stimulations, were the most obvious. Somewhat more extensive were a series of nerve signal boosters and dampeners that could modify skin sensitivity. That was actually quite a bit more *extensive* of an implant, but a relatively safe one, since there was plenty of modern medical data on nerve signals. You couldn't really make a functional prosthetic with a working touch sense without that particular bit of knowledge. The application was simply far more widespread in the general fully-body skin sensitivity controller that Mei now had. More interesting, from a medical perspective at least, was that they'd clearly dipped into medical nanotech to beef up some of the nerve trunks in Mei's body so they wouldn't risk overload.

That was definitely something he'd have preferred they tested a lot more before using it on Mei. Probably. Technically, he didn't know if they *had* tested it on others first. Mei likely wouldn't have hesitated to test it herself, but from what little he knew, Zavra took after her former Mistress. Specifically, with a tendency to test on *others* first. Whether or not they'd managed to get the importance of doing so *ethically* across to her or not was a bit more up in the air. It was something he made a mental note to check on...later. Right now, Mei had lost all of her clothes but her chastity belt and Zavra was cheerfully handing him the remote control for the implants they'd installed.

Letting himself give into the inevitable, he accepted the controller...and reached out with the Force to turn some of Zavra's implants on as well. She stumbled in getting her pants off as her clit piercing went ice cold and her nipples abruptly felt like they were submerged in dripping-wax hot, with both vibrating in opposite time to each other. Grinning as he watched Zavra start moaning along with Mei, stumbling over to pull the pinkette into a deep kiss, Izuku quickly went to work on his own clothes.

Sexy fun now. Figure out how much to yell at these two idiots for being reckless later, once he figured out just how reckless they'd actually been...

**- Lime Ends Here! -**

## **Chapter 121: Reformations**

### **- Jedi Temple – 23.7 BBY –**

The entire High Council looked unhappy as they received the detailed report from the head of the Temple Guard and the lead Jedi Investigator of the team recently turned loose for internal investigations. The attack of a Dark Sider on Master Zane at the potential training satellite academy site on Alaris Prime had triggered a deeper investigation than any previously done. Already, since the Sith reemerged, previous security sweeps had found an irritating level of electronic surveillance. Subverted cleaning drones, inadequate or outdated cyber security, bugs planted in meeting rooms. A standard security review had been performed on a technical level and numerous holes patched. They'd even brought in a few outside experts to help close slicer vulnerabilities that they hadn't had sufficient in-house expertise to deal with.

They had all thought that had been the end of it.

After all, while droids and automated systems were fiendishly hard to detect with the Force, outright sentient spying would be detected by one Jedi or another, surely? Despite his own belief in the Force, Mace himself had wanted to be a bit more aggressive, yet hadn't had a firm enough position to insist at the time. Not with how fractured the Order had become in the last several years. Cracks that had only escalated in severity with the Hutt Crusade and how many Jedi 'abandoned their posts' to go join it.

Alaris Prime had been enough ammunition for Mace to finally forced through a more...comprehensive review.

Instead of only looking for electronic surveillance methods, a team of Jedi Investigators had been pulled from other important duties and set loose on the Temple as a whole. They'd performed as thorough of a sweep and audit as could be made through the support staff, and had even been allowed to dig into the personal communication logs of all Initiates and Padawans. The Temple Guard had carefully monitored them, acting as a check on them going to far...and authorizing them to investigate the logs or effects of a few higher ranked Jedi as well.

The results were ugly.

*Dozens* of their support staff were completely compromised, reporting to everyone from individual senators, to the Chancellor's office, and even a few criminal groups! They had remained undetected, at least in theory, because *they had each believed reporting to those people was the right thing to do*. With no feelings of guilt or betrayal to zero in on, no one had noticed how utterly their low-level support staff was riddled with security leaks. Even the criminal groups that had managed their own plants had apparently figured out this vulnerability, convincing those that

reported to them that they were part of the planetary security services and just 'keeping an eye' on the Jedi.

From there, the report had only gotten worse when it moved onto actual Jedi.

The *least* damning was also the most expected, though the severity of the issue had been a shock. *Dozens* of Padwans had been found to be leaking information. Admittedly, mostly unintentionally. The most disturbing pattern among them, and something many were now silently cursing themselves for not seeing as a problem previously, were the numerous Padawans that had struck up 'friendships' with various senators. The communication logs of such conversations showed what were, to far more experienced eyes, clearly powerful individuals fishing for information...and often getting it. One of the absolute worst was a 'friendship' between the Supreme Chancellor himself and young Anakin Skywalker.

Several of the High Council had known peripherally that they communicated, but the *extent* of that communication had been horribly underestimated. Young Skywalker had leaked the results, in detail, of virtually every mission he'd been on. Including a lot of political details he'd been privy to which the Supreme Chancellor had no doubt used in his political role. Obi-wan, after all, was one of their best negotiators and Anakin had been involved in dozens of critical diplomatic meetings as a result. Nor, unfortunately, was Skywalker's case a standout in any way except the high rank of who he was leaking information to. At least a dozen other Padawans had been leaking just as much information, though to far lesser sources.

Clearly, they had made a horrible mistake by not including far more instruction on information control in initiate training. Something that was now horribly obvious *in hindsight*, given the high-level politics Jedi routinely got involved in. Yet, they *weren't* a militant or police order, and had never considered the need for teaching preteens information security. Not beyond the basics, at least. Generally, it had been left up to Masters to do a more comprehensive job, and clearly all too few actually did so.

Which, considering that some of the *Masters* were *also* leaking information they shouldn't be, made entirely too much sense. There was clearly a systemic problem that was in desperate need of being corrected, and they were *incredibly* lucky nothing more sensitive than possible sites for new training academies had leaked. So far, at least.

Unfortunately, that wasn't even the worst of it.

The worst of it was discovering no less than *five* actively practicing Dark Siders among their own numbers. The highest ranking, and the reason six Temple Guard now lay dead and four more injured, had been the widely respected Sora Bulq. The very same weapon's master who had helped Mace refine Vapaad, and who taught entirely too many of their basic lightsaber classes. Worse, Bulq had been actively corresponding with someone, though they didn't know who, and that someone had been encouraging the Weequay Master to spread his influence *within* the Order. The Temple Guard had failed to capture him for interrogation, though they *had* killed him at great cost to their own numbers.

Finally, after a horrible, lingering silence after the report finished, it was a worried sounding Master Coleman Trebor who spoke.

“This could become an even greater catastrophe, if it becomes a witch hunt. We are all aware of the...tensions...among even this High Council, let alone the Order as a whole. If this information spreads and everyone starts questioning everyone else...”

Master Trebor trailed off, but he didn’t need to finish the thought for the rest of the Council to get it. Despite recent disagreements, none of them wanted to see the Jedi Order as a whole crumble, and this had entirely too much chance of causing it to do so. The fracture lines caused by so many Jedi leaving for the Hutt Crusade had only just barely begun to heal, after all.

Mace was in full agreement, trying not to grimace as he raised a follow-up point.

“It would shatter much of the momentum we’ve managed in cleaning up some corruption from the Senate as well. That is already slowing down, as the Veil regains strength, and we’ve just had proof that the Order is leaking information like a sieve. If our problems become too public, or the Order fractures, we may lose what little progress we’ve made in preventing the slide toward war.”

There were grim nods all around the room, and Mace abruptly realized that, despite his own horror, there was an opportunity here. At least for this one moment, the entire High Council was once again united. Determination filling him, he took the bull by the horns.

“We need to address our factional issues. Right here and right now. Then, we need to decide, *together*, how we are going to clean this mess up without it being noticed by literally everyone, both internally and externally. We shall start with the obvious. The fact that *none* of the Jedi returning from the Hutt Crusade ended up flagged as a problem in this investigation...”

Several of the Jedi Masters present looked like they’d just sucked on a sour fruit, but none of them protested as he began to firmly guide the High Council. All of them united for the first time in years. Even before the Hutt Crusade, there had been internal factions and disagreements that made wrangling the Council a full time job. Yet, at least for now, this new set of revelations was suppressing their differences as they started proposing and debating solutions on how to deal with the mess.

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#### **– Vaklin – 23.6 BBY –**

Laranth Tarak had not seen the twist her life had taken coming. Perhaps other Jedi would have felt that was a failing, an inability to properly navigate the currents of the Force. Laranth, however, like all the Gray Paladins, did not see the Force that way. Their little faction of the Jedi Order had long been considered near-heretical by the traditionalists among the rest of the Order, as they believed firmly that the Force is only a secondary aspect of life, and not the primary.

They eschewed the use of the Force in any physical manifestation, relying rather on militant skills and other talents to achieve their goals. All of them *did* use the Force still, of course. But generally only to enhance the skills they’d already gained the hard way, rather than as a crutch to replace those skills. They didn’t even use lightsabers, instead preferring a good blaster or vibroknife. The goal was *minimal* dependency on the Force. To use it only as one tool in a vast

toolkit. As one might imagine, this put them at odds with most other Jedi, with the various councils barely tolerating them.

Which made it *very* unexpected and highly ironic that the entire sect was now on a long-term mission for the High Council.

Officially, in a move that showed far more concern and awareness of information security than any of the Paladins had expected, the Gray Paladins had finally split from the Jedi Order 'on their own initiative.' Instead of being a way to shoo them off to an unimportant duty and hope they vanished, though, the sect had been quietly provided with a *lot* of money and Orders. Orders which took them to the world of Vaklin. It was a mining world in the Inner Rim which had a long history of deep respect for the Jedi Order. Not only had a Jedi Master Prokreisha saved the local population from a Rust Plague in the distant past, but the world had been protected by Jedi Lords during the New Sith Wars, and various other Jedi over many generations had made a difference here.

Which they were now doing again, as they brought a massive infusion of credits for the local economy. Credits that were quietly being used to expand the mines, build industrial capacity to actually *use* the mined material locally...and support a brand new *Military Academy* that was intended to turn out a full-blown ground army. Not a huge army, with their orders only being to bring the numbers up as close to 100,000 troops as they could over the next two to three years. But a legitimate, professional, *standing army*, whose loyalty would be entirely to the Jedi Order.

It was something that hadn't happened since the New Sith Wars, and it showed just how worried the High Council was about the tensions building in the galaxy. Not that she personally thought they were overreacting. If anything, from what she could see it probably wouldn't be enough. Though she'd gotten the impression that there's was only one of several operations that the Order was abruptly undertaking. So hopefully she was wrong about that.

Regardless, being a more militant sect, one with a lot of the relevant skills, the Gray Paladins had been entrusted with this immense task. They had help, in the form of advisors from the Antaran Rangers and returning Jedi from the Hutt Crusades who had gained first hand experienced with ground armies. Likewise, a handful of commanders from worlds that had suffered local wars had been snapped up and would be helping build the structure of the army. Yet, it was the Gray Paladins who were being placed in overall charge of getting the job done.

It was a hell of a wild swing from what any of them had thought they would ever be doing, but it was a job they were all eager to tackle. Even the most cynical of their sect took a considerable degree of pleasure in being recognized as the right people for this job, and all of them were hoping to prove that their approach to the Force was a valuable addition to the Jedi Order as a whole...

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### **– Hynestia Prime – 23.5 BBY –**

Hynestia Prime was a remote world of cold tundras, with the only real exception being at the equator, where virtually the entire sentient population of the world resided. Not having the fortune to be near any major hyperlanes, the world saw very little travel despite being in the Colonies region. It had been known to the Republic for a long, long time, having been one of many

such worlds discovered when the Core Worlds first pushed outward to expand the Republic. At the time, the Republic had been struggling with overpopulation and desperate for new habitable worlds, with every such world they found inevitable getting a colony. Its presence in the 'Colonies Region' which resulted from that ancient push meant that, despite the low amount of trade it saw, it was still somewhat protected by Core World interests and had a fairly significant level of development. At least in that band of warmth that existed along the equator.

Yet, for all that it wasn't quite *forgotten*, it also wasn't any sort of major player in the galaxy. It *did* have a few modest exports, such as gherlian furs, and a Royal Family who had honestly done quite well by their world over the millennia. It also, as it happened, had a bit of history with the Jedi Order. Specifically, it had hosted a Jedi Outpost during the High Republic era, one of many such that had eventually been shuttered due to the shrinking size of the Order during and after the New Sith Wars.

Despite the Outpost closing down over a thousand years previously, the locals still had a moderate amount of warmth for the Jedi Order. In large part due to the fact that they had been among those worlds that had fallen under the protection of various Jedi Lords during those wars. They were, in fact, one of the rare worlds that had come through the New Sith Wars largely unmolested. The combination of not having industry worth taking and a Jedi presence having been enough to keep the fighting away. Something which, as perhaps the most colorful single anecdote in an otherwise fairly modest history, was still taught in the schools of the world to the modern day.

It hadn't, originally, been considered as a site for the Jedi to found a satellite academy. Yet, with the worlds that had first been scouted for such now known to have been leaked, a second round of diving through archives and attempting to find viable options had been done. Worlds that could better *hide* such an academy through the conflict they all knew was coming had been prioritized, and Hynestia Prime had a little-known secret to off-worlders that made it perfect for that purpose.

Specifically, that important detail was that entire planet was riddled with massive underground caves and hot springs.

For the most part, this had traditionally been a detriment to the world. Quite aside from the lack of major hyperlanes nearby, the caves and crisscrossing underground waterways made the idea of trying to mine for resources horrifically risky. With the resources of the world extremely difficult to tap into, and little arable land for crops, the world as a whole had never had much of a chance to develop. Its largest city housed less than two million people, and the total population was under 35 million. A highly unusual statistic for a habitable world within the Colonies Region of the Republic.

It was also a very useful state of affairs for clever Jedi charged with hiding a new academy.

Unlike virtually anyone else in the galaxy, Jedi could sense where it was and wasn't safe to excavate under the snowy tundra of the planet's surface. With the right Jedi, equipped with the right tools, it was easily possible to find a location that was geologically stable, yet surrounded by hot water underground springs that could be diverted into a loop that would warm an underground base. Which, as it happens, is exactly what they were here doing.

Jedi Knight Xiaan Amersu was one of the Jedi with the right skills. It wasn't something that most people tended to remember, given how common Twi'leks were in the galaxy, but the vast majority of Ryloth's settlements were *underground*. Much like Hynestia Prime, only far worse due to being tidally locked, her homeworld had only a narrow strip of truly habitable territory. Outside of that, the only way to survive was to dig down for protection from the hot and cold sides of the planet. While she had, thankfully, not exactly lived on Ryloth long in her youth, she had been there long enough to gain a sense for underground spaces. A more than ordinary sense, in point of fact, that had ended up revealing her as a Force Sensitive.

Now, she was almost feeling nostalgic as she oversaw the formation of the caves into a new satellite academy, alongside several other Jedi whose races had similar expertise. She hadn't even been aware there *were* any Elom Jedi, and the Anx on the team reminded her painfully of her first Jedi Master, who had been killed by Aurra Sing. They and others were mapping the tunnels and caverns, indicating to the droid tunneling machines where to dig to create a larger network of caverns. Other Jedi were following behind, deciding how to use each area and setting construction droids working to make it happen.

Inside a few months, this hidden academy would be ready to receive a pair of youngling clans and their minders, as would other locations she knew were under construction but had no idea of the locations of. It was a bit sad that everyone felt this was all needed. Yet, she had to agree that protecting the future of the Order through the upcoming conflicts was important, and the security of the main Jedi Temple had proven very much less than reliable...

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