

Can One Displaced Hero Save a Galaxy?

(Chapters 127-130)

Novus Peregrine

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Chapter 127: Expedition

– Tython System – 22.9 BBY –

“Hyperspace emergence successful. Welcome to Tython, everyone.”

Aayla’s comment was light, but the feelings on the bridge of the *Luminosity* were extremely...mixed. The ancient Corellian Colonizer ship was, so far as anyone knew, the very last such ship flying anywhere in the galaxy. One of three that had survived from the original thirteen in use as Praxeum ships before the New Sith Wars, the other two had eventually been stripped for parts to keep the *Luminosity* itself going. Yet, for all that the ship was over a thousand years old now, she was still the pride of the Explorer Corps in some ways.

The reason for that was actually pretty simple.

The *Luminosity* was tough.

The original ships of the class had been, as one might imagine from the name, intended for *colonization* efforts in poorly mapped regions of the galaxy. Corellian engineering, already generally famous for being rugged as all kriff, had been pushed to its absolute limits to create a capital-scale ship that could survive even the roughest hyperlane exits and longest expeditions. Once handed over to the Explorer Corps post-Ruusan, Jedi engineers had *farther* enhanced that ruggedness with updates and modifications. If there were any ship in the entire galaxy that could claim the ability to ‘safely’ map hyperlanes?

That ship was the *Luminosity*.

It was for this reason that the ship had been recalled when Yoda had, seemingly out of the blue, called for the expedition to Tython to resume planning. Events with the Crusade and the chaos caused by the near-fracture of the Jedi Order had derailed initial plans to make such an expedition, and more than one Jedi had given mood whiplash when the Grand Master had forcefully pushed to restart the planning for it. Even more mind-boggling was the fact that Yoda had done so with the intent of making it a *joint* expedition, between the Jedi Order and the Academy of Ossus. Though that fact was being kept rather quiet from those not part of the expedition itself.

Aayla suspected she had a good idea what the Grandmaster was up to and, much as she hated that becoming the point-woman holding both factions together was keeping her away from Izuku, she *did* approve. Contrary to what many outsiders thought, the various Service Corps weren’t entirely staffed by ‘Jedi Rejects.’ In fact, what even most *initiates* never realized, was that it was entirely possible to be raised all the way to Master just from work done in the Service Corps.

Admittedly that happened most often from the Explorer Corps, and it was still only a handful of individuals, but it *did* happen. Likewise, some Jedi were just flat called by the Force to work in the various Corps, their particular gifts with the Force being well suited to some task other than fighting.

The result of that congruence of facts just so happened to be that one of the largest chunks of apolitical, non-traditionalist, Jedi? It could be found in the Explorer Corps in particular. It took a particular sort of mindset to push out into the unknown areas of the galaxy, mapping new hyperlanes and contacting new species and civilizations. A *flexible* mindset, as it happened, given that the Explorer Corps was the single most likely to run into ‘Weird Force Shenanigans™.’ That they were *also* prone to running into *conflict*, also meant they were the one Service Corps with the most Knights and Masters. Some raised internally from initiates that had been shuffled into the Explorer Corps, others simply called to the Corp by the Force after they made the rank of Knight more traditionally.

Encouraging good relations between perhaps the single most flexible group of Jedi in the Order and the Ossus Academy? Well, that was pretty obviously a start on getting the Order as a whole to accept that the Academy existed and that its existence wasn’t a *bad* or *heretical* thing. Something she’d already seen playing out on the slow trip mapping a new hyperlane to Tython. The Explorer Corps Jedi, be they masters or those who’d never become more than initiates, were exceptionally curious about the various Force Traditions that made up the other half of the expedition. Yet, they were also *diplomatic* about that curiosity as they politely integrated the likes of Luka Sene and Matukai. The former along out of academic interest and the latter to act as security.

The pair of Matukai *really* wanted to try punching the Dark Side technobeasts in the face to see if their internal Force usage could be honed even farther by fighting off the virus they produced. Lunatics, the both of them, as far as Aayla was concerned. Both had managed to learn Force Light, however, so they at least weren’t at much risk of the technovirus actually *corrupting* them. Meanwhile, their enthusiasm for dealing with the local Dark Side beasties would help keep the rest of the expedition safe.

“The whole world is at war with itself. However could this have happened to the birthplace of the Jedi?”

The quiet comment had come from Jedi Knight Tyneir Renz, and it was Master Ru-Tuo, the Pathfinder in charge of the *Luminosity*, who answered a moment later.

“Hmmm, feels like the residue of a natural Dark Side event, the sort of thing that occurs when some sort of cataclysm or other causes a mass extinction event or similar. Such things normally fade naturally, but it seems someone made use of the Dark Side surge for their own ends, spreading corruption that kept the natural occurrence from healing. Even that doesn’t seem to have fully corrupted the planet, though. There are even older Force Nexuses down there that are Light aligned and appear to be slowly purging the corruption.”

Aayla nodded at that.

“The planet honestly feels a bit better than the first time I was here. It’s been a couple of years now, and the small group of us that were called here killed off a significant number of corrupted beasts. That might have sped the process up a little, though it clearly has a long way to go if left entirely on its own to recover.”

Master Ru-Tuo nodded at that.

“It’s unlikely such culling was enough on its own. But if things were already righting themselves towards balance, it may well have tipped the scales and sped the process up. If that’s the case, then investigating this ‘Dark Fortress’ you reported and cleansing it is all the more important. If we can speed up the process farther, we might yet be able to establish a lasting base here, instead of just an expedition. For now, though, we need to pick out one of the less corrupted areas for our field camp. Can you highlight where the Fortress, as well as the old Temple, are for us?”

Aayla nodded and, from where she was at the helm, pulled up the map to mark the locations she had visited with Izuku and Mei. Hopefully, this trip would go smoothly and she could return to League space once the expedition settled in. She was really only here as the glue between the groups now that they’d arrived, and if they all continued getting along, she could return home. If not...well, at least she could now reach out to Izuku and Zavra even from here. Though it was a little annoying that full blown communication was only possible when two or more of them were sufficiently horny.

Fun, too, admittedly. But it was still something they needed to work on...

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– Hatsume Station – 22.8 BBY –

Zavra hummed happily to herself as she checked her latest augmentation project against Mei’s handy list of ‘War Crimes Not to Do.’ As she worked her way down the list, she once again thought New Master was a little silly. So far as she knew, there had never been such a level of *civilization* to warfare in their reality, unlike the interesting-but-small world he’d come from.

Really, who had ever heard of not shooting medical ships? Those were high priority targets! If you just *let the wounded* get away, you have to try killing them a second time! Worse, you’d ease logistics for your enemy if you let them save their wounded. Sure, it was *always* possible to recruit another person to fill a dead minion’s shoes, but it cost a *lot* more in both credits and *time* for the enemy to train a new officer to replace the experienced one you’d killed off. Not to mention that any soldier that survived got away with experience that would help them survive *again*. They might even teach their tricks of how to do so to others!

Oh well. Even if her New Master was a *little silly*, she thought she actually liked him better than her Empress! He was more pragmatic than those silly Jedi she’d worked with before, as evidenced by the number of Hutts who had been executed for ‘crimes against sapient life,’ despite those not having *been* crimes within their Empire. At the same time, he was less *callous* than her former Mistress had been, something which had bothered Zavra when Acina directed that callousness at their own people. Enemies were one thing, but allies were another! One should only

kill them by *accident* or experiments gone horribly or wonderfully wrong! Not by deliberate sacrifice!

Finding that her current project, an exo-spine that would support a much superior super soldier project and which hadn't *quite* been possible in her original time, *wasn't* a 'War Crime,' Zavra gave a little cheer and submitted it. She moaned a moment later, enjoying the start of the 'reward program' as it activated some of her *fun* implants. She'd been ecstatic when Master Izuku approved her for a similar reward system as Mei!

That was *another* thing she loved about him! He was way more willing to let her actually cum than Mistress had been! Acina had often edged her for *weeks*, even *months* once or twice, before finally rewarding her! Master Izu let her earn her release *way* more often! Ohhhh, this one was going to be a good one too, it had chosen one of her favorite programs in its random shuffle. Better flop into her 'reward appreciation chair' before her legs gave out on her...

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- Tython System - 22.7 BBY -

Aayla spun, blades flicking out in both directions to momentarily turn herself into a whirling dervish. One that cut through four separate technobeasts that had managed to surround her or, more accurately, that she'd *allowed* to surround her. They fell, diced into pieces, and a burst of Force Light from one of the less melee-focused Jedi following behind her finished them off. The abominations just didn't *die* properly if you didn't do that part, but the strike team she was leading had experimented with packs of the creatures outside and worked out the best pattern to advance.

This was their second expedition into the Dark Fortress itself.

The first one had been cut short when they'd found the remains of five ancient Jedi who had been cut down, choosing to remove their bodies, lightsabers, and other effects instead of continuing on. That first assault *had* turned up some basic information on the Fortress, however. Enough to confirm that it was the source of the technobeasts, as well as the primary thing keeping the planet's natural Force from returning to balance.

From what they'd discovered, it had been the stronghold of a Sith Lord named Belia Darzu, who had specialized in mechu-deru and Sith alchemy. The combination of those two fields was rather obviously what had created the technobeasts, and the *continuing* presence of them on the planet seemed tied to the labs that were still present within the Fortress. Apparently, they were still pumping out a technovirus called the nanogene spore, which created the mutated cyborgs the Sith Lord had referred to as Metanecrons. They would assimilate virtually any living creature into their 'army.' Which is why the planet was still crawling with the things so many centuries after her death.

Honestly, it was a good thing someone had apparently assassinated the female changeling. There were actually proper records of the Metanecrons withing the Jedi Archives, despite how fragmentary those archives were about events of the New Sith Wars. The records had survived due to the cyborgs making up most of the threat of the Sith during the Sictis Wars. One of the many sub-wars that made up the New Sith Wars. There was a *reason* it was the New Sith Wars, not 'War,' and the Sictis Wars had been a particularly brutal subset. One of those that had been solved not so

much by genuinely *winning*, but by the Sith critical to it being eliminated internally and the enemy falling apart.

Thankfully, the remnants of the technobeasts here on Tython were aimless and easy to guide into kill zones. Like the cross-corridor they'd just gathered this group up into to deal with.

"Alright everyone! Mapping says the labs are in the West Wing, and the left-hand corridor should take us there. Double check your filters and keep your senses dialed high. Once we cross into the lab section, we're more likely to see intact traps and static defenses."

There were acknowledgements from her team. Less snappy than if she'd been working with a League military group, but over the last month as they'd worked together she'd gotten them to at least *communicate*. Working together through the Force was well and good, and how Jedi normally operated, but they were up to their eyebrows in Dark Side energy at the moment, meaning that sort of thing wasn't reliable. Not to mention that they weren't *all* Jedi. The two Matukai that were part of the Tython Expedition were both part of this raid group, for example. Which made verbal orders and responses even more critical.

Thankfully, none of the Jedi she was working with were serious ego-cases, and had willingly learned to work with her methods. Once she got confirmation of good seals from everyone, she pointed them into the left corridor and pushed onward. The Matukai were directly behind her, their own unique abilities having proven equal to keeping the technovirus from infecting them. Together they made up the vanguard as they pushed keeper into the Fortress, intent on reaching the labs...

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– Kor Gejalli System – 22.6 BBY –

For once, Izuku was pleased to be doing paperwork. Specifically, he was pleased to be doing the paperwork that brought the Hutt Crusade to a close. Not *legally*. For the 'official' close of the Crusade, there would be a proper ceremony, with suitable pomp and circumstance. Even now, he knew the committee assigned to plan that ceremony was arguing viciously if it should be held here over Kor Gejalli, over Nal Hutta as the symbolic capital of the defeated Hutt Empire, or on Tythe Central as the symbolic head of the League of Free Stars. There were arguments for and against all options, with many of them revolving around degrees of safety for all of those attending.

Personally, Izuku suspected Nal Hutta would win out in the hotly contested debate. They'd had control of it long enough to *solidify* that control, and it was more representative of the League. For all that the League government was currently on *Tythe*, that wasn't likely to last in the long run. Tythe was separated from the rest of their holdings by multiple sectors of space, albeit it wasn't a great distance in absolute terms. The Grand Council Chamber had been specifically built as the center of a growing space station capable of being *moved*, precisely because they'd suspected all along that Tythe may not remain the capital forever. The fact it allowed the Council of Free Worlds to move around where it met, rather than constantly favoring one planet, was a nice bonus.

As for Tythe, even with a number of systems between Tythe and former Hutt Space having joined the League, the territory between former Hutt Space and Tythe itself didn't quite connect. The Abrion Sector and Grohl Sector still lay between the closest world that had joined the League

via the Hutt Space Border rule, while a handful of systems in the Arkanis Sector were the farthest 'North' from Tythe that had joined the League. In that case, only the fact that those systems had never actually *been part of* the Republic in the first place had allowed them to join the League instead. Something the Republic was very unhappy about but, as far as Izuku was concerned, that they could *remain* unhappy about. Those worlds, including Tattoine, hadn't been part of the Republic due to the Republic's own efforts in making it harder for poor worlds in the Outer Rim to join and get representation.

He was more than willing to play nice with the Republic if possible, but complaining that you shot yourself in the foot because you thought you were the only game in town? Well, suffice it to say his sympathy was closer to non-existence than it was the more polite description of 'limited.' To be honest, he suspected the Republic was unaware that a number of those worlds had even 'flipped,' given how rarely they were visited by anyone but the scummy flavor of interstellar traders.

Dragging things back to his current happy paperwork, however...*this* form work was *unofficially* ending things, in his capacity as Sovereign. It would shift the League Military from a full war-footing to a police-action. In practical terms, it wouldn't make a lot of difference how most of the military was being run. It *did*, however, serve to mark the occasion of the *last* Hutt World having been captured. It would likely be long years of policing the Bootana Hutta region in particular, before they were truly and properly League worlds. Possibly even decades. But for all intents and purposes?

The war was over, and the League had won. After 25,000 years, the Hutt Empire was no more...

... ..

- Tython System - 22.5 BBY -

Aayla was *very* pleased to be leaving Tython.

Not that she felt that the work here had been any sort of waste. Her and her team's own efforts to cleanse the Dark Fortress had been an unqualified success, and already everyone could tell that the planet was healing much faster than it had been. Likewise, the Expedition as a whole had made a *significant* among of discoveries. Over a dozen holocrons had been found, as had numerous records that were already helping patch holes in the history of the Jedi Order.

Even better, an entirely-light-aligned Nexus near an old Temple had been found, and a *new* Temple was being constructed near it. A few of the older initiate clans were being slowly trickled away from the main Jedi Temple on Coruscant and repositioned here. There was still enough risk on the planet that no one thought it a good idea to move the *younger* clans. But for those who were more advanced, the new Temple would be a good place to finish their learning. The planet and its dangers serving as the final whetstone that would normally be found in missions across the galaxy. Likewise, with the greater push for combat instruction, the somewhat wild and slightly dangerous nature of Tython would serve as a better place for them to hone their skills overall.

To the best of her knowledge, it was one of *four* new academies that were being set up. Though, in a burst of paranoia that she heartily approved of, Aayla herself didn't know where the

other three were located. The Jedi Order was getting *much* better at information control, which she very much hoped would frustrate the Sith out there that they still hadn't managed to identify. *She* certainly felt better about the Jedi not having all their eggs in one nest, as one of the Avian Master's assigned to the task had put it.

Even on a personal level, she had to admit that her time on Tython had borne fruit. She'd learned quite a lot from the pair of Matukai on her own security team, and been allowed to spend time with many of the recovered holocrons as well. She'd been filled with a sort of uncertain pride when more than one of the Masters present had quietly told her, when they'd given her that access, that she would like be raised to Master herself...if she ever returned to the Jedi Order properly.

Aayla hadn't hated her time with the expedition by any means, understanding she'd done good and learned a lot. No, Aayla was proud of what she and the expedition had accomplished...she was just also *very much* wanting to get back to Izuku. To Mei, Zavra, Shaak, Padmé and Sabé too. Though not all of those were likely to be waiting in one place for her.

According to what she'd been able to communicate with Izuku and Zavra, Padmé and Sabé, at least, were due for another stint with the League. Which she'd hopefully be around for. She'd missed them making one return trip already while she was away...and *might* have pouted at having to hear from Izuku that the pair actually *had* made it the several month gap without removing their chastity belts. The sex after they'd managed to reunite with Izuku had apparently been *fantastic*, and she'd missed it!

Oh well, at least Sabé had apparently bullied Padmé back into 'something like it' again, though no one would tell her exactly what. Only that it was a Mei-related solution. She was *really* looking forward to finding out what that meant...and looking forward even more to getting passed the entirely-too-long dry spell she'd been on since splitting from Shaak! She'd gotten her dose of adventure in for a while, thank you very much!

She wanted some Izuku time now...

Chapter 128: Jedi Grinding

– Jedi Temple: Coruscant – 22.9 BBY –

“Are we entirely sure this is a good idea? Even if we pick our targets incredibly carefully and with as much foresight as we can manage, given the veil has recovered, being wrong even once could cause disaster. Either by the information we know leaking to the Sith, or one of those we think will jump one way, jumping another and outing our preparations to the Senate.”

Plo Koon's question was, unfortunately, entirely reasonable. Equally Unfortunately, it was also true that there wasn't much of a real choice. Something Mace put forward as carefully as he could with his reply.

“There is little other option. If we don't warn at least *some* of the people who could make a difference, the very first strikes may end the coming war before it starts. Worse, once we unveil our own fleet, it will be clear to everyone that we knew something. Our list of allies has grown thin

enough simply under the strain of our recent anti-corruption efforts. If we are also, *rightfully*, accused of not warning anyone of what we knew? The Republic as a while may well turn against us. Given we have reasons to suspect Count Dooku, we could hardly flee to his new Confederacy. Nor should we, as they are nearly certain to be the aggressors.”

Grimaces filled faces in the ancient War Room. While this was a High Council meeting, for the first time in a millenia, it was not being held in the High Council *Chamber*. A proper accounting of just what all was *in* the Jedi Temple, during the security sweep, had reminded everyone that the sprawling edifice of their home had a lot more space than it *actually used*. The Academy, where initiates lived and trained, took up only a quarter of the temple, for example. The section which housed the High Council also housed the offices of the Jedi Service Corps...and the deeper sections of that section also contained things like armories and *high security War Rooms*.

The Jedi Temple of Coruscant was *old*, even if parts of it had needed to be rebuilt several times over the span of thousands of years. It was old enough, in fact, that it actually *sat on a natural mountain*. It was one of the precious few buildings on the entire upper level of the ecumenopolis that very technically sat, at least partially, on the actual surface of the planet. Of course, the central Ziggurat had been expanded outward several times. The original Grand Temple was never really used and barely even accessible. But that was somewhat beside the point. Said point being that they had remembered they legitimately had proper secure meeting places intended to be used in times of war. Built for those purposes for the wars of the ancient past.

One of those rooms had now been refurbished, updated, and they were using now. Of course, half of the High Council was also missing, out doing entirely too many tasks that demanded high-level involvement. Yet, all of those currently on planet were in the room now, discussing the possible dissemination of the information they'd gathered by various means so far. About the Separatist buildup, yes...but also the *Republic* buildup, and regarding the existence/reemergence of the Sith. As Mace had just stated plainly, warning *no one* while they had obviously known, would do them no favors in the eyes of the Public or the Senate.

“Master Windu is correct. Even if we completely finish with our current projects and begin building additional ships and ground forces, we can't handle the numbers the Separatists will have on our own. Nor do the Judicial Forces, even with the ORD systems having been recently bulked up, have the firepower needed. At least *some* of the major players out there need to be pre-warned, or else the opening days of the conflict will be an unmitigated disaster. One that will be blamed squarely on us as a target of convenience.”

Eeth Koth's voice was wary as he spoke. Koth had been one of the neutrals, not taking sides in the issue of the Hutt Crusade, and the *reason* for that had proven invaluable as the scale of their problems had grown. Prior to his stint on the High Council, Master Koth had spent his years training Sharad Hett going from far-flung world to far-flung world, quelling civil wars and dethroning tyrants. He, of perhaps the entire High Council, had perhaps the closest thing to a 'military background.' Even after becoming a member of the High Council, he'd taken part in the Stark Hyperspace War with Mace Windu and Adi Gallia, and several other conflicts besides. In many ways, he'd become their military expert, even if people like Rahm Kota or the Gray Paladins were handling the more day-to-day aspects of their own buildup.

Thankfully, with his word added to Mace's, the others present nodded, ceding the point. Master Koon spoke up again a moment later.

“Very well. If we are agreed, then it is only a matter of deciding *who* we can warn with the least risk. I believe we need to consider at least three factors. Reliability, ability to contribute politically, and the current size of security forces each planet or sector may have available. They won't have time to raise an army or navy entirely from scratch, after all.”

So continued a grueling meeting, where the High Council would determine who they should pass on what information to, in order to give the Republic a chance in the opening rounds of a war they were all now certain was coming. It's not like all those ships the Republic was building in secret had *crews*, after all. Nor would they be enough on their own, if they had the numbers of both sides even partially right...

... ..

– Space City – 22.8 BBY –

Anakin Skywalker had to admit that his current 'mission' was enjoyable, despite technically being a punishment. At least *sort of*. It was...annoying...to be effectively cut off from all contact with the outside while stuck on Space City. Even the high-security comm he normally used to keep touch with his mother wasn't something he was willing to risk using here. Not after being forced to sit through *weeks* of lectures on proper security procedures. He knew the only reason he hadn't been in more *direct* trouble, had barely gotten a slap on the wrist honestly, was because of *how many other* padawans had been in the same lectures.

Honestly, he was fairly certain all of their respective *Masters* had gotten most of the harsh words, for not teaching them what the Order said was basic common sense.

Not that they were *wrong*, in hindsight. The longer the lessons on both security and the ethical reasons it was important had gone, the more he realized he'd screwed up. Not, as the instructors had been careful to point out, out of any major fault of his own. A rare case, in his experience, of the Jedi Order owning up to an institutional failure rather than blaming individual Jedi. They'd trusted *Masters* to teach ethical privacy concerns and fundamental security measures to their padawans, and a lot of Jedi Masters apparently just...hadn't.

Anakin hadn't realized just how bad it was to share details of political negotiations with people like Supreme Chancellor Palaptine, for example, as he hadn't understood that a huge chunk of the reason people called on Jedi was for a *neutral* party. Passing on all the information to someone who might well be a rival politician, even if they were one of the *good* politicians, was a massive breach of that neutrality. One Anakin now realized he was guilty of contributing to. The fact that several *Masters* had ended up expelled from the Jedi Order for corruption, two of them even awaiting outright trials by the Judiciary, underscored just how serious it was.

Honestly, it was one of the few times he was *glad* he was still a padawan, as official displeasure had skipped them for the most part. Sure, he was *sort of* restricted, having all of his comm traffic monitored for the next three years and stuck for the entirety of *this* year somewhere out of regular communication. But he hadn't been like Obi-wan, who'd been given a *survey of the*

Planet Hoth as a shit detail for his own failure to teach security or monitor Anakin's comm usage. Anakin felt a *bit* guilty about that, admittedly.

Doubly so since he was seriously enjoying the job *he'd* been assigned to.

Discovering that the Jedi were taking the threat of war seriously enough to quietly build up their own private fleet had honestly been a huge relief. Something that restored some of his faith in the Order, just as their recent anti-corruption raids had. Being assigned to a team of professionals and other Jedi who were designing *new starfighters* for that fleet though? That was *amazing*. A little frustrating at times, as well, since they were specifically being forced to design fighters for *non-Force Sensitive* pilots, which was a lot harder than he'd expected. At the same time, though, it was a fun challenge...*and* they were going to be working on a Jedi-specific variant once the initial design was done! One which, as one of the best Jedi pilots currently alive, he was going to get to test pilot!

Yeah, even if it sucked he couldn't send messages to his mom for a bit, this assignment was honestly pretty fun. Besides, she was doing fine these days and, last he'd spoken with her, she had shifted to League Space. Tattoine wasn't the hellhole it had been before, what with Hett working to build a new and fair government there, and his mom hadn't been needed to act as a go-between with the world any longer. Frankly, he was happy she was apparently taking a new job working at Tythe Central. If there was one place in the galaxy that was safe, the center of the League's power was probably it. More so than even most of the Core Worlds Anakin had been to. Those always had random crime rates that were uncomfortably high, even if they were safe from *external* threats.

Yeah, life was okay, for now, and hopefully the fleet they were building meant the Jedi would continue being proactive the way they had been in the last few years. It had, he thought, been a long overdue change to the Jedi Order. One he was pleased to see, even if he thought maybe the League had even better ideas, going after the Hutts the way they had...

... ..

- Hoth - 22.7 BBY -

Obi-wan was extremely grateful that he didn't hate the cold. His Padawan, who'd never quite adjusted after his childhood on Tattoine, would have been an extra special level of miserable on this particular world. In fact, he was fairly certain that Anakin thought the mission was entirely a punishment detail for his Master, and Obi-wan hadn't disabused him of the notation. In truth, there was most likely an element of the Council's displeasure with his errors not catching the massive security breach Anakin had been over his entire padawanhood.

Yet, the problem had proven sufficiently systemic across the *entire Order*, that 'punishment' missions weren't really happening. Every task Jedi Masters were being sent on these days served at least one, and usually more than one, purpose. Yes, the Masters that had kriffed up their security the most were getting some of the worst assignments, yet they weren't *unimportant* ones. Obi-wan, in particular, wasn't surveying an ice-world like Hoth for *no reason*. Specifically, he was scouting a number of ancient locations, looking for any that might be intact enough to hide another of their satellite academies.

The world, despite being a seemingly useless chunk of ice, had enough legitimate traffic to discreetly hide coming and goings from it. The largest attraction on the world was the Ceyan Range Raceway, a somewhat major stop on a couple of the galactic podracing circuits. In addition to that, there were facilities used by a few star touring companies for ice-boarding, hover-skiing, and big-game hunting. There were even a few small operations that extracted Lumni-spice from the world.

As one of the, if not *the* rarest form of spice in the galaxy, it was lucrative...for those who managed to pry it away from the territorial Dragon slugs who fed on it. Add in the planet being a semi-popular place for smugglers to operate out of, and you ended up with a remote world with no real *permanent* settlements, but which still had enough space going traffic to hide the operation of one of their academies. At least so long as they kept the number of flights made to or from it down.

Of course, that was only if it could be made *practical*.

Which meant finding something that could be used as a starting point, so they didn't need to move in enough heavy equipment to create a from-scratch base. That *would* be noticed and would render the idea not worth pursuing. Thankfully, or perhaps not if you were him and stuck surveying the possibilities, the Jedi Order *also* had old records on a number of bases that had existed on the world in the past. One was fragmentary knowledge from a major battle fought on the planet during the New Sith Wars, while others had been pulled out of the derelict space station the League of Free Stars had handed off to Master Eno Cordova.

Apparently, both the Old Republic and Sith Empire had possessed significant bases on Hoth during the Great Galactic War and following Cold War. Both the Whiterock Wastes and Icefall Plains had old potential bases, ones built to wartime bunker standards, which might mean they were still some degree of intact. Likewise, there was data claiming that the Ortolans had attempted to colonize the world, building geothermal taps that it might still be possible the update to modern standards, without having to drill down to the mantle from scratch.

As his speeder approached the location they had for 'Aurek Base,' Obi-wan just hoped that *one* of the possibilities played out. He might not *hate* the cold, but he wasn't a particular fan, either. So it would, as Anakin might say, 'kriffing suck,' if all his efforts to endure turned up no usable result...

... ..

- Jedi Temple - 22.6 BBY -

Shaak Ti cut her most recent padawan's braid with solemn formality, even if she was practically beaming inside. Asajj was radiating just as much happiness, even if she was looking a touch ragged after going through the Knight Trials. Due to being trained entirely away from the Temple, Asajj hadn't been able to skip any of the five traditional trials, as was sometimes the case with padawan's who had recorded missions that met the conditions. Trials of Skill and Courage were the most commonly bypassed, and Shaak honestly felt they could have been with Asajj as well, given her history.

Other steps, like the Trial of Spirit, were almost never skipped. *Never*, period, for Jedi raised during peace team, and only under dire or desperate circumstances even in war time. Facing the

Mirror, as it was often called, was the test most likely to be failed...and the most likely to reveal darkness in a padawan that their Master had failed to discover or address. The deep meditative trance that forced one to confront their inner fears and demons was never pleasant, but it was also the truest test they had for selecting those who could overcome the darkness *all* sentients had within themselves.

Shaak Ti had not feared at all for her latest student's ability to pass through that fire. In truth, she knew that Asajj had already faced her true moment in the crucible when her first Master died. Now, with her having completed the entire set of trials with flying colors, she was no longer Shaak's padawan, but a Jedi Knight in her own right. Of course, what was about to happen was going to set an Akul among the chickens in some ways. But they could handle that.

Hopefully.

Grandmaster Yoda, personally presiding over this particular knighting ceremony due to Shaak having warned him in advanced, tapped the floor with his gimmer stick and spoke the words needed.

"Rise, Knight Ventress, and speak your code."

Asajj, who had knelt to have her braid removed, braced herself as she rose and spoke with confidence, even knowing she was about to spark a bit of a flame the Order might not quite be ready for.

"Emotion, yet peace.

Ignorance, yet knowledge.

Passion, yet serenity.

Chaos, yet harmony.

Death, yet the Force."

It was an ancient version of the Jedi Mantra. Far more so than the one spoken by any modern Jedi during this ceremony, and many of the Masters present stirred in disbelief at it being spoken here and now. Disbelief that redoubled as an echo of *approval* surged back from the Force in response to Asajj's conviction. In reality, the old code *meant* virtually the same thing as the 'modern' code and, up until the Ruusan Reformations, it had been common for Jedi to choose one or the other...or even a couple of other minor variants. All had the same core meanings, but each version tended to resonate more with some Jedi than others.

Yet, since the Reformation, *all* Jedi had used a single version. A version that *meant* the same thing, but which was far too often *corrupted* into meaning something else entirely. *Interpretation* had changed the meaning, stripping the modern mantra of its original *symbolic* meaning in place of overly literal alternatives. Too many forgot that Odan-Urr had been a *poet*, and his version of the mantra was meant to be symbolic of the meanings explained at length in the far greater volume of *'The Teachings of Master Odan-Urr.'* An entire *series* of text that *should* be required reading, but for some reason haven't been for centuries. All on its own, the older code that Asajj had just recited was, Shaak Ti felt, more true to the Jedi ideals.

Which didn't stop the murmurs from spreading as Yoda, Grandmaster of the Jedi Order, accepted Asajji's oath without question or comment. In doing so, he endorsed it as a legitimate alternative and left her position nearly unassailable even by the most rigid of traditionalists, who were not going to like this at all. Not even with the Force itself having surge with approval. It might well cause more cracks in the Jedi Order, but Shaak Ti thought they would be the healthy sort of cracks this time, if managed well.

After all, her own efforts to sway the group she'd exposed to Master Shan's teachings were coming along quite nicely. If the Order could just get through the next year or so without fracturing, it might yet heal and once again become the beacon of Light in the galaxy it was always meant to be...

... ..

– Brighthome Space Station – 22.5 BBY –

Master Adi Gallia nodded in satisfaction as the streaks of hyperspace muddled into view with abnormal, but expected, lethargy. Brighthome Station was a nearly-forgotten piece of Jedi history, which had only possessed a very small staff of caretakers when she'd arrived months ago. Once, it had been a major Jedi Outpost serving the Mid Rim, and one of the handful of places in the galaxy that contained a backup of the Jedi Archives. As, over the last thousand years, the Jedi Order had contracted and grown overly attached to the Republic instead of retaining independence, Brighthome had been partially shuttered.

Not entirely, mind you.

No, Brighthome had remained in use, positioned in the Mid Rim, as a relay hub for multiple of the Jedi Order's agriworlds. It had also served as a common resupply station for the Explorer Corps, a deep-space jumping off point for clandestine missions, and more. By the large, however, it had mostly been kept operating as a space dock and storage hub, with the rest of its facilities largely shut down. Most had forgotten it existed, even *within* the Jedi Order, if they didn't have some reason to make use of it.

That had all changed in the last several months.

The agriworlds were actively being raided for talent these days, reassessments being done on a huge number of those who had been sent to *all* of the Service Corps for not making the cut to become padawans. The best of them, who'd grown out of flaws like quick teenage tempers or ego, were being quietly offered another chance at training as a means to bolster the number of active Jedi. Even those who still were not suitable for such roles, however, were being winnowed through to find those with no malice or bitterness toward the Jedi Order as a whole.

Those that based that metric were quietly shuffled off to military academies, naval schools, judiciary positions, or a dozen other places. Even the youngest of former initiates sent away had a *decade or more* of experience with the Force tricks designed to aid in rapid learning and skill retention. With that in mind, hundreds of them from *all* the Service Corps were being put into positions to soak up the skills the Jedi Order was going to need, with the war they could all see coming on the not-so-distant horizon.

The result, predictably, was that they'd also been able to consolidate their agriworld operations. They didn't *shut them down*, of course. Such would be far too noticeable to the many eyes that kept watch on the Jedi Order. But Jedi hands were being replaced with droid workers, and the remaining actual Force Sensitives concentrated on just a few worlds.

Neither of the agriworlds that had transshipped through *Brighthome* were among them.

Deliberately, of course.

It meant that those worlds no longer required the *security measure* that was that transshipping. *Brighthome* had been used specifically to prevent the general galaxy from knowing *exactly* where they might be able to kidnap a few hundred partially-trained Force Sensitives. It was for this reason that *Brighthome* had just...floated out in Dark Space, between star systems, quietly existing and doing its part.

The thing about *Brighthome* though?

It could *move*. Including through hyperspace.

Not very fast, of course. It was a large space station, not a proper ship. But the station *was* hyperspace capable. It had, admittedly, taken some time to bring that capability back up to snuff, but it had been well maintained for the most part. Now, as it removed itself from the region of space everyone knew it had been in, and crews far larger than its normal compliment worked to bring the old teaching and training facilities aboard it online? *Brighthome* was once more set to become the mobile Praxeum that it once been designed to be. Once they arrived at their first new hiding place, where the station would be farther refitted with defensive weapons and provided with a fighter compliment, they would also receive multiple youngling clans. Whereafter, the station would go into hiding in remote parts of the galaxy hard to navigate without the Force as an aid.

Whatever else happened, the *future* of the Jedi Order would not be so easily targeted as it might have been, if the upcoming war had caught them napping...

... ..

– Pammant Space Shipyards – 22.4 BBY –

Tholme was both satisfied and worried as he worked to cover up the additions he'd made to the programming of the droids workers of the Pammant Shipyards. The worry, of course, came from what he'd found while tracking the military buildup of the separatist movement. He was, at this point, virtually certain that Count Dooku was one of the current Sith, his findings in that regard passed on to the High Council via secure drop some months ago.

Unfortunately, the timing didn't add up for him to be the *Master* of the Sith that had been killed by Obi-wan on Naboo. Meaning that, terrifyingly enough given how good the Count was, he was likely the *Apprentice* that had replaced that particular Sith. It may even have been Qui-gon's death that pushed the already dissatisfied former Jedi Master over the edge, though that was only Tholme's personal theory. He didn't have enough proof to even be absolutely certain the man *was* a Sith, which complicated matters a great deal.

Proving it to at least his own personal satisfaction had, however, at least allowed him to *focus* his efforts. Instead of splitting his attention between trying to find the Sith and trying to map the growing crisis, he'd doubled down on the latter, hoping to find the other Sith in the process. He hadn't managed that, not yet at least, but he *had* gathered quite a lot of information about the separatists' buildup in the process. Which included the discovery that the Pammant Shipyards were being used to build true military ships that *very much* violated the current armament laws. The largest chunk of finished ships were a 2km plus scale cruiser-carrier variant called the Providence-class, but there were also unfinished hulls of a much larger series called the Subjugator-class.

The size, armament, and number of ships was very worrying. Nor could he realistically sabotage the whole shipyard. What he *could* and *had* done, which was granting him a certain amount of satisfaction, was modify the shipyard droids so they would bake hardwired programming into any of the new ships' cores. From now on, any additional ships built here would give their positions away via extremely well-hidden transmissions, intended to be buried in their regular comms traffic. Something they wouldn't be able to *fix* without completely replacing the ship's cores, which might as well force them to rebuild the ship from scratch.

Given he was fairly sure both classes of ship were intended to be command vessels, he hoped it would do some good. As, he hoped, would several nasty surprises he left in the already-completed ships, which would only activate the first time they were engaged in active combat...

Chapter 129: Pressure Cooker

– Alderaan – 22.9 BBY –

“The information the Jedi have provided is...disquieting.”

Bail Organa's expression said he was more than merely 'disquieted' by the information he and his wife had been going over for the last several hours. Included was not only the information of an emergent Sith threat, something that Alderaan had *entirely too much* historical evidence of the danger of...but also of the military buildups going on behind the scenes.

Buildups as in *plural*.

That the separatist movement was choosing to arm itself was not particularly surprising, given some of the bad actors that filled its upper echelons. The Trade Federation was only the worst offender, not the only one, in the area of misuse of private armies and barely-legal military forces. That they were quietly building up proper warships, as proven by him receiving separate reports from both the Jedi *and* Senator Amidala, was disappointing but not unexpected.

What *was* unexpected was the Jedi having discovered similar building programs on the *Republic* side of the fence. Major, hidden fleet buildups by Kuat Drive Yards and Rothana Heavy Engineering were only the tip of a distressingly deep iceberg. Vast orders of blasters from Blastech and WESTAR disappearing under layers of obscurity, but tracked back to major players behind the Military Creation Act. Slayn & Korpil producing massive numbers of a new starfighter design called the V-19 Torrent. Incom Corporation and Subpro doing the same with something called the ARC-170, which even the Jedi hadn't been able to find out much about. Though Incom was *also*

massively upticking production of a new Z-95 variant that was just vanishing into the same void that the blasters seemed to be.

The Republic was arming up for a galactic scale fight...*without* the approval of the Military Creation Act.

Worse, in a way, was that with a few of the people involved? There was absolutely no way the Supreme Chancellor was unaware of the buildup. Given that Bail was, himself, a member of the Loyalist Committee, yet hadn't heard a word of this before the Jedi dropped all the data off via a courier? To say it was extraordinarily alarming was to understate things dramatically. His wife Breha, Queen of Alderaan, put down the dataslate she'd been studying and rubbed her eyes, before addressing him.

"It's war then. Neither side would spend tens of trillions, possibly hundreds of trillions, of credits without building the momentum to go through with the conflict no matter what happens in the political space. It also explains why the Jedi abruptly went on the offensive, ceasing their pacifism and going for the throat with every bit of corruption they could find."

Bail connected the dots at that moment, catching up to his wife's thought process, and nodded.

"They are stalling, buying time while attempting to visibly prune enough corruption to limit the systems willing to leave over the Republic's problems. At least *some* systems that might have jumped, haven't yet, as they are seeing something actually being done to improve the corruption issues. With the Republic apparently wanting the war too, though...they aren't making any friends on either side with their choice of tactics."

Breha shook her head at that.

"No, they aren't. But when have they ever cared about that? You know your history as well as I do. The last thousand years have been an aberration for them. Normally, the bulk of the Jedi Order does what is *right*, rather than adhering so tightly to what is *lawful*. Faced with reemerging Sith on one side and a brewing galactic war on the other? They are reverting to type and focusing on protecting the *people* as much as possible, rather than the government."

Bail hummed, mulling that over, comparing his history lessons of the Jedi Order to their current actions. There were times in the Jedi's history where they'd outright split internally, between those who couldn't stand aside while terrible things happened, and those who were more political animals. Yet it was *almost* always the 'doers' that altered the course of galactic history. Acting as a firebreak against everything from the Sith to the Mandalorians.

He wouldn't have thought the modern Jedi Order capable of it...if not for the near-fracture caused by the Hutt Crusade. The Crusade, which even he could now admit had been warranted and done as cleanly as realistically possible for such a large-scale conflict, had nearly caused another such split in the Jedi. Now that the near-fracture was healing again, it was obvious that the faction that wished to take action was once again ascendent. Spurred on by an ancient enemy and awareness of a galactic-scale threat.

That didn't mean he had a very good idea what they would *do* about it, though. For that matter, that wasn't the big question of the moment. No, the bigger issue was closer to home.

"What are we going to do about it? We've already quietly stepped-up recruiting for the security forces, and have been increasing protection around our colonies. But the scale of this..."

There was quiet between them for long moments, before his wife spoke with reluctance and pain her voice.

"With the Sith involved? It is time to put peace aside for a time, I think. Our world has suffered from their depreciation enough in the past, as have tens of thousands of worlds throughout the Republic. Reach out to Garm, see if an infusion of cash and resources can pry loose some of Corellia's shipbuilding capacity. For that matter, I think we need to talk to Dac about repurposing the next round of Relief Cruisers we had ordered into something with a few more...teeth."

Bail recognized the steel in his wife's tone, under the pain. This was no longer a wife speaking to her husband, it was a Monarch commanding her Viceroy. Alderaan may have chosen peace whenever it could, but it had wielded the sword more than once in its long history. Apparently, it was time to do so again.

"At once, your majesty. If the worst comes," he glanced at the pile of datachips and pair of dataslates between them. "No...*when* the worst comes, Alderaan will be ready."

... ..

- Kashyyk - 22.6 BBY -

"You have the report?"

Attichitcuk nodded to his King's growled question. King Grakchawwaa was only first among equals, with there being several royal families on Kashyyk, but his was by far the dominant voice on the council of kings at the moment. While many clans had gained influence as a result of sending support for the Hutt Crusades, Grakchawwaa was the only royal head who had directly sent many of his own forces to participate.

Attichitcuk himself, whose clan was one those those under Grakchawwaa's leadership, had ended up handling the bulk of the negotiations between the League and Kashyyk as a result. Something which, combined with his son Chewbacca coming out of the Crusade as a respected warband leader, had tipped the scales of local politics. Even before the Crusade, Grakchawwaa had been the most influential of the various kings, but now he easily had the influence to make wide-ranging decisions for the planet as a whole.

Something which was going to be important, given what Attichitcuk had to report.

"Yes, your highness. According to the investigators, there is no question that the attackers were entirely made up of Trandoshans using Trade Federation supplied equipment. They were *far* too well equipped for a normal raiding force, and would easily have overwhelmed the shuttle and captured all 215 passengers aboard, if not for a patrol of Defender IIs being close enough to intercept."

Those Defender IIs were a *very generous* gift from the League of Free Stars. Not payment, which would have been an insult, but a *gift of thanks* given to the warriors who had participated in the ground fighting of the Hutt Crusade. Unlike the vast majority of the class that were sold to outsiders, the Defenders gifted to various Kashyyyk clans were the most up-to-date military models used by the League itself. While the League might be phasing them out from anything but police actions now, their latest generation Defender IIs were still *extremely* good corvettes. Most likely among the best, if not *the best*, system patrol ships in the galaxy.

Given that Kashyyyk had always lacked much of a naval force, the *two dozen* of them that had ended up in Wookiee hands had been a major boon. A boon which, after their experiences in the Hutt Crusade, the various clans now legitimately had some idea what to do with. Alongside a few larger captured or purchased vessels, the clans had come together to create a proper Kashyyyk System Defense Force for the first time in their history. Given the inability to *mine* on their homeworld, as there were very few places it was safe to get near the surface, such a thing had been out of reach in the past. Even with the relatively recent acquisition of Alaris Prime, that hadn't yet changed.

They could, however, now build enough parts to maintain the small-but-growing defense force they'd pieced together.

Something that, much to the approval of the Wookiee people as a whole, had resulted in a dramatic decrease in successful raids by Trandosha. Their vile neighbors had hunted their people for sport for thousands of years, despite numerous appeals to the Republic for intervention. Worse, the fact that more of the lizard bastards people left for dishonorable careers as smugglers, bounty hunters, and mercenaries? That little detail had always meant their ancient enemy had more access to ships and modern arms than the Wookiees did. Trandosha was *poor*, with their culture being so barbaric that they could never really get ahead *as a people*. Which was the only thing that had kept the situation from being completely untenable.

Now, however, it was increasingly obvious that the Trandoshans had sold out to the CIS, and were being supplied with ships and weapons to harass their neighbors with. Undoubtedly a direct result of the Council refusing the services of the Kashyyyk Pathfinders Guild to the separatist movement. The new 'Confederacy' had wished to make use of both the secret trade routes known only to the Wookiee people, and also the skills of Wookiee Pathfinders, renowned for their ability to scout new hyperlanes. Given their people's collective hatred for the Trade Federation after the Alaris Prime incident, the CIS had been summarily kicked out of the system and told not to come back.

Apparently, they'd decided if that was the case, they might as well back the Trandoshans instead.

"This must stop. Reach out to the clans, I want a plan to blockade Trandosha until a way to cut their access to the CIS is found. Reach out to our League contacts as well. We might want to see about buying more hardware from them. It's better quality than what we could get on the open market, and I have little doubt they'll sell it to us at a discount, particularly if they know we're using it in anti-slaver operations."

Attichitcuk nodded, telling his king it would be so. Privately, however, he wondered if this latest failed attack had only been another sign of worse things to come. He'd been paying a great deal more attention than he used to, to events off Kashyyyk, and a pattern of aggressive raids along the border between Republic loyal worlds and Separatist systems was beginning to become increasingly obvious. Well, either way, getting some more ships from the League would likely help against whatever came their way...

... ..

- Onderon - 22.5 BBY -

Mina Bonteri gritted her teeth in frustration. It was becoming increasingly obvious via her connections to the various factions that the Japrael sector was going to be on the right on the border between where Count Dooku was forming 'Separatist' space, and the remaining Republic. Much of the sector would, she knew, be willing to make the jump. There were plenty of dissatisfied worlds nearby, after all. Sure, the Inner Rim wasn't nearly as bad off as the Outer Rim, but The Slice had traditionally suffered more corruption from the Republic than other parts of *any* section of the Rim because of the Hutts.

The Hutts might be gone now, and the worlds of The Slice better for it, but the Hutts being slaughtered by the League didn't change the *Republic* corruption. Onderon had never been *allowed* to grow under the Republic, and they finally had a *chance*. Dooku was a great man and his success in rallying disenfranchised and disillusioned worlds was proof positive that the Confederacy was going to work, at least as far as she was concerned.

Yet, her stubborn, stupid king was unwilling to bend. He'd have them continue to kowtow to the Republic, begging for scraps, when they could finally be *free* of its bureaucratic dead weight! Without Onderon moving, the rest of the sector wouldn't either, as it was both the Sector Capital and, as of late, the most influential world in this section of space. That fact, of course, was coming from the investment and resources offered up by the League of Free Worlds. Which, admittedly, *were* helping improve Onderon's situation greatly. Including providing their forces with decent ships for pretty much the first time in Onderon's long history.

But it was not enough. Not *nearly* enough. Not when they were right where the *front lines* of the coming conflict would be. Something had to be done. She just wasn't sure if she had the will to do it...

... ..

- Hidden Sith Temple: Coruscant - 22.4 BBY -

For once, Darth Sidious was pleased with events. While he was still annoyed with the League of Free Stars, the loss of the Prophets of the Dark Side, and the increasingly competent actions of the Jedi Order, what he was seeing in the Senate was proof that none of it mattered. Just as he had foreseen, a steadily escalating series of terrorist strikes and assassinations across the galaxy were polarizing the two sides of the Separatist Crisis.

Disruptive actors dancing on his apprentice's puppet strings were producing all the bad press with the 'loyalist' members of the Republic that could have desired. A successful attack on

the *Iron Tether*, a Republic *Rescue* ship, an attack on the Wookiees, a bombing on Naboo that he'd acted properly outraged by. Those and several dozen other acts of violence or terrorism, combined with galactic protests, had begun the final slide towards violence. The recent assassination of two senators, Ask Moe on the Republic side of the fence and Daggibus Scoritoles on the Separatist side, had farther enraged and *terrified* the Senate in particular. Making the threat a personal one as well as a matter of what their sectors were demanding.

By his best analysis, using both the powerful droid brains he assigned to track the Republic for him and meditations on the Dark Side of the Force, they had another three quarters of a year before they hit critical levels. Perhaps as long as a full year on the outside, given how the Military Creation Act had been slowed by the Hutt Crusade. That was the longest before a large enough flashpoint occurred to incite the war that was needed. If not naturally, than certainly there would be a large enough degree of tension to create such a flashpoint artificially by that point.

For all the Jedi's pointless struggles, for all the League's irritating presence was sucking in some sectors that would have broke way to the CIS...it mattered not at all. It was too little, too late, to disrupt the Grand Plan the Sith had worked for centuries to create. *He* would be the one to bring the plan to fruition, to end the Jedi, and reign as the immortal Emperor of the galaxy. He had foreseen it, and the way every attempt to slow the slide toward his goals failed was merely more proof that he was right.

Yes, everything was going exactly according to plan. No matter the small delays.

Though, speaking of those small annoyances, that stupid chit Amidala was doing something irritating again. He hadn't expected *her*, of all people, to begin tentatively offering support for the Military Creation Act. Unfortunately, as part of the negotiations for her votes, she was poking holes in the act that Sidious would have preferred remained unnoticed. Highlighting the lack of an officer core and recruitment centers, demanding to create a pay structure for troops and figure out where that money would come from.

It was pointless, of course, since the Clones and Jedi would be filling those roles.

Irritatingly, he couldn't give that away just yet, as the Clones needed to be a surprise. Since even many of *his own supporters* were enthusiastically agreeing with some of her points and acting to refine the bill, it was something he couldn't fully stop. In fact, several worlds that already had military academies were now expanding them, while others were increasing their planetary or sector defense force recruitment. No matter. There wasn't enough time before the crisis point for the academies they were proposing to turn out enough troops and officers to outweigh the Clones. In the long run those very institutions would help him replace the Clones with proper *people*, once he announced his new Empire.

Even his enemies' actions were benefiting him. Truly, the Force was with him, and he would come out on top...

Chapter 130: Ceremony

Aayla was amused by Izuku's grumbling as he was fitted by a tailor droid for formal wear. Somehow, and she *still* wasn't sure how, Izuku had managed to dodge having 'official wardrobe' made for the 'Sovereign.' Given that he technically *owned* Tythe, she understood how he'd kept anyone from pressing him when he'd been *only* the 'Master' of that Star System. The vast majority of his people weren't native to that world, after all. Which meant none of them would have had the same standard for formal wear anyway. Nor were the type of people they'd sought to attract the types to be formal by nature in the first place.

She privately admitted it had been a much more impressive feat that he'd managed to keep out of the grubby hands of the PR people after becoming the Sovereign of the League, though. She personally suspected he'd only pulled it off by leaning on the fact that he *did* have an official dress uniform for the League military. Something he'd specifically ordered to be made actually *comfortable*, rather than miserable. For which she suspected every military man and woman half-worshiped him.

Unfortunately for him, the Crusade was over, and the PR people were insistent that a new wardrobe was required for the Sovereign before the Address of the People that would announce that fact formally. When they'd convinced him it was required, he'd tried to sell them on something called a 'kimono,' only to be shot down as it being 'too similar' to the robes that the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic wore. He, in turn, had shot down several ridiculously elaborate styles that would have put Padmé's hated formal regalia from her time as Queen to shame.

Eventually, thoroughly amused but knowing they needed to properly *get* somewhere, Aayla and Shaak Ti had stepped in. While Jedi weren't exactly the height of fashion expertise, they *were* well traveled, and spent a great deal of time dealing with VIPs from thousands of worlds. The result was that, between them, they'd seen a vast array of different formal wear styles, and were able to pick pieces of a few that they knew would look good on their lover. *Without* the result being horribly impractical. Given some barebones *guidelines*, the experts had begrudgingly accepted and eventually admitted that the end result *did* look fantastic on their Sovereign.

The end result was a black longcoat and pants combination paired with a green and black vest. The longcoat was embroidered with a green that matched the vest, and aurodium buttons added just a splash of aristocratic wealth, without being completely tasteless. The end result, paired with Izuku's naturally dark green hair and features that had sharpened a bit as he lost the last of his youthful babyface in his twenties, was striking. He looked suitable sharp and authoritative, without coming across as *authoritarian*. It even had a decent enough range of motion to fight properly in.

Which hadn't stopped him from complaining about the process of getting a wardrobe of copies, along with several variants. Even if it was comfortable compared to *most* formal wear, it was still considerably less so than his usual casual wear, or even his armor which had been explicitly designed by Mei for comfortable all-day usage. Admittedly, Aayla understood that, having grown rather attached to her own armor after Mei created the 'Bunny Variant Mk III, now with less Bunny!' Her previous, more full-coverage armor had never been entirely comfortable to her, but Mei's more agility-focused version for the female Force users in Izuku's life was quite pleasant. Both to wear and to look at.

Of course, she wouldn't be allowed to wear anything so militant herself for the upcoming ceremony. The whole point was to usher in Peace and Prosperity now that the Hutts were finished for good. Doing so while wearing the armor of war wouldn't send the 'right sort of message.' Nor was she getting off as easily as Shaak Ti, who had a particularly fancy set of Jedi Robes to use. Aayla still very purposefully hadn't reclaimed her position as a Jedi, not even for the expedition to Tython.

Given that she was *publicly known* at this point to be Izuku's romantic partner, it was better to leave that complication aside. Without being properly part of the Jedi Order, they couldn't protest much. Other Jedi had left the order for love and marriage in the past, after all. More to the point, the distance helped prevent the entire League from looking like a Jedi ploy to the galaxy at large, merely using Izuku as a patsy. Which, given Count Dooku's leadership of the CIS, was *very important*. Thankfully, Aayla had never been as in the spotlight as Dooku was, and Izuku was too charismatic, if unintentionally so, for that possibility to sink in for most.

Back on the point of formal wear, though. Aayla was lucky that she could lean into the fact she was a Twi'lek. Even if the *reasons* might be a bit dubious, the fact of the matter was the high-fashion for Twi'lek females ran in the direction of skin-revealing, flowing gowns, which emphasized their beauty. She was quiet pleased with the purple-and white shimmersilk outfit she'd been fitted with. The fact that Izuku's eyes had nearly popped out of his head when he'd seen her in it had been especially gratifying. Doubly so when it had needed thorough cleaning and a few minor repairs afterward.

It was *slightly* possible they were still riding a bit of a high from being reunited again. If anyone had a problem with that, though, they could sit on a cactus and spin, as far Aayla was concerned...

... ..

– Evocar: Freedom Plaza – 22.4 BBY –

Freedom Plaza was overflowing with standing-room-only crowds, and only careful management of those crowds was keeping things from getting fractious. Not because anyone was *upset*, of course, but instead because the crowds were *excited*. Today was an important one of the citizens of the League, and most of those in the plaza qualified. Though there *was* a carefully sectioned off area for foreign dignitaries. It was from that very section that Padmé and Sabé were observing the crowd and events with interest and anticipation. For that matter, even the Plaza itself was a statement, and not one that any of those in this particular section had missed.

Like the reverting of the name Nal Hutta back to Evocar, the ancient name from the original species, the domed and terraformed city of Elysium hadn't existed a year ago. The League, at Izuku's direction, had spent a small fortune tracking down examples of the original flora of Evocar. Given how *thorough* the Hutts had been in converting the world to their tastes, that had not been an easy task. Yet, enough examples existed in far flung botanical gardens on various worlds to at least make an *attempt*. Contained within the new dome were lush plains and forests that were created by mixing cloned plants from the original biome and others carefully chosen by experts to mix with

them. The terraformed reversion to something like the original world had been like? It was a stark contrast to the swamps of the rest of the planet, and made for a very pointed statement.

The League intended to *undo* as much of the harm the Hutts had done as was physically possible.

Doing so included finding those few Evocii that still existed in the lower levels of Nar Shaddaa and granting them the best land in this and several other similarly terraformed cities. While their numbers were few, too few to try taking back their world in full, the League was determined that they would have a place on Evocar and some level of voice in the world's future. Efforts were even being made to reverse some of the genetic damage done from so long living in horrible conditions, and with small enough populations to run into inbreeding issues.

Personally, Padmé suspected the Evocii would never truly recover, not after so long and with so few of them left. Yet the fact that the League was making the effort at all, at considerable expense, both spoke well of them...and made a firm statement to the rest of the galaxy. Privately, with insider knowledge she wasn't really supposed to have, she also knew that the amount of credits being spent on the effort was *trifling* compared to the staggering fortunes recovered from the Hutt clans. Frankly, she was glad Izuku had the good sense to conceal just how wealthy the League now was. The last thing the galaxy needed was an economic crisis on top of everything else.

A flare of music sounded out from the floating speaker-drones above the crowd, drawing attention as the ceremony itself began. Padmé settled in, focusing her mind as she took in the start of the first speech. She knew from Izuku that this ceremony had been managed, at his insistence, to include *only* those speeches which originated from people genuinely affected by the League and Hutts. Those speeches were carefully chosen to weave a timeline and story of the League's march through Hutt space and the changes they brought with them. There would be no pandering or false words here. Only a genuine narrative, driven by the emotions of those who had been personally affected. Capped in a final speech from Izuku himself.

It was something that would likely be missed by many of the observers from the Republic, but *she* was intent on getting a feel for the overall message the people he'd chosen would send...

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Izuku stepped forward to the podium, tactfully ignoring the three different snipers he could feel his Guards quietly eliminating. Not that it would honestly have done the snipers any good if they'd gotten a chance to shoot, given that the belt of his formal outfit had the latest version of Mei's personal shield built into it. More than strong enough to turn away any single shot from anything man portable. Well, short of a rocket launcher maybe, and he'd have felt anything like that coming through the Force anyway.

With that sideshow excitement ignored, it was time to do the whole speech thing. Which he still didn't exactly enjoy doing, but understood the importance of.

"Gentlebeings of the League, and guests from the Republic! It is on this day that I, with great pleasure, officially announce the complete destruction of the Hutt Empire. Long has the galaxy suffered their tyranny, and many are the voices that now rejoice at their fall!"

A cheer surged out of the crowd, and Izuku let them have their moment, patiently waiting for the initial burst to die off, before signaling for calm and sending a gentle wave of such out with the Force to encourage it. As the crowd quieted, mostly at least, he spoke again.

“Yes! It is a fantastic day, for long-overdue news! Yet, while this is a joyous day of peace, it is also a day to acknowledge how much farther we have yet to go. Removing the Hutt’s themselves was but one, albeit perhaps the largest and most important, step in undoing the evil they have wrought on the galaxy. Even as I speak, on dozens of worlds, labors to repair the damage they did and uplift those they repressed are ongoing. Great strides and successes have already been made, as you can see merely by looking around at the city of Elysium in which you stand!”

More cheers, the chanting of several worlds’ names, as representatives from some of the worlds they’d been most successful in uplifting so far shouted their success. A well deserved spark of pride fueled those chants, as some of those worlds had doubled or tripled their GDP with help of League expertise and investment. New shipyards and industrial complexes, local refinement of ores for new manufactures, greater and more varied destinations for their production. The economies of the League worlds were booming, and programs to provide practical education were already having a serious effect on worlds captured early on in the Crusade. The Hutts had *squandered* most of the potential of their worlds, too busy oppressing the population to keep them from rebelling to really use what they had properly.

Despite what most people seemed to think, slave labor was actually *shit* for an economy. It can make a few people rich in the short term, but it tends to cause a massive negative impact in the long-run. Something the Hutts *should* have realized, with how long-lived they were, but which they’d never considered due to their ‘cultural bias.’ Of course, wage slavery caused the exact same issues in Core Worlds, and the politicians there were equally too stupid to realize their shit policies were what caused them to need to drain the Outer Rim to support themselves.

“On this day, I declare not only that the Hutt Empire has collapsed for good, but that the League of Free Stars has pledged to erase their works and failures. To prove once and for all that *their ways* were weak and ineffectual. That the people were always meant to be *FREE* and that our success will prove it! For Freedom!”

The crowd took up the cheer, even as two bombs meant to cause havoc were defused by Jedi that had stuck around to see the end of things. Well, despite the number of people trying to kill him and disrupt his efforts to make the galaxy better, at least this time he’d only needed to give a *short* speech. Any longer and someone might have tried to crash a freighter into the plaza or something. Smiling and waving to the crowd, he stepped away from the podium as the planned drone display, a replacement for fireworks that would have been foolish to use in a domed city, began...

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– The Miruko: Orbit of Evocar –

“Padmé, Sabé! It’s great to see you two again!”

Aayla was on the pair instantly, the very moment the door to their private suite aboard the *Miruko* closed. The pair hadn't been the first delegation to meet with Izuku and Aayla, to better dispel any rumors that might chase them. For that matter, it technically wasn't the first time they'd seen each other since Padmé arrived for the ceremony. Each other occasion had been somewhat public, however, forcing them to act friendly-but-professional, instead of the intimate hug Aayla was pulling them into now.

With the pair entertaining a series of influential guests in their 'private' dining for the last few days, no one was going to suspect anything but a similar arrangement was going on between them now. They might even get the mistaken notion that Izuku had snubbed them a bit by not having the Ambassador to the League be their very first guests. Which was just fine with all of them, given that it helped hide the truth that this was intended to be a more *intimate* gathering, instead of a political showpiece.

Of course, that didn't mean they were jumping straight into bed together. No, this was as much a date as it was anything more, as shown by Aayla excitedly leading them past the formal dining area and into a comfortable lounge. One that had been equipped with the sort of full-color holo system that was so common on Tythe and was now spreading to the rest of the League. Naboo, as well, as it happened. Their own home planet benefiting from being a long-time trade partner of Tythe. Now, said holo was displaying a paused scene that, if not for Aayla being captured in the frame, might have looked like an action movie.

As it was, Padmé only spared a bare thought for that, as she caught sight of not just Izuku, but Shaak Ti as well. Her breath hitched slightly at the possible implications of that, particularly given that the Torgutan Jedi was wearing a short, silky negligee instead of her usual Jedi Robes. The woman was exotically gorgeous, and certain things Sabé had been cheerfully subjecting her to since before they even arrived certainly made that fact jump to the forefront of Padmé's mind. Trying not to blush at those thoughts, she was grateful when a beaming Izuku swept her and Sabé up in a hug nearly as energetic as the one Aayla have given them. She breathed in his scent with heady delight, having missed it since her last, short mission six months ago, to attend a major session of the League's Council of Free Worlds.

"It's fantastic to see you both. We thought we'd do a less formal dinner, watching some interesting highlights from Aayla and Shaak Ti's trips in the last year as we munch on a bunch of different foods. Nothing serious, that sort of thing can wait for another time. Just some fun or interesting moments. Or, if you don't want to do that, we can put on a holodrama instead."

Padmé very reluctantly left his arms, so that he could see her smiling hugely.

"No! Seeing what everyone has been up to is much better! And some of the food smells like the delightfully casual fare no one ever lets me eat."

Izuku grinned back.

"Oh, it is. Tons of unhealthy foods and lots of calories...to burn off later, of course."

Padmé blushed at the husky promise in his tone, but didn't have a chance to sputter a reply as he spun her towards the master bedroom.

“First, Aayla can help you get something more comfortable to wear! Then you can come back for the food and show!”

A moment later, she and Sabé found themselves at Aayla mercy, already instinctively knowing whatever they ended up wearing would be just as sexy as it was comfortable...

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-Lemon Starts Here-

Padmé whined as Aayla traced her pussy lips with the back of a single fingernail, coming away glistening with natural lube despite the briefness of the contact. She squirmed, mostly helpless with her arms tied above her head, reclined in one of the loungers they’d been watching the holo from. Her negligee was long gone, though she was technically still wearing a pair of panties. Of course, that didn’t exactly *matter* since, true to form, Aayla had provided only the sexiest of options. Specifically, she’d provided Padmé and Sabé only with *crotchless* panties, after flipping up her own half-transparent babydoll sleepwear to show off a nearly-identical pair of her own.

Nearly identical, as Aayla’s had possessed a set of pearls that pressed between her lower lips, constantly digging into them a bit with every movement. The grinning temptress had informed them without remorse that Shaak Ti was wearing a pair like Aayla’s, so ‘surely the two of you can handle the merely crotchless sets.’ Somehow, the blue devil always knew exactly how to push and how much, though Sabé certainly hadn’t helped by whining about not getting the pearl version herself.

“Hmm, just what have you been doing to poor Padmé, Sabé? She’s leaking like a faucet after barely being touched!”

Padmé blushed all the way down to her exposed nipples, even as Sabé giggled from where she was sitting in Izuku’s lap, moaning a second later as he pinched her own exposed nipples with his fingers.

“Oh, I used those delightful implants Zavra gave both of last time! I numbed her clit and pussy for the last week, since the day we set off to see you. I’ve been trying to train her to cum from just anal and her nipples, but she’s not quite there yet! So, every night I’ve been edging her while we work on it. I only undid the command *after* we left for your suite~!”

Aayla blinked, then barked a short laugh, before returning her finger to tease Padmé’s aching slit again.

“Oh, that’s *evil*. Perhaps we need to punish you~?”

Sabé voice was breathy, with little moans between words, as she protested.

“Hey! I activated *mine* too, just to be fair. Just because she hasn’t teased me as much is hardly m-myyy fault.”

That got a deep, rumbling chuckle from Shaak Ti of all people, who’d shed her clothing entirely and was playing with her own pussy openly on the lounge directly across from Padmé’s.

The more exotic view was warring with the sight of Sabé's own drooling pussy resting against Izuku's rock-hard erection, and Aayla's *newly pierced* nipples hovering near Padmé's head as she watched the same views. The Togrutan's voice was husky as she spoke up after her chuckle.

"I believe that's an unfair comparison. I was given to believe you're the more dominant between the two of you, yes? Perhaps we should use the implants to numb your pussy again and see if *you* can cum from Izuku's attentions elsewhere?"

Sabé squirmed, moaning more heavily at the combination of that thought and the tiny amounts of friction her efforts got from grinding on Izuku with those moves. For all that she was 'more dominant,' Sabé was at best a switch, leaving her fighting between how hot that sounded to her and the desire to *cum*. She hadn't mastered managing to do so with the implants tuned like that either, which meant a week of horniness had built up as she'd played with Padmé. Aayla cut in with her own idea, mischief in her voice.

"I think I have a better idea. They can earn their chance to cum with a little competition~. One of them can eat each of us out, with Padmé getting the advantage of familiarity by working on *me*, since she's the injured party. Whichever of them gets one of us off first, gets the first round with Master~. Is that alright with you, Master~?"

Padmé was fascinated to see Izuku's cock twitch each time the word 'Master' rolled off Aayla's tongue. She made a note of it, even if she didn't think she quite had the courage to try it herself just yet...

"Hmmm, I think that's fair. As you say, she'll have the advantage of familiarity...but you also cum a little too easily. I think we'll have to make sure you're distracted by servicing me at the same time. You wouldn't want me to get lonely, would you?"

Aayla's smirk was all the reply he needed, as Izuku picked up Sabé with the Force and moved her over to Shaak Ti, dropping her between the Togrutan woman's legs...before taking a moment to even the playing field fully by tying her hands behind her back. Aayla took that as her cue to tip the lounge back even farther, leaving Padmé nearly flat on her back as Aayla crawled up her body. Soon, a familiar blue pussy, freshly stripped of pearl panties, hovered over Padmé's lips. As she could already hear Shaak Ti's throaty moans, Sabé ruthlessly getting the jump on her, Padmé dove in without hesitation...

-Lemon Ends Here-

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