

Can One Displaced Hero Save a Galaxy?

(Chapters 83-87)

Novus Peregrine

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Chapter 83: Negotiations and Bunnygirls

Tythe Central - 78 Days Post Start of Hutt Crusade

Izuku was having a devil of a time keeping his desire to laugh down, even with the aid of the Force, and it was entirely his own fault. He'd *love* to blame Asora and Aayla, but doing so just wouldn't be self-honest, given that he'd given Aayla the idea in the first place, even if it had been *meant* as a joke. Now, with a serene-faced Shaak Ti on one side of him, and a genuinely smiling Aayla on the other, he was trying desperately not to die of suppressed laughter at Padmé's utterly blank face...which didn't *at all* match the mixed jumble of confused emotions she was putting out in the Force. Disbelief, incredulity, even a bit of desire, he was interested to note. All combating a desperate attempt for her professional political training to keep to protocol.

He understood her difficulty. He really did.

After all, Shaak Ti and Aayla looked *amazing* in their Bunny-Armor.

Yes, the two of them, along with Asajj who hadn't yet been introduced, had run with Izuku's joking plan. Worse, they'd gotten in touch with *Mei* to do it, meaning that what they were wearing was genuinely, legitimately, useful as armor. While it kept the general 'leotard' aesthetic via a skintight nature and offset colors, this 'armor' variant had an underlayer that encased the wearer in a body glove from toes to neck. That skintight underlayer wasn't true armor, but it *was* cut resistant and temperature-regulating. It would stop most knives that didn't fall into the monomolecular edge or vibro-equipped categories *and* it kept the wearer either cool or warm in a fairly impressive range of external temperatures.

Then, of course, there was the 'leotard' layer. Which was *just* thick enough to both stand out, drawing attention to all the right places, *and* contain a thin layer of tiny phrik armor plates. That 'armored leotard' would actually stop at least one shot from a blaster rifle, or multiple from most blaster pistols, cold. Meaning it legitimately *did* protect the vitals of the wearer's body unless they were shot more than once in the same place. All, as Mei and Aayla cheerfully pointed out, without limiting mobility at all. Greaves, boots, and bracers that were equally reinforced only increased the protection, though thighs and shoulders were left uncovered. That suited the girls just fine, since it meant they retrained full mobility at their joints. Something critical for lightsaber combat.

Hell, Mei had even managed to rig sensors into the 'ears' of the outfit, which fed to an eyepiece that could be projected from a small earpiece (or decorative Montral Mount in Shaak's case) with a tap. The truly ridiculous woman had made a *bunnysuit* into an effective form of armor, that *just so happened* to be perfectly suited for Jedi. Female Jedi, anyway. This joke had one hundred

percent gotten away from them and he was virtually certain Asajj was going to refuse to give hers back after the joke ran its course. Hopefully, he could at least convince her to let Mei tweak it so that the sensors were part of a pack or helmet, instead of ears...

“Sovereign Midoriya, it’s good to see you again. I hadn’t expected it to be so soon.”

Padmé’s voice was almost as flat as her face, her presence in the Force radiating ‘I am so *done with this*’ even as two of her Handmaidens were clearly slowly failing at their own desperate attempts not to crack at the scene that was playing out.

“Yes. Well, needs must when the rancor drives, as it were. There is a short break in the Crusade at the moment, and a few things needed dealing with. As it’s hard to say when I will be free this way again, I felt I should deal with some of them personally. Doubly so as I’m afraid the Liberty Council is still a bit...new and untested. It has representatives from its first few planets beyond Tythe now, but most of them are a little out of their depth in galactic affairs for now.”

That statement finally seemed to cause Padmé’s mind to focus. In fact, it was almost terrifying in how quickly it discarded all the confusion and absurdities as she latched onto information within her field of expertise and started intuitively connecting dozens of points at lightning speed. Somehow, he didn’t think most of them were related to what she actually said next, though she was certainly fishing for useful information.

“Oh? I hadn’t heard any representatives had been made official? I was given to understand that such would be forwarded to me in my position as Ambassador. What worlds have joined so far?”

Izuku fielded the light reprimand, obviously meant to prod him a bit, easily enough. He’d expected it, to be honest.

“When worlds officially take their seats, you will be notified. As this batch is literally the *first* set, however, we’ve held off on official announcements. We want to push the first dozen or so through all at once, to make the jump from a single-system ‘Council’ to a more obviously representative-based polity more clear. As for the specific worlds...so far only Illos, Illos Minor, Sriluur, Riileb and Tatooine are ready. Not enough for the statement we want to make. Several more worlds would have been ready in another month or two, when we’d originally intended to call you back.”

Riileb had been a pleasant surprise. Not entirely an unexpected one, but still a pleasant one. The rather remote world was one of the *only* worlds in Hutt Space to have managed to remain independent. There had been a concern that they would resist *any* outside influence, but that concern had thankfully proven unfounded. They’d *eagerly* latched onto the nascent League, wanting a firmer way to keep their hard-won freedom from the Hutts. Still, despite his personal interest and the slight feather in their cap it was for a world to join without the slightest bit of conquest involved, he could instantly tell it wasn’t the world that had sparked instant *concern* in Padmé.

“Forgive me, Sovereign Midoriya, but isn’t Tatooine in Republic space? I’ve...been there personally and know that it was under the control of the Hutts, but it is still officially part of the Arkanis sector, is it not?”

Izuku nodded, doing his best to keep a level tone as he responded. This was something they'd planned for, but it could still be an...issue.

"It is, yes. However, Tatooine has never had Republic membership. Something which is true for a number of other worlds in that supposed 'sector.' The Republic lost virtually all contact with the entire region of space for thousands of years, and they've only been 'rediscovered' in the period of peace since the Ruusan Reformation. Very few of them have applied for, and even fewer have actually received, Republic membership. Tatooine is one such world...and a recent revolution there has removed the Hutt influence and replaced it with a newly forming government that includes the natives as well as the humans and free slaves."

Geonosis was another such world, and one that was behaving...*oddly*...regarding the League. They seemed simultaneously extremely interested and *very* nervous. A portion of that was certainly the fact that they were a little bit too much like the Hutts. Their ruling caste was very much of the 'manipulative and domineering' mold. Yet, that didn't explain everything. Not when their people were mostly happy with their rulers and the League's official policy was live-and-let-live regarding species that had biology-based caste systems. Which was, as it happens, the case with semi-insectoid Geonosians.

No. There was something *else* going on there, but they hadn't been able to dedicate the resources to figuring out what. Something that was itching on Izuku's brain in a way that made him make note of it *again*. If it was coming to mind so often, it might just be the Force at work. He'd *make* time to figure it out personally, if he had too.

"That's...possibly not going to be the way the Senate sees it."

Right. Not focusing on Geonosis at the moment. Though the fact his mind had detoured there again meant he *was* going to track down why. Putting a mental red-ink underline under that as a priority, he focused on Padmé again.

"That is, in fact, a concern we wish to discuss with you. Many of the worlds out here on the Rim that aren't a part of the Republic have been approaching the League already. Though many are still holding us at arms-length until we prove we can handle the Hutts. Even the limited feelers we've already gotten are, however, a strong indication that our likely final borders are not going to be limited to former Hutt Space. There are quite a few systems in The Slice, in particular, that are asking questions as well. Even some that *do* technically have Republic membership, as it happens."

They had begun moving as they talked, smoothly heading for a pre-prepared conference room. Padmé, to her credit, only paused to twitch a single time when Asajj joined them as an 'observer,' wearing her own suit of Bunny-Armor...

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Sabé had desperately needed the get away to let the giggles out of her system. She knew what they were meeting about was important, the current subject having had their hosts and Padmé dancing around how to deal with 'borders' in areas where there *wasn't* a clear border between Republic and unaligned space. But watching Padmé twitch every time one of the Jedi present did something that brought attention to their outfits had just been too much.

Thankfully, Dormé was the real expert on the political bits and pieces, and Cordé was their expert on Republic law. Sabé was primarily their security expert and wasn't *really* needed for the discussions. Doubly so once Shaak Ti had made it obvious that she and her padawan were genuinely neutral. The Jedi Knight had quickly settled into the role of mediator for the back and forth, with what was obviously long experience. Of course, that fact had led to several of the 'twitching incidents' as it brought Padmé's attention back to what the admittedly gorgeous Knight was *wearing*. But still...security at least wasn't really a concern for the moment.

Which meant that Sabé had been able to escape to spend several minutes having a giggle fit in a nearby refresher, before she died of her attempts at suppressing it.

It had also, unexpectedly, led to Asora inviting her into her office for a 'chat.' Given that she was Sovereign Midoriya's personal assistant, it was a little odd he hadn't kept her on hand for the meeting. Something which had twiggged Sabé's professional paranoia enough to accept the invitation instead of heading immediately back into the debate. Now, she was glad she had, as an 'emergency message' was followed by Asora 'accidentally' leaving critical information out on an unlocked dataslate. The whole thing had been done smoothly enough, yet in a way that made it very obvious to Sabé's training that she was *intended* to read whatever was on that slate.

Mentally shrugging, she noted its position, scooped it up, and began speed-reading. She nearly stopped in shock by the third page, but forced herself to continue, not knowing when Asora would 'reappear.' The fact that there was only a single topic on the dataslate, and it was a collection of files that *shouldn't* all have been in the same place, it was more clear than ever that she'd been intended to read it. Using several tricks from her training to commit it all to memory, she was able to get through ninety plus percent of the content by the time Asora reappeared. Deliberately making enough noise so Sabé wouldn't be caught, too.

Having quickly and professionally restored the dataslate perfectly to it's previous state, Sabé greeted the Bunny-Uniform clad assistant with her best smile, despite the fact that her mind was racing lightyears a second. At least she now knew why their hosts had warned them about the Trade Federation delegation being present. Even if she wasn't sure what to do with the information she'd just gained. Tell Padmé and the others, of course. But after that? Well, that was a bigger question.

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"Kark."

That was a succinct by less that useful summary on Eirtaé's part, though it was Padmé who they were all looking to for a reaction. Their mistress's expression was twisting and contorting as she worked through all the angles at play, and none of them were at all sure what the result would be. Finally, expression settling on a frown, Padmé spoke. Surprisingly enough, her voice was relatively calm.

"You're sure that there was an indication that they'd sent the information along to the Jedi?"

Sabé nodded instantly and firmly.

"Yes. That particular report was the single most out of place, so it stood out. They passed the information along to Master Tholme. Who, if you recall, was Aayla's own Master in the final years of

her training. I've looked into him before as part of background on Aayla herself, and he's apparently some sort of investigator or trouble shooter for the Jedi Order. Not quite an outright intelligence agent, but probably the closest thing their order has to one."

Padmé's shoulders relaxed slightly but noticeably at that.

"Good. That's good. It makes the rest of this make sense, at least."

Sabé nodded her head, though Dormé, Eirtaé, and Cordé all continued looking confused. Since Sabé could see Padmé was still processing and considering what it meant for their own position, she aimed a quick explanation their way.

"The League is covering its bases as best they can, without tipping the TF off that they leaked the information. They can't afford to blow the whistle on the situation directly. The Trade Federation abruptly backing the Hutts, possibly with a lot of those Battleships, would be a complete disaster for their Crusade. Worse, it would be throwing away a useful asset, since the files indicated they were in the process of striking a deal to buy the ships into their own service in exchange for not blowing the whistle about their existence. The Federation doesn't lose money, gets the issue of ownership over Hoersch-Kessel Drive completely resolved before it causes problems, and doesn't get in trouble over the battleships. An acceptable compromise for the Federation...but obviously not one the League is entirely happy with."

Dormé caught on immediately. So did Cordé from the look of it, but Dormé spoke first.

"They still wanted to warn the Republic that something fishy was going on. But the Trade Federation has people all through the Judiciary and Senate both. It's how Nute Gunray got off with barely a slap on the wrist after their invasion of Naboo. The League knows that, so they slipped the information quietly to the Jedi, who are technically part of the Judiciary and can come up with an excuse to investigate. And us...they don't want us caught off guard, and hope we can poke around on the Senate side, where the Jedi are weak, without alerting anyone."

Padmé nodded, seeming to have finally gotten her thoughts fully in order while they all got on the same page.

"Exactly. They know we don't have any love for the Trade Federation *and* are aware how deeply connected they are. Given the technically illegal way that Sabé came across the information, we can't whistle blow the situation directly, but we're forewarned and can put out feelers simply on the worry that somehow the Federation made a deal with the League even before the Republic. Given our history, no one would blink an eye at us trying to figure out the 'why' and 'how' of that. If we get independent confirmation, we can then blow the whistle without implicating the League."

Sabé, seeing that Padmé might have missed something from the spycraft angle, filled in another bit.

"So can the Jedi, too, with the League able to claim that it was one of the various independent Jedi now roaming Hutt Space that leaked the information. Cut outs for the League either way, with a double shot at the information getting out despite that. Clever, honestly. Doubly so as they made the whole thing obvious to us, making it clear they value us as an ally. Kriff, this

entire summons is likely about those ships, even if they are using the completely legitimate negotiations as a cover to pass the information along.”

Dormé huffed a sigh at that.

“Which explains the rush, of course. Yes, it all fits. Damn it. What do we do, though?”

Padmé shook her head.

“Nothing. Not for now, at least. As you said, we have completely legitimate negotiations to get through. Better to sit on this until we get back to Coruscant...or possibly Naboo, actually. We can reasonably make a detour there and act with great certainty of information security. If the Jedi already have the information, then this isn’t time critical. So we take our time and make sure to properly obscure our source or sources.”

They all nodded at that. The League had trusted them with sensitive information, even if indirectly. How they handled that fact would likely color their interactions going forward. Firmly deciding that a new, lighter topic was called for, Sabé grinned hugely.

“Now! The really important thing! Jedi Bunnygirls! Hot or not? And does this mean that I can redesign our uniforms now? Obviously, it’s respectable if the Jedi are wearing it this season instead of those frumpy robes!”

Padmé’s whimper-groan at the topic shift was everything that Sabé could have hoped for...

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“Oh, Force. That was *awful*. I thought business negotiations were bad, but those would at least have *gotten* somewhere. Half of the day was wasted was going around in circles! We barely even managed to agree that there *is* an issue, let alone on what sort of solutions there might be!”

Izuku snorted, though even that sound came across as somehow *tired*.

“Why do you think I intended to foist the political machinations off on proper politicians, instead of doing this myself? Thankfully, we can still get away with that after a few days of establishing positions. Probably.”

Shaak Ti, was quick to tease. She was looking far more amused than fatigued despite her Padawan looking even more *done* than Aayla clearly was.

“Oh, that wasn’t so bad. Why, the good Senator was positively *straightforward* for her position. Why, it’s almost like she was a bit distracted by something?”

The comment, and the artfully innocent tone it was delivered in, revitalized Aayla a bit as she snickered.

“*That* part was *glorious*. I honestly didn’t think her reaction to the outfits was going to be quite so extreme. I got the impression that one of the handmaidens, Sabé I think, has been teasing her about something related. I wasn’t even *trying* to peek at her thoughts, but the sheer mental volume behind that name and her instinctive desire to wring someone’s neck for the situation was hard to tune out.”

Asajj perked up at that as well, a smirk fit to match Aayla's on her face. It was a lively expression that Izuku and the others were glad to see there. Her melancholy over Ky Narec's death hadn't entirely vanished, of course. Not so soon. But the Padawan was showing all the signs of dealing with the emotions involved in a healthy manner, slowly returning to the same chaotic energy that had led her to a plan that involved getting a bunch of mercs stoned on the very spice they'd been protecting.

"That part *was* fun, and the armor is honestly pretty awesome. I *wish* I'd had something this protective back on Rattatak. Or...well..."

There was a momentary flash of pain as her thoughts trailed to the obvious other time armor might have helped. Though the way her Master had died meant it was unlikely. Enough so for her to quickly shake the thought off and continue.

"...I'm totally keeping it, you know."

Izuku groaned, having seen that one coming.

"At least let me have Mei redesign it without the bunny ears. They are a little impractical, despite the sensors in them. The sensors can be put in a helmet or small back module, maybe."

Asajj considered for a moment, seeming to war between practicality and the amusement value of the ears. Finally, she nodded.

"If she can come up with something that's a little less of a liability when doing flips and such, that would be great."

Glad to have won at least that small victory out of a ridiculous battle, Izuku decided to strategically redirect while he was ahead and shifted direction to another point he wanted to cover. One underlined in mental red ink.

"Getting away from the politics for a bit, in preservation of our own sanity, a thought sprung to mind while I was talking about Tatooine that I think needs chasing down. Mostly because it *keeps* springing to mind at odd times, despite not seeming like the issue should be critical enough to do so."

Asajj looked puzzled, but Shaak Ti and Aayla immediately perked up, with the older Knight being the one to point out the obvious for her Padawan.

"That sounds like the Force trying to get your attention. Though, in this case that seems very odd. You aren't affected by the Veil the same way we are, so you tend to get more *direct* guidance. Nudges like that are far more like what the Jedi have been reduced to dealing with for the last decade or two."

Izuku nodded acknowledgement to that, even as Asajj obviously caught on, perking up now in the same way that the other two had.

"I thought that myself. In fact, it was why I ignored the first two or three idle thoughts on the subject. Now, however, it occurs to me that just because *I* am not covered by the Veil, that the *subject matter* might not be instead. If the issue is something that's being directly concealed by the

Veil, then it would still exist between me and it, unless I was physically close enough to connect to the 'local' Force midi-chlorians and ask for the equivalent of a data dump.”

Aayla nodded and pointed out, for Shaak and Asajj's benefit, another example of the same thing occurring previously.

“It's the same issue that has kept you from finding who your mysterious Sith is, when Tholme asked you to try. If you were right on top of them, on the same planet at minimum, you could probably find them easily. But from a random point in the galaxy to another random point, you're swimming in an unbelievably vast ocean of data that makes the gaps caused by a single person's Force Cloak appear so meaninglessly tiny you'd never spot it.”

Izuku nodded, scowled, then shrugged.

“It would be nice to have a cheat code to solve all mysteries. But we shouldn't complain about the boons we have, just because they don't solve every problem instantly.”

All three Jedi nodded firmly. The effect Izuku had of clearing up the local Force for Jedi nearby was a major boon, one that some of the Jedi who had been exposed to the phenomenon were already using to great effect to make their own impacts on the Crusade. Hell, even just being able to feel the difference between the Veil covered Force and Veil free Force had helped many of those Jedi refine their ability to penetrate said Veil even when away from the immediate effects of Izuku's presence. Complaining that it didn't hand them every answer on a silver platter when it already helped so much would be stupid and ungrateful. Not that some Jedi wouldn't likely complain anyway, but even Jedi could be entitled little brats at times. The ultimate problems with power and egos coming together was a sort of poison that not even the Force could make one immune to.

“Anyway, the nudge in question is about the planet of Geonosis. They've reacted a little oddly to the League, seeming both interested yet nervous at the same time. Really, it *shouldn't* be anything to be concerned about, but if the Force really is nudging me to make sure we check it out...”

Shaak Ti nodded firmly.

“Then it needs to be checked out. I'm committed to acting as a neutral mediator while the League and the Senator are in talks. But as soon as we're done, I'll take my Padawan and show her some investigation tricks while running down whatever it is that the Force wants you to notice. If you could have the League's own intelligence network do whatever initial work they can, we will take it from there afterward.”

Feeling a satisfied pulse from the Force at the firm statement from Shaak Ti, Izuku relaxed and nodded.

“I'll get our people on it. Thanks, Shaak. Now, how about something less serious? I know I, for one, could use a decent bit of exercise after that session.”

There were murmurs of agreement from the others, even as they began to debate what form that exercise should take. Shaak immediately suggested another sparring match, having become

determined to make some progress against Izuku's odd combat style, but Aayla and Asajj just as quickly began lobbying for something more 'fun'...

Chapter 84: Amenities

Izuku was doing his best not to stare. Which, to be entirely fair to him, meant he was doing better than both Aayla *and* Asajj were managing. When he had ultimately suggested using one of the Zero-G obstacle courses as a happy medium between 'training' and 'fun,' he hadn't had any particular expectations. The courses were popular entertainment, one he'd suggested himself, and most people either wore regular Zero-G suitable clothing they happened to own, or rented a simple set of the same from the facility. Shaak Ti, on the other hand, had pointed out that for this to be 'training,' they should assume they would only have the same clothing options as they would in the field.

That had been logical enough, and both Izuku and Aayla's regular day-to-day outfits were suitable. Asajj, meanwhile, had taken the suggestion as an excuse to try the Bunny Armor, minus the ears, in another environment, since she was apparently serious about it becoming her standard 'mission outfit.' *Shaak Ti*, however, normally wore fairly traditional Jedi Robes. Actually, hers were *fancier* than most. More elaborate. Intended to fit in with the diplomatic functions she'd often taken on as a Jedi Consular.

None of them had expected her solution to 'sudden Zero-G' to be simply ditching her robes for her underwear. Nor had any of them but Aayla had an idea just *what* sort of things Shaak Ti wore under her robes. While the plain tan breast wrap, made of a similar but softer material to her outer robes would have made sense...the fact that it was accompanied by *another* complex wrap for an equivalent of panties was certainly *eye catching*. Izuku recognized it as something vaguely similar to a fundoshi style of undergarment. Effectively a single piece of cloth wrapped and tied in such a way as to create a pair of underwear. It hadn't been a common style in Japan in his time, mostly only used for very traditional events. But it was a style he could mentally relate to what he was seeing.

Technically, it probably actually covered more than most types of underwear...in the front. It didn't really cover the thighs at all, and the back was essentially a twisted-cloth *thong*. All of which, when taken together with the stunning body that it was on and Shaak Ti's markings, viscerally screamed 'sexy tribal barbarian woman' to anyone with eyes and even the most vague appreciation for humanoids. All of which was only made *MORE* after Shaak had run one of the most difficult courses and developed a light sheen of sweat as a result.

Izuku was having to use the Force not to pop a boner. Aayla wasn't helping with the amount of lust she was radiating through their bond, or the way her eyes kept gluing themselves to Shaak's bare ass as it moved. Meanwhile, he was *fairly certain* that Asajj hadn't been aware she was attracted to women before this, and was now quietly experiencing her first 'gay panic.' Something which she was doing a remarkably good job of shielding from her Master, likely out of sheer desperate survival instinct. But which Izuku was picking up quite clearly with his own non-standard version of Force Empathy...and Aayla's own version of Empathy clearly picked it up too, from the looks she was throwing Asajj when her gaze wasn't locked on that ass.

Well, at least he could count on Aayla having *that* particular conversation with Asajj instead of him. Now, if only he was certain he wouldn't trip over his own tongue for the first time in years as Shaak walked back over to them, nipples visible through the now-slightly-damp breast binding, a bright smile on her face.

"That was most invigorating! I must admit, I never considered the possible training advantages of building a course like this in Zero-G. It was particularly excellent at forcing me to use movements from Ataru, despite that not being my preferred style. I imagine it would likely be a fantastic training aid for those first learning complex three-dimensional movement in combat."

Aayla, bless her, was still far more able to speak than him, despite the amount of 'please, can we seduce her, I want those thighs around by head' she was radiating down their bond. Yes, the emotions were that specific. No, Izuku hadn't known she could radiate emotions that specific. Frankly, he wasn't sure *Aayla* had known that she could do so until this very moment either.

"It would be, so long as it wasn't overused. It could easily lead to some incorrect footwork in regular gravity if it was introduced too often or at the wrong points in training. I know even I've gotten something out of training the movements in here, though. So introducing it once or twice at the start, then more frequently with an intermediary student, would be a fantastic way to help with Ataru training."

Seemingly oblivious to their collective ogling of her body and attempts to hide it, Shaak turned to her poor, panicking apprentice and set her a task.

"Right! I know you haven't done much Ataru training, but I think you'll find it well suited for you. Why don't you run a course normally in that armor. Then again while focusing on using the movements from Ataru. If Aayla is willing, she'd be an excellent person to give you some follow up advice on your second run, to try adapting your movements for your third."

Very interested in getting away from her Master at the moment, Asajj agreed immediately. She picked one of the longer, more complex courses almost at random and dove into it with enthusiasm. So much enthusiasm that it caused Shaak Ti to blink and Aayla's lust energy to transform, at least partially, into mental giggles that made Izuku's own lips twitch...

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"Well, I think that's just about the best we can do for a border arrangements. The Senate isn't going to be pleased with your stance, particularly your unwillingness to bend on the idea of border worlds being able to go or stay freely as they did with the Hutts. But your point that, strictly speaking, the Hutts are still in control of the border and thus the agreement isn't voided without them involved anyway? That will at least buy you time. Expect them to push if you manage to fully take over Hutt Space, though."

Izuku nodded. Technically, all of what they had just agreed to was verbal only, with the finer details to be ironed out by Esa Rotsino and Padmé in a series of additional meetings. Thankfully, no one expected the leader of even a planet to attend to that sort of detail, let alone someone representing what was slowly but surely forming up as a new galactic power. The barebones agreement, so far, was that the League of Free Stars would not accept membership from any

Republic world. In return for not rocking that particular boat, no one would fight them over unaligned worlds that the Republic high-handedly considered to be in ‘their space’ despite not being members.

The only exception, one that the Republic wouldn’t be happy about, covered the *existing* carve-out for worlds that were on the soft border between Hutt Space and the Republic. That border had always been in constant flux, with eons old laws on the books that eased a world moving from one to the other, depending on whom could practically project power to those worlds at any given time. In truth, that power projection had favored the Hutts for some time, with the Republic’s lack of military beyond the Judicial Forces turning the entire Outer Rim rather lawless. The Hutts simply hadn’t been interested in expanding onto those worlds either, being perfectly happy with a said lawless buffer zone being between them and the Republic.

The League was of a different mind, and the Republic, or at least Padmé, had clearly figured that out. The agreement would keep them from accepting random worlds that might be looking to jump ship, or even worlds like Abrion Major that were dangling between Tythe and Hutt Space. But, at least for now, border worlds would be fair game. Which, combined with there being a fair few unaligned worlds in this region of space, meant that the League was likely to expand a fair bit beyond the old Hutt Space ‘borders.’ Assuming they could go the distance at all.

Izuku had pointed out, as part of his argument, that the Republic could offer those same worlds the help they needed and allow them to properly join and not *want* to jump ship. Which had caused a mildly pained expression on flit across Padmé’s face despite her professionalism. The Core Worlds that controlled most of the Senate spent all their time sucking the blood *out* of the Outer Rim these days. They’d never agree to put enough money *into* those systems, let alone give the ones that didn’t have it actual membership. Doing so would increase the power of the Rim, which was the last thing the Core wanted.

“Now, let’s move on to something I hope will be easier. Republic businesses that had assets in Hutt Space. So far, it’s been noted by most of those companies that the League has not attempted to seize any of their assets, but also hasn’t released control of them back to their parent companies in Republic space. The Senate and its members are very interested in making sure that happens, and quickly.”

Izuku nodded, but it was Aayla who leaned forward and spoke. They’d agree that this point was one better made from her, even if she didn’t have much to do with what was going on. Her status as a ‘Former’ Jedi would make the statement go down easier, particularly when Shaak Ti confirmed it. Doubly so since, rather interestingly, Shaak Ti’s Jedi ID had been quietly reinstated, despite her being among those supposedly taking a ‘leave of absence.’ It was clear that someone on the Jedi Council had realized she was acting as a neutral party mediator, and their working theory was that whoever it was wanted to use Shaak Ti as an eventual bridge between the League-Adjacent Jedi and Jedi Council.

“On that point, I can give you some good news right off the bat for those interested parties, as well as an explanation for the delay. For the first, we have no intention of seizing assets *legally* owned by Republic Businesses. We have, in fact, already begun releasing some assets back to the various businesses that have properly cleared.”

Namely, the Trade Federation and one or two other ‘major’ businesses that they’d arranged deals with, but that didn’t need to be stated unless asked.

“The delay, however, is because many of those businesses were interlinked deeply with Hutt affairs. *All* Hutt assets are considered legitimate prizes to be folded into the League treasury, which means that we’ve had to task teams to investigate who actually owns what. More, we’ve already found a large number of illegal operations being carried out from Republic owned businesses. Something else that has to be investigated. Despite having prepared nearly a hundred dedicated teams for exactly this eventuality prior to the Crusade’s start, there are simply *so many* companies that it’s taking time to clear them of wrongdoing.”

Padmé’s face hadn’t gone blank at the ‘illegal operations’ line, she was too good a politician for that. But with both Izuku and Aayla being empathes, they didn’t need that sort of physical tell. They had *felt* the internal cringe. *Everyone* knew that a lot of Republic companies used Hutt Space as a work around for hideously illegal research. Some of them even dipped into the slave and spice trades just as a ‘side business.’ What better way to arrange ‘indentured servants’ for that dangerous new mining operation your corporation wanted to start up on the cheap, after all? Aayla didn’t let up, continuing to hit the pain point that was going to develop for the Republic out of this.

“Obviously, some of those things were not illegal under the old system. However, many of them *were* and *are* illegal for a Republic Incorporated business to engage in, regardless of where they do so. Manufacture of war droids, controlled substance production, and certain types of research explicitly outlawed during the Ruusan Reformation restructure of the Republic. We’ve found dozens of violations already, and the need for documenting them in full has slowed efforts further.”

When Aayla stopped speaking, there was a moment of silence before Padmé managed to rally.

“Perhaps, then, we should consider wrapping this and my other major discussion point together. Concerns about such criminality, and the possibility of Republic criminals fleeing into League space, has resulted in the Senate ordering me to pursue the idea of forming a Judiciary Interpol. For now, that would only mean aiding each other in the pursuit of criminals that flee into the other polity’s space. However, I could see that, perhaps, allowing some aid from the Republic Judiciary to help clear companies faster would aid in freeing up the business assets we were speaking of. For many of the smaller companies involved, lack of access to their assets may otherwise destroy them before they can be cleared.”

And so began yet another round of negotiations....

... ..

Negotiations, at least the ones they would need to be directly involved with, were finally wrapping up right around lunch time of day four. It was just after that official wrap up that, with a gusty sigh and an artfully forlorn look, Aayla stuck.

“Gah! You were so much more fun as a Queen, Padmé~! Come on, now that we can’t be said to be buttering you up, let us treat you to some fun! I bet you haven’t even really gotten to see all the interesting bits and special attractions of Tythe Central, have you? You and your handmaidens can

all write it off as ‘assessing the culture’ or something, right? I know from experience you won’t relax unless we practically sit on you, but this counts as ‘building good relationships with a foreign power,’ right~?”

Her over-the-top batting of eyelashes at the whole handmaiden party actually startled a laugh out of Padmé. Aayla’s primary contribution to the negotiations had been to force a more casual frame of mind, using banter between both her and Izuku and her and the Senator as a tool. It hadn’t been even remotely malicious, of course. The purpose of her intentionally acting casual, leaning on the easy friendship she’d struck up with the woman the two Handmaidens still present from their beach day back on Naboo, had been purely intended to keep any debate from getting too heated. Something which they had, in fact, actually managed. Though Shaak Ti had been needed, once or twice. to reign in *Padmé*, rather than either of them.

The woman was hardheaded and passionate. Though, thankfully, none of the current points were ones she seriously disagreed with them about. The closest to such was her belief that the Republic was the right way to run the galaxy, and that everyone should be joining it to work together. Even there, she was aware enough of the flaws and problems in the current system, of the corruption that had crept in, that she couldn’t argue the point too fervently. She wasn’t a zealot, as it were, but a moderate who leaned idealist.

“I think that could be nice, did you have something specific in mind? I admit, I’ve noticed advertisements for several entertainment concepts that I’m unfamiliar with. Along with a few particularly spectacular looking examples of ones I am.”

Aayla grinned at getting Padmé’s acceptance.

“Well, there are several options, but I thought we could start with lunch at the *Sea of Stars*. The food is fantastic, but the ambience is even better. After that, we can either hit up the Relaxation Pools, the Gravity Spa, or even the Virtual Delve if you’re wanting something more active.”

Eirtaé perked up at that.

“Wait, is that the whole thing I saw advertised when you can pretend to be a fantasy warrior, kicking butt through a dungeon with a sword?!”

Everyone looked at her, surprised by her sudden excitement, causing her to blush.

“...What? I thought it was a cool idea, and if it’s as good as the advertisements I saw showed, it’s way more immersive than similar ideas I’ve seen. How the heck did they get full-color holograms cheap enough to fill whole decks with them? Not to mention the claims about the monsters actually providing haptic feedback when you touch or hit them!”

Izuku chuckled, the abrupt enthusiasm reminding him of Mei. Which, as it happened, was also the answer. After a fashion, at least.

“Believe it or not, the same genius that developed most of our new ship systems came up with the basic technology. She even came up with the idea of the Virtual Delve, but never would have gotten around to making it with all of the other projects on her plate. In fact...three of you have met her before, if only in passing, I think. Mei Hatsume.”

Padmé's expression twisted into one of surprise, even as Sabé started outright giggling. When the others all looked at her, she managed to choke out an explanation.

"E-eirtaé and I-I were the ones r-reading reports about the N-2 projects. That girl is hysterical! I still can't believe she nicknamed Miss Tveree *Megamilk* and got away with it!"

An expression of understanding dawned on Eirtaé's face as she apparently connected the dots, starting to snicker a moment later.

"O-oh, goodness. The expression on her second's face when she started calling him *Triangles...*"

The two Handmaiden's bright laughter was infectious, sweeping them all into a good mood as the picked up their respective dataslates and talked about their plans for lunch...

... ..

The *Sea of Stars* had been breathtaking, of course. The food there was excellent, and included some dishes Mei and Izuku had been able to roughly duplicate from Earth. But, while good food was always a draw, it wasn't the most important one of the *Sea of Stars*. No, the main draw always was, and had been again in this case, the *incredibly high-fidelity* holograms of a miniature galaxy that surrounded guests as their hovering platforms floated in seeming isolation. The isolation was, itself, another trick of the holograms, editing out other tables and guests in real time.

The effect was that of being set adrift in a literal Sea of Stars, the artificial galaxy having said stars far more densely spaced than they would be in a more realistic map. Though it was still largely accurate. It was their own galaxy on display, in a way rarely seen save in the most immersive of star maps. If the dinner wanted, they could reach out and touch any inhabited star, getting a little pop-up box with interesting facts about it. Padmé and the handmaidens had been fascinated, the artist who rendered the world having done an incredible job of capturing the beauty of the stars instead of the perfectly accurate rendition normal for the very rare projections of such size and quality.

It was yet another thing made possible on Tythe by Mei's knowledge, though in this case she was mostly reproducing and mildly enhancing holographic tech that had already been in use on Earth. The worlds of the Republic had the same problem with virtually all of their technology, in that generally only the simplest and more robust tech ever reached mass production on a scale that it could be found *everywhere*. Meaning, even among the halls of power, it was relatively normal to see monochrome or limited color holograms. There were certainly places that had better, specific worlds with the right tech base to supply themselves with superior options. But such tech was more complicated than the simple, robust versions, and rarely got exported in large enough numbers to matter on the massive scale of the Republic.

Something that was sadly likely to be true of their tech, too. But that was a lament for another day. For now, the slightly late lunch had been a huge success, buoying spirits as Padmé, Sabé, and Eirtaé firmly decided they wanted the more physical activity of the Virtual Delve. Dormé and Cordé weren't as physical of people, it seemed, and had instead split off with Shaak Ti to visit the Relaxation Pools.

Actually, Izuku was fairly sure Padmé had been torn between the Pools and the Delve. Her choice had been blushing decided by the brutal teasing about another round of ‘topless fun’ like she, Sabé and Eirtaé had enjoyed during the Bikini Beach Party on Naboo. The teasing had made her swerve hard away from the swimsuit-related activity and settle on the Delve. Though she at least seemed nearly as interested in the chance to physically stretch out after days of meetings as the other two had been.

Of course, with Aayla and Sabé on the case, Padmé had still been doomed. She just hadn’t realized they’d have almost as much ammunition in the VIP decks of the Delve as they’d have had in the Relaxation Pools. Unlike the simplest walk-in Delves, which stuck to a few rooms and looped them, the VIP decks featured a much greater degree of ‘immersion.’ Which, as it happened, included smart-clothing costuming. Essentially, a wide range of themed costumes which used a type of smart cloth that could adjust itself for a significant range of sizes and body types. Smart cloth wasn’t anything new, but was generally considered fairly pointless, as few people needed clothing that changed size with them. Particularly not when the stuff was far more expensive than even getting regular clothing outright *tailored* to your specific body.

For the Virtual Delve, though, it was a fantastic addition for the VIP area, allowing the business to carry a broad range of costumes that VIP delvers could use for their delve. Something which Aayla and Sabé had apparently taken full advantage of. It was pretty obviously the two of them responsible, given that *they* were obviously flaunting their outfits and grinning like the nexu who’d raided an entire tuna factory. Unlike, as it happened, Padmé and Eirtaé, who were both trying not to blush horribly. Eirtaé was at least mostly successful in that, while Padmé was obviously struggling to keep her cool as they rejoined Izuku.

He couldn’t blame her, given what Aayla and Sabé had *somehow* convinced her to wear.

Despite the hefty and badass looking sword she carried, the outfit definitely leaned into the ‘fantasy’ side of the genre the Virtual Delve catered too. Beyond some practically armored bracers and shin guards, the rest of her outfit screamed ‘belly dancer’ far more than ‘fighter.’ A very thin, as in thin enough he could see her nipples starting to poke through, white bikini top was bordered around by worked gold filigree. With the addition of puffy sleeves in the same style, paired with a swirling and high-slit half-skirt that left one leg fully uncovered, the entire outfit could equally be worn by a ‘blade dancer’ type class or a harem girl. Given the broadsword she carried, almost more a bastard sword in her hands really, he was assuming ‘blade dancer’ was the official intent. The outfit left *very* little to the imagination, though. Frankly, the way it highlighted and worked with her lightly toned body honestly made it far more of a temptation than a mere bikini would have.

Sabé hadn’t spared herself, of course. In fact, Izuku assumed that the fact her ‘barbarian’ themed outfit covered even less had been part of how she’d gotten Padmé into so little. She wore little more than a strip of cloth across her tits, barely covering her nipples, a loincloth that he was *fairly sure* didn’t have anything under it, and a collar and shackles with ‘broken’ links of chain hanging off of them. She carried paired short blades in a single-edge style, the way she held them screaming to Izuku’s hindbrain that she *knew how to use them*.

Eirtaé had gotten off *somewhat* more lightly. While the second Handmaiden was one of Padmé’s original set, and had some biosculpt work done to help with her job as a decoy as a result,

she hadn't grown into quite the same frame as Padmé and her near-identical 'twin' in Sabé. Nor had, Izuku thought, there been as much effort to maintain the resemblance as that fact became clear over the years. Now looking more like Padmé's cousin or half-sister instead of her twin had, just possibly, spared her from the quite as scandalous of a wardrobe of the other two.

Instead, she'd been dressed up in what Izuku could only think of as 'Sexy Sorceress' attire. The 'robes' she was wearing certainly covered more skin than the belly dancer or 'barbarian' look of the other two. Yet, it still had a *deeply* plunging neckline. As in, it went all the way down to expose her navel, keeping her breasts covered only by virtue of a few thin strings holding the two sides of the deep V together. It also stopped above her hips at the sides, splitting into a long front-and-back swirling loincloth style that only went down to her knees. Izuku could, in fact, see the intentionally exposed straps of what he suspected was a thong panty, arching over her well-formed hip bones. She also, of course, carried a nicely carved staff with a crystal set in it, which he knew would allow her to shoot 'spells' at the holograms they were going to be fighting.

Aayla, of course, was perfectly shameless with semi-nudity around those she liked and had embraced a ridiculously suggestive chainmail bikini. She was also holding a bow, with the quiver on her back honestly probably covering more of her ass than the chain-bikini did. She was also waggling her eyebrows at him from behind a blushing Padmé, not a tall subtly looking down a moment later and pursing her lips in a silent wolf whistle at the sight of the Senator's ass moving in that thin, clingy cloth.

Trying to suppress his own blush, as well as move things along, Izuku cleared his throat and *somehow* managed to get a suggestion to get started out without his voice cracking. Somehow, he was afraid that his own rather 'heavy' style armor was going to leave bruises on his unmentionables by the end of this, as he tried to fight the 'monsters' while also fighting down an erection...

... ..

"Ha!"

Izuku watched in amazed bemusement as Padmé brutally decapitated the final boss, seeming to have *really* gotten into her role. He and Aayla had held back from using the Force, with Izuku himself having taken the role of 'cleric/priest' to keep things fun for the less experienced trio of women. In the same way, Aayla had taken a completely unfamiliar weapon in the bow, and refrained from helping herself in any way with the Force to wield it properly. Her pure athleticism had still put her in competitive range with Padmé and her Handmaidens...who had showcased quickly that they had significant self-defense training. Sabé was a little monster with those blades, and Padmé had taken shockingly well to the bastard sword. As evidenced by her recent enthusiastic beheading of the final boss.

"That was *fun*! Oh, please, please, please tell me that the owner is thinking of opening one of these on Coruscant! It would totally be a great way to bleed of violence when one of the Senator's hits on Padmé or one of us again!"

Eirtaé had proven to be a surprise as she slowly dropped her professional masks and embraced a clear case of inner fantasy geek. She'd become practically giddy the longer the delve

went on, and the more she got to order the others around into different formations and tactics. Izuku couldn't help but return her own huge smile, even as he answered.

"I don't think there are currently plans to open more of them, but I suppose it's not out of the question, if you think there would be a market for it?"

Eirtaé made a half-hysterical noise, and even Sabé and Pamdé outright laughed. It was Sabé that ultimately answered for the three of them.

"Izuku, this was *far* better than anything short of top-quality combat sims, and those are usually only in the hands of corporations or security services, not something one does just for *fun*. You could open an entire *chain* of these on *any* Core world and they'd be booked solid for months! People would probably plan entire damn vacations around a single delve like this!"

Izuku gaped. He'd known that entertainment tech was pretty primitive out on the Rim, but things he'd seen in places like Naboo, or at the Resorts he and Aayla had occasionally vacationed at, had made him assume it was just a resource scarcity thing. The idea that the *Core* didn't have anything like this hadn't even occurred to him, particularly as he *had* seen comparable technology that could piece something like this together on some Mid-Rim and Inner-Rim worlds. He looked at Aayla in disbelief, only to get a shrug back.

"Jedi don't exactly do a lot of pure entertainment stuff, Izu. So I have no idea. We had access to a training room or two that could *mostly* mimic what the Virtual Delve does, at the Temple. But it was always used for advanced situational training. Not often, either, since it can't duplicate Force presences and thus wasn't that useful for us Jedi. Usually, it was used more to mimic disasters aboard ship or something, instead of combat. Helping people gain a point of reference for how to respond to fires aboard ship or evacuation drills of dangerous areas. Things like that."

Padmé, who was a *bit* too tempting to look at right now, given that her sweat had done a number on her white top and she was effectively topless with how see-through it was, spoke next. She sounded contemplative, which he suspected meant she hadn't yet realized the state of her top half.

"I've seen similar technology used for holo-operas and similar events. But never for something as *interactive* as this was. I've never seen the haptic feedback worked into the holograms like that, either. How is that even done?"

Eirtaé perked up, laser focusing on that question and *clearly* wanting an answer. Shrugging, Izuku told them what little he knew.

"It's a combination of holograms and carefully projected micro-repulsor fields, plus some hardware in the weapons and such. The tech was originally developed for Tythe Central's command and control center, allowing someone to summon up a touch screen on basically any surface, or even midair, so they can customize their data streams. Borgan Trillian, our primary business guru, took one look at it and went nuts. He assigned a few people to make entertainment businesses based on the tech, but I don't think he's had the time to really follow up with those teams."

Eirtaé looked thoughtful, clearly piecing how it could all work together to create the experience they'd just finished.

“That’s brilliant...and technically complicated, I imagine. There have got to be a few droid brains or similar hooked together running this place, to handle all the raw on-the-fly calculations.”

Aayla fielded that one, Izuku not actually having a clue. He'd only visited the Delve once, when it first opened. Aayla, on the other hand, had found she enjoyed the place as a way to unwind and had often volunteered to test the more advanced scenarios as a result.

“There’s a single high-end droid brain running each ‘delve,’ but they have access to a fairly impressive server farm that helps them crunch the numbers. So the droid brain only has to act as the interactive control mechanism, accounting for delver actions, rather than doing all the heavy lifting for the entire environment.”

Eirtaé nodded, clearly enthusiastic about the idea. Before she could get too deep in the weeds on it, Izuku raised a hand.

“I’d be happy to get you in touch with the techs later. For the moment, I think Padmé might want to change, though. Then perhaps we can all wind down over a drink or two in a nearby lounge.”

Confused, Padmé looked down...then *squeaked* and dropped her sword to cover her nearly-naked breasts. She flushed scarlet as Sabé and Eirtaé giggled, then blushed even deeper as Aayla cheerfully complimented her confidence in fighting half the delve topless...

Chapter 85: Managing the Rear

As much as Izuku had found himself somewhat enjoying the break from the war that was the last few days, mostly due to Padmé and her Handmaidens being pleasant company that made the politics go down less nauseatingly, there was much that couldn't be left to slide for long. As a result, after a few hours of more casual conversation after the fun at the Virtual Delve, he'd handed off the rest of the political wrangling to the appropriate minions.

Now, he and Aayla had commandeered one of the conference rooms of Central Command that had Mei's reconfiguration tech, using entire walls of custom screens to get a handle on what they'd missed. Aside from them, Lieutenant Trotter and Knight Agai'i were the only others present. Shaak Ti would have been, but she'd left to investigate Geonosis just a few hours previous. Now that it had been brought to their attention, it was apparently itching at the back of both her and Aayla's mind just as it had his. Another sign that the Veil was involved in actively concealing whatever was going on there. She and Asajj had been given a Toru II stealth vessel that had just cleared trials, along with a skeleton crew for it, to make sure they weren't spotted while checking the planet out.

“Trotter, is this right? Five separate attacks along the Triellus Trade Route and three on the Kaaga Run? All in just the last week?”

Trotter snapped to a sort of sitting attention at the console he was manning, helping feed data or pull up information for them as they went through the reports.

“Yes sir! All three on the Kaaga Run failed, since we run heavier ships through that route, the ships themselves usually being part of the ‘delivery.’ Two of the Triellus Route raids were partial successes for the attackers I’m afraid, sir. They destroyed three cargo ships between the two attacks, and cost us heavy damage to the escorts. The escorts were beefed up in time to repel the last attack cleanly, but there’s a chance the enemy will escalate in turn, given their successes so far.”

Izuku scowled. Those two routes were the only realistic ways to get ships and supplies from Tythe into Hutt Space. All the convoys hit on the Triellus Route had been logistics groups too, not new warships. Which meant the ‘pirates’ either had spotters somewhere in the systems along the route that could alert their comrades in time to either hit or avoid a convoy, or the League had a security problem somewhere in the pipeline. Unfortunately, it was far more likely the latter than the former. Holonet access was rough out as far as the Triellus Trade Route, as it was basically Wild Space. Not *technically*, since it was too thoroughly explored for that. But the systems along that route, such as Gamorr, were all unaligned. They existed in the thin shell of space that separated Hutt and Republic Space from true Wild Space.

“Damn. I assume Aharo is already looking for a leak?”

Trotter nodded.

“Yes, sir! The leak on the Kaaga Run was quickly identified as a Bothan and...dealt with. Though given that particular species’ culture, it likely won’t be the last. He’s still looking for the Triellus leak, if there is one. He thinks it might just be a listening post of some kind, though. Lots of old posts all along Wild Space that used to point out during times like the New Sith Wars. If someone converted one to look *in*, they could be picking us up and using a localized hyper beacon to signal go or no go on attacking any given convoy.”

Aayla was the one to point out the problem with that.

“Shouldn’t we pick up any beacon like that, too? If that’s the cause, why haven’t we noticed it yet? Beacons aren’t exactly subtle.”

Trotter shook his head.

“Not usually, ma’am. But if they converted an old war-time outpost there’s no telling what sort of tech it might have had. If it doesn’t use modern hyperbands, or if it uses something more esoteric than a beacon, we might not pick it up.”

Izuku tapped one of the systems on the route. Gamorr, home of one of the most stereotypical brute minion species in the galaxy. One, as it happened, favored by the Hutts.

“It might be simpler than that. Gamorr has been in Hutt hands on and off for centuries, if not longer. What if this is another situation like the Poytta – Tisht hyperlink. A lane that no one knows exists except the Hutts. If the Hutts have an outpost in the Gamorr system, and a link to somewhere in Wild Space, or even to the parts of the Hollastin Run we don’t control yet...”

Aayla caught on immediately.

“If that route has fewer jumps than the Triellus Route, they could get ahead of the convoys and let the attackers know if it’s a viable target or not. Kriff, that makes too much sense to ignore. There’s no way the Hutts don’t have better navigational data for this part of space than literally *anyone* else. It wouldn’t even need to be a proper route, either. A smuggler’s route would be more than enough for a simple courier run.”

Izuku nodded sharply.

“It’s something we’re going to have to remember inside Hutt Space, too. We *think* we have them pinned in. But if we actually *don’t*, they could hit a system that we thought they couldn’t touch, with more ships than whatever we left to defend a ‘safe’ world can handle. Trotter? Make a note for someone to look into that. As well as for our teams on captured Hutt worlds to start pulling Nav data from *everything* Hutt. Especially private Hutt vessels that might have used hidden routes.”

Trotter did his half-snapping-to-attention trick again.

“Yes, sir! I’ll get right on it, sir!”

Sighing at the way his military aide just could *not* seem to relax, Izuku went back to reviewing more data. The containment fleet at Varl had been seeing off probing attacks from inside the Boota Hutta subsector, and there were some sort of buildups going on a Chalacta and Ubrikkia. All three of those spelled trouble, though the fact they all seemed aimed at different points might well spell that the Hutts still hadn’t all gotten on the same page yet.

That could be good, or bad. The Hutts failing to concentrate their Forces to one front was good for the League...but multiple opponents made the entire battlespace brutally hard to predict. Shaking his head and ordering the new Ray-class Corvettes to be shifted to patrol the Triellus Route for now, he moved on to considering where else they could hurt the Hutts.

Admiral Lin would be striking out at Ulmatra soon, her new Fleet already heading that direction. But, in light of his own thoughts that the Hutts might have other routes they didn’t know of, there was a serious need to try and do more than just isolate the slugs. Yet...where could they sow some more havoc without weakening their efforts to digest what they’d already taken? Humming as he abruptly remembered a *specific* set of individuals who had joined their efforts, he turned to Knight Agai’i.

“Tresten? Just what are Captain Kirthos and his fellow Wardens up to at the moment...”

... ..

“Kriffing *finally*.”

Izuku couldn’t agree more with the sentiment as he provided his biometrics as a final approval for the list of promotions that Aayla and he had been going through. One of their more critical issues from the very start had been a lack of senior officers. Technically, the promotions he was counter-signing wouldn’t fully fix said issue. Their fleet was still rapidly expanding, after all, and finding new mid-rank officers capable of handling individual ships or small detachments was going to become increasingly difficult. What these promotions *did* do was finally flesh out the upper

echelons with a handful of Commadores, Rear/Vice Admirals, and Generals of various stripes. For the Navy and Ground forces respectively, of course.

“We’re still going to have to keep an eye on them for a while. None of the new batch have more than one or two battles under their hat. Some of the Commodores not more than a few skirmishes and raids, really.”

Aayla nodded but also waved the comment away dismissively.

“Yeah, but having to *keep an eye* on them is a hell of a lot better than having to micromanage multiple fleets and flotillas personally. Not to mention that at least thirty percent of these are rear-area promotions that we don’t need to watch that closely. The commandants for the various academies, for example. Or the new head of military R&D. We can trust people like Tervo and Admiral Ringo to watch the R&D side for anything extra-level stupid, and Mei’s outside the system entirely for a good reason.”

Izuku nodded. It was nothing but the truth, after all. Those positions were *important*, but more administrative than combat-facing. He and Admiral Lin had outright refused to promote anyone to those levels who didn’t have at least *some* ability to command in combat, since there was always the chance they would be called upon to do so. Yet they’d been able to settle for a number of officers who were only middling at battlefield command, yet were extremely good administrators, to fill a number of important slots.

“Well, hopefully it will make some of this other formwork go away, once they are up and running in their new commands. But for now, I’m afraid we still have a lot more of it to swim through.”

Aayla groaned, but didn’t abandon him to his fate, instead picking up yet another dataslate and setting to work again...

... ..

Aayla abruptly laughed, causing Izuku to blink out of the half-fugue state that he’d been in, processing all the new budget addendums linked to their captures of various planets. Some of them were proving to be bigger credit-sinks than expected, simply because the populations on those worlds were in such bad shape. Thankfully, their main medical ships, the now-officially-dubbed *Mercy-class* Mon Calmari MC80 variant, were extremely well equipped for mass medical treatment. The fact that most of the sixteen ships of that class they possessed now also had at least one Jedi Healer aboard, and were seeing a steady trickle of volunteers from the more peaceful planets of the Republic, was helping blunt any tragedy. It was still an expensive proposition, but one Izuku didn’t hesitate to fund from his purely personal assets instead of war funds.

His love’s laugh had certainly jerked him out of a somewhat morbid state of mind, though he was confused what had caused it, given that Aayla was looking over reports of her own. Given how much she hated this sort of work, *laughter* was the last thing he’d expected to hear from her while they were grinding away at it. Hoping whatever it was would make for a nice break from the grim reading he’d been doing, he spoke up over her continued giggles.

“What is it, love?”

Seemingly helpless to get words out, Aayla flailed a bit at her dataslate, finally managing to send him a file. Curious just what had her in stitches, he opened up the file...and *stared*. For long, long moments all he could do was stare. Then, he managed to read a few lines of the report...before breaking down in laughter himself. The dataslate slid from his fingers, taking with it the images of what could *only* be Mei-sourced chaos of the most unexpected kind. Somehow, in some way that no one had noticed it until it was too late, Mei had added crude bi-color holo-sheaths to the droids assigned to help guide and protect the various 'observers' that were filtering in from select Republic worlds.

Every single one of the custom HI-Mk5 commando droids intended for the purpose had been repainted a friendly pastel pink, and given a personality makeover beyond just the planned protocol uploads. Now, whenever activated, they used the primitive, half-translucent holo-sheath to project an image of a brightly smiling Japanese Miko with a hyperactive and hyper-friendly personality to interact with *everyone*. Including, as it happened, the three times so far that locals had tried to attack an observer. Which had each resulted in the droids doing a color shift from pink and white to a deeper blood red and white. Followed by them crying out cheesy lines about Justice straight from a kid's anime...as they brutally beat down the assailant with violently neon-pink stun sticks that let off completely pointless sparkles.

Izuku didn't know how, let alone *why* Mei had done it. What he *did* know was that it was *amazing*, and he was absolutely breaking out her portal tonight to reward her for the well-timed laugh. Or, actually, they were all in the same system...so perhaps they could make time to physically go and reward her? There *were* still some upgrades that needed to be made to her chastity belt/portal panties, after all, and Mei had been stuck with the initial version long enough for the lesson about thinking things through to stick properly. At least for a little while. That lesson never stuck for good with her.

Nodding to himself as he considered that idea, he made a note to *make* the time. Aayla hadn't seen Mei in even longer than he had, and she was part of their relationship too...

Chapter 86: Grinding Away

Commander Luenn Tyew, formerly Gungan Grand Army and currently League Liberation Army, cursed in his native language as mortar fire came whistling out of the forest. He, along with everyone else, immediately scrambled under the cover of the shield being projected by the single Battle-Tiger mech that was with them. Most of his people made it, thankfully, but not all. Worse, a fair few droids were caught up in the attack as well. Again.

"Bravo Squad! Get in there and flush them!"

He honestly hadn't needed to shout the order, even if it made him feel a bit better to have done so. Bravo, one of the two squads of Powersuit soldiers they had, were already moving. One of the two was constantly assigned to that exact reaction at this point, even as the other squad and their four Striker Mechs kept tight to the Tiger and droids. Any second now...

Almost as if summoned by his thoughts, streaks of shoulder-launched missiles erupted from the forest around them. The point defense micro missile clusters on the spread-out Strikers quickly went active to intercept as many of the launches as possible. Their enemy already knew about that Strikers, at this point, though. Which meant that they had fired in waves and there was no choice but for some of the commando droids to deliberately intercept the attacks with their own handheld shields. Something that saved the more squishy sentient troops, but whittled away farther at their droid contingent.

Which was the whole point, he'd long sense realized.

This was the *seventh* near-identical ambush that had their column has suffered through while moving through the Forested areas of Aylayl. Unfortunately, they hadn't reached this world until after it had gotten a ton of materials and mercenary troop reinforcements via the relatively small hyperlane connection to outside Hutt Space. That connection, the Hollastin Run, had now been cut off at Tsyk, but that move had come too late in the Crusade to stop the initial rush of manpower and equipment into Aylayl. A fact which was rapidly turning the ground fight here into a grinding, attritional affair they could ill afford. Thankfully, he'd recently received some very *specific* assistance he was glad of. Now, if that assistance would pay off or not...

There were abruptly sounds of heavy combat coming from *inside* the tree line, and not from the direction Bravo team had headed out in to force the mortars to pick up and move again. Said sounds were accompanied by *roaring*, which made Commander Tyew grin savagely.

"Alpha! Into the trees! You know what to do!"

They did, with a solid half of the remaining droids attached to his command fanning out around his other squad of Powersuit troops as they charged into the tree line. They barely took any fire as the missile teams that had been throwing tens of thousands of credits of heavy ordinance his way were currently a bit *busy*. Pleased that his idea was working out, he began barking more orders to get the column moving again.

Truly, there was nothing like a few dozen Wookiees to make *anyone else* regret trying to fight in the forest...

... ..

Lieutenant Pimi, of the scout ship *Ghost Watch*, bit her lip hard enough to draw blood as she watched the pounding the defense forces over Illos were taking. The system joining of its own free will had stretched the defenses along this corridor of their externally-facing defenses thinner than originally planned. Ships had needed to be posted here from the Nar Kreeta fleet, and they hadn't yet been able to get any of the Plus-class defense stations put together in orbit. While they still had plenty of those stations in reserve, the *crews* to put them together were busy assembling planned-for stations elsewhere.

Unfortunately, that meant that they hadn't been able to put as much of a defense up over Illos as they could have wished, and the Hutts had somehow realized the weakness before it could be fixed. Another pirate fleet had jumped in from the Chalacta system, the defense here in Ilos only warned in time because her own ship had been assigned to watch the border.

Unfortunately, even with the warning she'd provided via Quantum-comm, the defenders were obviously losing. All she could do was watch, and continue to keep up the datafeed for the forces of Nar Kreeta that were responding. It was going to be a pod-race to get anything here in time to act, and she just wasn't sure if it was going to...

Abruptly, her sensors updated, and she blinked at the new contacts. A trio of Volitions in tight formation had just appeared *right behind* the pirates. Well inside the gravity well! How the kriff had...no, wait. It had to be Jedi, didn't it? She'd heard that they had the ability to pull off *completely bullshit* astrojumps like that. It also explained why it was *just* the three Volitions, with none of their usual screening ships. Those ships must have been the only ones available with Jedi aboard.

Thankfully, it was obviously going to be enough.

That realization began unknitting the tension from her shoulders. The defenders might have been losing, but they'd been giving much better than they'd taken, only being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of the pirate ships. But the Volitions had immediately started emptying their hangars, including producing some gunships that they must have ditched their normal shuttle complement to squeeze in. With new fighter squadrons, the gunships, and the heavy hitters that were the Volitions themselves, this battle was clearly already over.

Unfortunately, it had also cost the defenders. She'd seen *at least* two Siege-class cruisers outright explode, and three more were dead in space. The sole Volition that had been anchoring this fleet had taken a hell of a pounding too. Not enough to destroy it, but enough that it would need *weeks* of yard time before returning to service. Ice ran through her veins at the realization that the attackers had, as far as the Hutts were concerned, probably won this fight.

After all, they'd only been pirates, ones the Hutts didn't even need to pay now. Whereas the League was down several heavy ships, with more of them needing yard time. All while they were already stretched a bit thin holding this corridor.

Damn.

Taking a deep breath, she hoped that the big brains up top knew what to do about this. As she set course to return to watching the border, she was glad it was well and truly above *her* pay grade...

... ..

Sasha Belphont smiled as she poured another drink, putting on her best utterly *vapid* expression even as her training helped her file away the contents of all the conversations going on around her. Several of which contained tidbits of important information. Many former slaves would have been horrified to be where she was, with a collar around her neck, her tits out for the viewing pleasure of her audience, and pouring drinks in a 'club' of dubious repute but exclusive clientele.

Sasha wouldn't blame them, the slaves that felt that way that was. Theirs would, honestly, be the normal response. She was well aware that she was an oddity, if a very useful one. Despite her relatively human name, the legacy of a Master who'd hated trying to pronounce her original, she was a Twi'lek from Ryloth. An *extremely* rare Lethan Twi'lek, at that. Even more than the blue skin of a Rutian Twi'leks, her own crimson red was what had doomed her from birth. A lot of Twi'leks weren't

captured into slavery, but sold into it by their own clans, and Sasha's literally one-in-a-million coloration had ensured her own clan had seen her as little more than a vault of credits waiting to be cashed in.

It was why she'd never bothered to reclaim her original name. It meant nothing but pain for her. Ironically, her Master had been far kinder to her than her clan had been. Mind you, he'd only valued her as a pretty bauble to be shown off. She'd spent thousands of hours in just as little clothing as the short, half-transparent loincloth that was all she had on now. She'd danced, she'd sung, and she'd poured drinks. Yet, for all that many in the galaxy would pity her, she knew she'd been lucky. *Insanely* lucky.

After all, her Master had been gayer than a Kunti Nobel flying a powder blue star yacht and screaming 'harder daddy' at anyone who was willing to spank his petite ass. She'd know, since her master had, in fact, had a series of flings with that very noble, and at least the noble had visibly appreciated her tits. Her very *nice* tits, thank you very much. Her Master, on the other hand, had never looked at her with lust. Instead, he'd only every viewed her with the sort of appreciation you'd give to fine artwork.

Something that had ultimately protected her twice over.

Not only hadn't he 'sampled' her himself, but he'd been *harsh* to anyone that tried to take liberties with her body. They might sully her looks if they handled his fragile art, after all. Kriff, so long as she'd kept herself looking good and never complained, her Master hadn't even cared that she'd read extensively from his personal library. Making her one of the most well-read slaves she knew of.

The net result was that Sasha had been remarkably untraumatized by her six years as a slave. Not that she hadn't been *ecstatic* to be freed by a sting operation of the Shattered Shackles. But she'd hadn't been overly in need of help to 'recover from her ordeal,' either. She'd also, as it happened, utterly lost anything resembling a normal nudity taboo. She hadn't owned a single pair of panties since she was sold as a slave at fifteen, and a costume much like her current one had been her former master's favorite way to display her.

That combination, along with her ability to act more like a living decoration than a person, had brought her to the attention of the League Intelligence Service.

LIS might be relatively new, but most of its top people had been either connected to the Underground Hyperlane or previously involved with corporate espionage circles. They were also lavishly equipped, hilariously well-funded, and encouraged to be *creative* in how they gathered intelligence. Which, as it happened, is how she and a handful of others had been seeded into the 'slaves' of a high-profile club deep in Hutt Space. It wasn't the sort of place that catered to the Hutts themselves, of course. The Great Slugs largely stuck to their own palaces and personally-owned businesses. What it *was*, though, was a place that catered to the top *advisors* to the Hutts.

The *Naked Nymph* was *the* place to go to be surrounded by beautiful women and *calm*. None of the loud, chaotic mess that most Hutts preferred in their Throne rooms. Just extremely gorgeous and mostly nude girls and boys of a dozen species, incredibly good drinks, and extremely tight security. The suppressors over her ear-cones were even *supposed* to render her deaf to whatever the Hutt minions were saying.

They even worked, most of the time, and would respond to scans proving that fact.

She and the other planted agents could disable them at will, though. Anything as crude as a recording device would have inevitably been found by one of these paranoid (rightfully, to be fair) bastards. But the suppressors simply occasionally turning off? Even the most paranoid wouldn't notice that, particularly given how well trained she'd been in not reacting to anything she heard. That, along with tricks of memory enhancement, were what her primary training had been from LIS. Along with the ability to lip and body language read two dozen or so species well enough to know when it was a good idea for the suppressors to 'fail.'

Now, as she listened to the complaints about which mercenaries were demanding more money so that they would join this fleet or that, which Hutt was paying for it, and where it was all aimed? Well, she didn't regret getting recruited into LIS. She would help bring more slavers down, and it wasn't like she was *actually* a slave. The owner of the club was another LIS agent, after all, and they had a reliable extraction method if things got ugly unexpectedly. So all she had to do was shake her tits and listen in without anyone noticing, and she'd strike a blow against slavers everywhere.

Didn't hurt that the LIS agent running the club was cute, either. After years of not getting any despite being a 'pleasure slave,' she was intent on getting rid of that pesky virginity on her own terms. She thought he would do quite nicely...or maybe one of the other girls? She wasn't picky, really. Just horny, darn it!

Chapter 87: Shadow Games

Plo Koon was, once again, actually quite grateful for his mask. He had long, long ago gotten used to the need to wear the antiox mask on most worlds, able even without the Force to largely ignore it's physical presence. The fact that he'd equally long ago modified it to *also* filter pollution and unpleasant scents, instead of just the oxygen that was poisonous to all Kel Dor, was what frequently made him outright grateful for the need to wear it.

Ubrikkia was not exactly a pleasant world.

It was, in fact, a grimy, industrial, hell hole. One that undoubtedly smelled awful.

That fact wasn't exactly a shock. While the Ubrikkia system was currently *technically* independent, it had been effectively under the control of the Hutts for the last 5,000 years or so, give or take another millennium or two. At times, when the size of their space had waxed, it had been officially part of Hutt Space. At other times, it had fallen under the control of everything from pirates to Darth Revan's Sith Empire.

The underlying truth, though, buried below the ruler-of-the-day, was that it was effectively a Hutt World. Something evidenced by the fact that the sprawling umbrella company of Ubrikkian Industries, which included everything from the Ubrikkian Private Shipyards to Ubrikkian Steamworks, was managed by the Hutts. The umbrella company produced everything from sailing barges and landspeeders, to the personal yachts used by many Hutts. Being perhaps the foremost experts in the galaxy at building such to comfortably accommodate the large gastropods.

The problem, and the reason why Plo Koon was here, was that *officially* Ubrikkian Industries was actually a subsidiary of Kuat Drive Yards. A company that their recent peek through the Veil of the Darkside had revealed quite a few *concerns* about. Unfortunately, attempting to investigate Kuat itself would be the next best thing to outright impossible. Kuat Drive Yards, for all intents and purposes, was the Kuati government. Oh, they had a ruling class. But the original ten families that were the top of that ruling class had started out as merchant families, 25,000 or so years ago near the very founding of the Republic. Their entire purpose in the founding and terraforming of the planet had been with the express and explicit intent of forming the 'biggest and most influential' shipbuilding concern in the galaxy.

Something they'd honestly succeeded at. Frankly, only CEC even came close to matching the sheer tonnage produced by Kuat, and not even they matched Kuat Drive Yards' output if you started considering all of KDYs subsidiaries like Ubrikkian Industries. It also, unfortunately, meant that everything important that was Kuati, was linked to the yards.

Eighty percent of their system population lived and worked on the orbital rings, the nobles all held positions or interests within KDY, and *all of them were covered by KDY's insane internal security*. Kuati security could and would bribe, blackmail, assassinate, or orbitally bombard anyone trying to poke to deeply into the system itself. They were, almost without question, the single most dangerous corporate security the entire galaxy over. Which, of course, also meant they had one of the most dangerous interstellar espionage services almost as an accidental byproduct.

Which left the best avenue to try and investigate Kuat Drive Yards to be directing your efforts at the subsidiaries. The fact that Ubrikkian Industries was *also* effectively Hutt-operated only made them a doubly good target of the moment. With Hutt Space currently a mess, the Hutts here wouldn't be getting the usual support from their Kajidics. Add in the fact that the entire system was wildly stirred up with a slowly mobilizing Fleet, one almost certainly intended to help the Hutts, with dozens upon dozens of mercenary ships moving through the system? Well, even someone as high-profile as a member of the Jedi Council hadn't had much difficulty slipping into onto the planet under these circumstances.

Now, how to go about getting to the Ubrikkian Industries mainframe with a bigger issue. The solution, of course, was something the late Qui-Gon Jinn might well have approved of. His challenge to the Council that they were ignoring the regular people of the galaxy too much, and the resulting mission to the planet of Kwenn to attempt to address his challenge, had taught Plo a few important lessons. Not all of the Council had learned from the experience, with some like Master Tiin mostly lamenting the amount of work that piled up on larger tasks while they were gone. Plo, however, had fully understood Master Jinn's point, and learned from the experience.

While it hadn't been the main point, *one* of the things he had learned was that the galaxy actually rested on the willingness of the lower classes to accept their positions in life. Which, if those positions got bad enough, would quickly become less and less true. Given this was a Hutt world and he was set on infiltrating a Hutt controlled business, he suspected he wasn't going to have any trouble findings some discontent workers to help him out...

... ..

Palpatine was, for the first time in a while, pleased with something regarding the irritating speed bump that was the League of Free Stars. Oh, he'd made use of their movements, of course. Everything, even the unexpected, could always be made to serve his ends. Such as with the modifications to the ORD defense fleet laws and agreements that he'd pushed through. Those fleets being brought back up to something realistically useful would mean he didn't need to hobble the opening blows of the Separatists nearly as much when they came, and the resulting greater number of deaths would only empower the Dark Side and the Veil.

The League itself, however, had continued to be *irritatingly good* at information security. Even shifting a few of his better assets, led in this case by Kinman Dorian, had failed to meaningfully penetrate the League's security. Unbelievably, the entire League seemed to be using some sort of novel communication method, instead of relying on the holonet, meaning the taps the Sith had long ago put into the holonet system were useless. It was a revelation that had at least partially explained how their military buildup had been hidden so well and for so long.

Longer term efforts had born only middling fruit. The sheer number of sentients pouring into Tythe and Hutt Space to help in the Crusade meant his agents had little trouble slipping some people of their own in...but the League was showing good sense in keeping the new acquisitions from anything critical. In time, some of their plants would work their way upward in the League's various services. But for now, that wasn't a useful source of information. Worse, the League's own people had been formed from sources that meant they were *remarkably* loyal. So simply offering bribes wasn't getting very many useful bites either.

Padmé Amidala had once again proven herself useful, however.

While he was still annoyed at how well the little chit had managed to parley her personal connection with this 'Sovereign Midoriya' into a much larger power bloc than she should have had access to, she still hadn't realized he was no friend of hers. It had been hilariously easy to convince her to add the idea of a 'Judiciary Interpol' to her agenda for her unexpected recall to the League for negotiations. Now, he'd just gotten confirmation from her that some form of that idea would be going forward, even if the details were still limited.

Perfect.

The Judicial Forces of the Republic had been one of the first places he'd focused on 'clearing of corruption,' once he'd taken office. Which meant, of course, that he'd replaced all the key figures with people that answered entirely to himself. Some directly, and others through numerous cutouts. It would be child's play to make sure that the various investigators tracking 'criminals' into Hutt Space were his own agents, and those agents would give him a clear look at what was going on inside that region. Not to mention that their own interaction with the forces of the League would give them plenty of access to plant spyware and find blackmail to turn more assets still.

Yes, that insipid little bitch had given him the perfect opening to pry into the League's secrets, at last. Now, it was only a matter of time before he knew all he needed to...

... ..

Anakin had to admit there was a certain satisfaction in seeing a senator arrested. He wasn't really one to follow politics all that much, but the reasons weren't quite what he was sure Obi-wan thought they were. It wasn't that he was *uninterested*, so much as that he found their complexity frustrating. It was, beyond anyone else, the *politicians* that made simple solutions impossible. It was politics that stopped the Jedi Order from tackling the slave trade. It was politics that forced the Jedi to toe the line and not interfere when they saw blatant corruption happening on various Core Worlds. Even on Coruscant itself, where the Order itself was based!

He left politics alone because they were not conducive to his calm.

Which, considering that *calm* had never exactly been an easy thing for him, was something he felt was simple common sense on his part. Or, at least, it *had* been. For now, at last, the Jedi Order seemed to be moving on a lot of the corruption it had strongly suspected existed but had stayed its hand on looking too deep into. The results were evidenced before him now as soon-to-be-former Senator Ronet Coorr was led out to a Judiciary Ship in cuffs.

It wasn't enough, not all by itself, but he also knew that he and Obi-wan were only one of dozens of teams that had been sent out to deal with similar situations. Maybe, if they took a big enough bite out of the corruption in the Senate, something would actually get done. It was even possible, if still highly unlikely, that some of those simple solutions might become possible.

He'd still really rather be out running Hutts through with his lightsaber, though...

... ..

Pre Vizsla wasn't one overly given to smiling. Yet, as he saw the new ships, filled with new recruits for the death watch, that their latest payment from the Hutts had brought them, he allowed himself one. It was hidden by his helmet, of course. But he knew it was there, and he reveled in the fact he felt like smiling at all. The price for their actions, first on Tythe and then in Hutt Space on Jilrua, had been high, but entirely worthwhile.

The loss of Bo-Katan was more annoying than a serious issue. Her presence as a political tool against her sister had been potentially *very* useful. Mandalorians, even those stupid karking pacifists that didn't deserve the name, were very family oriented. The fact that Satine's own sister thought she was so out of line that Bo-Katan had jointed the Death Watch to oppose her had been a striking point. One he'd even used to sway a few coverts and clan leaders in the wake of her very Mandalorian death. Yet, in truth, the girl had been nothing special, and the two *million* credits they'd gotten for managing to hit a military manufacturing complex on Tythe itself had been a massive boon.

Those credits had been enough to land the majority of the Death Watch on Jilrua, where they'd managed to outright push the League off the world, giving them a bloody nose in the process. It was the *first* time anyone had done that. So far, the *only* time, in point of fact. To say that the Hutts had paid them gloriously well for that victory would be an *understatement*. The world had since seen too much reinforcement to try to hold onto, but the fact the League had been forced back had proven they weren't invulnerable. Moreover, it had been a public enough victory that many of the more cautious merc groups, cowards that had balked at the high death tolls that were coming out of Hutt Space conflicts, had started to fold under the offers of huge amounts of credits.

Most of the scum were barely cannon fodder, of course. But even cannon fodder had its worth, and Pre could easily see what the Hutts were up to. They were using their fortunes to whittle away and grind down their attackers. Attackers who, for all their success, had captured less than fifty worlds within Hutt Space. Given that the Hutts held somewhere close to eight hundred, by his best intelligence, and influenced far more, the League were still punching out of the weight class. The rest of the galaxy might not realize that yet, but they would soon enough.

In the meantime, Pre would find more targets to blood the Death Watch on. All while building up the Fleet he needed to pull the rug out from under Satine. The squadron of Fang Fighters they'd just gotten, along with the half dozen Kom'rk transports, were a nice start in that direction. Soon enough, they'd have enough people and enough firepower that the pathetic 'security services' of the Duchess wouldn't be able to stop them.

Mandalore would be theirs. Sooner, rather than later.

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