

Can One Displaced Hero Save a Galaxy?

Chapters 66-70

Novus Peregrine

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Chapter 66: Unadulterated Loathing

- Hidden Sith Temple - Coruscant -

Darth Sidious was a firm step beyond rage.

Rage was what he had felt as he ripped apart every training droid in the hidden Sith Temple, his heavy use of the Dark Side shielded from the accursed Jedi by the Temple's own powers. Rage was what had fueled his killing of three separate courier droids, his primary tactical droid, and that one stupid cleaner bot that had previously gained immunity from his wrath by being extra good at getting bloodstains out of robes.

No. Rage had passed an hour ago, when he'd coldly given the order to bring the next tactical droid online to comb over the stored data from its predecessor and figure out how said predecessor had missed so much. The droids were custom models, not the trash the separatist movement would be using when the time came. *His* droids were loaded with the records of the various Sith Wars, preserved by the Sith Order in far more complete form than the Jedi had managed with their own copies. Of course, he had enough traitors in among the Jedi and Jedi support staff that he *also* had their copies. Which were loaded into the droids as well, just for good measure. Each successive tactical droid used by the Baneite Sith had been farther allowed to refine their tactical analysis via deliberately triggered wars and conflicts like the Stark Hyperspace War and Yinchorri Uprising.

The droids weren't flawless, of course. But, in combination with the Sith intelligence apparatus, they were *supposed* to be good enough to help him track the overall movements and shifts of military power in the galaxy. Now, as he moved on from mere rage to hate and unadulterated loathing, simmering in both, he looked over the exploded view of The Slice region of the Galaxy. Included in the display was Hutt Space, of course. Though even *his* sources there were less helpful there, for the moment, than he'd like. The Hutts had been well and truly caught off guard, and he'd relied mostly on taps into their own considerable intelligence networks within their space. The region just wasn't important enough to his plans for him to have bothered building a deeper network of his own. Doubly so when so *many* individual networks already crisscrossed the region, and he'd penetrated all of them.

Also included on the regional map, beyond the known conflict points in Hutt Space, was a tentative mapping of alliances and influence his agents had been doing regarding this unexpected new player. He had, in his great foresight, moved assets into the region around Tythe and Hutt Space, even when he'd expected the fools to quickly lose. Now that an increasingly dire flow of information

was coming back from his taps into the various Hutt networks, revealing just how *completely* this new threat had brutally upended the table in their backyard, he was glad that he'd done it. His own people were only just starting to report, of course, but they were at least starting to get in place to get him greater objective information. Right now, what he had from the Hutt networks was...unfortunate.

The Hutt's massive mothball fleets were *gone*.

All of the major mothball fleet depot systems, thousands of ships from dozens of eras, had been somehow infiltrated *before* the fighting had kicked off. This League of Free Worlds weren't the fools he'd thought them to be initially. Instead, they were a genuinely, dangerously, competent group that had mapped out a legitimately viable plan to take on the Hutts in their own space. A plan that extended well *outside* Hutt Space and ***took advantages of some of Sidious's own efforts***.

Ruthlessly grinding down the renewed spike of rage, he forced himself to analyze what his agents were finding. Someone, whether it be this Izuku Midoriya or his Jedi allies, had made use of the numerous cracks in the Outer Rim that he and a half dozen Sith before him had carefully crafted. Worlds like Abrion Major and Ukio had been intentionally marginalized for decades, in some cases *centuries*, as part of the plan to fracture the Outer Rim. The entire Abrion Sector was one that was supposed to go over to the Separatists in time, specifically as a threat to nearby *Kamino*. Which, while technically in Wild Space and virtually extra-galactic due to the Rishi Maze, was also technically within the boundaries of the Abrion Sector.

Now, Abrion Major and most of the major worlds of its sector were in the next best thing to an open alliance with the League of Free Worlds.

Even more aggravating than some of his and the Sith's own efforts having been *co-opted*, was the fact that the League of Free Worlds had gone and done the *exact same thing* to some critical supporters within the loyalist side of the Senate. Orn Free Taa of Ryloth was one of his Palpatine persona's own political faction's more critical members. Incredibly well connected in the Outer Rim, and decently so in the Mid Rim, Palpatine had been previously nothing but pleased with the man shoring up Ryloth. Yes, there were some downsides to a stronger Ryloth. But, on the whole, it had only made someone already loyal to him more useful.

Now, his agents had discovered that Ryloth's renewal was largely the work of Izuku Midoriya's own business dealings. Meaning that Orn Free Taa was on *extremely* positive terms with the very businesses that were funneling so much wealth to the League. The fat fool had been one of the first in the Senate to piously defend his world's new ally...and he'd jumped before Sidious had even possessed enough information to know to stop him. Nor was he the only one. That *aggravating little bitch* Amidala had *once again* proven too irritatingly good at the political game for his liking. Naboo should have been taking it on the chin in the Senate for their relationship with Tythe. Instead, the little chit had managed to spin the entire thing into a new power block by making herself the primary contact point for the Republic with this new, extra-Republic power.

He couldn't even do anything about that, since Naboo was *his homeworld too*, and it would reflect badly on him if he cut her off at the knees!

Add in the wildly divergent reactions all across the Republic, and the Senate was currently a complete mess. The lines he'd been carefully drawing, the conflict blocks of power between Loyalist

and Separatists, had been scrambled and blurred with the injection of an entire different *type* of conflict. No one liked the Hutts. Thousands of worlds had axes to grind with them, and the League had gotten enough people to shout quickly enough in their defense, that corporate interests were slamming into old hatreds and making the entire wild beast impossible to guide. It wasn't even *close* to irrecoverable, thankfully. But it was going to take time to reign both sides in and get them focused back where he needed them to focus.

Still. It wasn't *all* bad.

Sidious found his seething hatred cooling somewhat as he finally acknowledged that point. His own quick actions to make use of the crisis point, as a means to forward a few useful measures, had found fertile ground. The motion to revitalized ORD nodal defense fleets with new Venators that KDY just 'happened' to have for sale, had gone through quickly. The anti-militarists were, quite frankly, *distracted* by an actual war going on at their borders. Amidala's own actions in negotiating with the League had taken virtually their entire attention, and he'd managed to slip the modification to the ORD Systems bill through almost unopposed.

Hardening those nodal defenses would, in turn, allow him to make the coming war bloodier and flashier right from the start. That would not only feed the Dark Side and create more vicious battles for Jedi to die in, but would help suck the entire Republic more firmly into the war. Emergency powers would be even easier to acquire, the need for more troops even greater and more obvious. There were potential problems with that, of course, since Kamino would need time to expand production. But he *still had that time*. There had been at least three years yet before he'd planned for the war to start, and the confusion in the Senate was likely to delay his original timeline by at least six months. Possibly as much as a year if the League was more successful than he'd like. That was enough time to order the Kamionians to increase the batch sizes for the army, allowing him to keep the Clone Trooper to regular troop ration he'd been aiming for.

As always, the Dark Side would be the winner in the end, and as its destined Master, *he* would benefit most from that fact. No matter what these other fools thought. Now, what assets could he activate to deal with one Izuku Midoriya? As far as he could tell, the foolish idealist was the primary driving force of the war in Hutt Space. Without him, his movement would collapse quickly and he could put the Senate back into order faster. He would win either way, but the *disorder* of the current tribulation in the Senate annoyed Sidious greatly...

- Orbit of Tythe-

Shaak Ti had to admit that the orbitals of Tythe were equally disquieting and enthralling. Tythe Central was an impressive and beautiful space station, even if she felt it would probably be much more so when not in 'defense mode.' The military hardware all around the planet was far more concerning, particularly the power readings from those Orbital Defense Platforms, which told her in no uncertain terms anyone attempting to attack the planet would be in for a world of hurt. Add in the *many* ships zipping around, both military vessels on patrol and numerous cargo ships moving in and out of the system, and the orbitals of the planet were *far* busier than anything this far out on the Rim really should be.

For that matter, even Tythe itself was of considerable interest. Much to her surprise, a stop at the Jedi Archives actually *had* turned up quite a bit of recent data about the system. Not about its economy or military, but about its *ecology*. Master T'ra Saa, a name Shaak Ti knew and respected even if she'd rarely encountered the Neti in person, had filed a quite extensive review of the world's ecosystem. An ecosystem that had been busily *collapsing* just a few years ago, but which Master Saa had reported on serious efforts to repair. Now, Shaak Ti could certainly see that the locals hadn't been joking about that effort. While parts of the world still looked...*rough*...for lack of a better word, the majority of it was visibly thriving.

Passive scans of the surface while she awaited permission and directions to land had shown some fairly obvious uniformity in places. Signs, for those that knew to look for them, that terraforming droids had likely been used. If, however, they were working to the plan Master Saa had written up herself? Then it was likely that those droids were revitalizing existing ecology rather than replacing it. At least where possible. As someone who had always felt more at home and at peace in nature than on city worlds like Coruscant, Shaak Ti could appreciate that someone cared deeply enough to make that effort. It potentially spoke well of the man likely responsible for it all, even if there was some small chance he was only doing it to win points.

Shaak Ti didn't think such was likely the case.

If for no other reason than that there were far easier ways to do so.

Not only had she met the man several times when dealing with mess of the Kazarak system, but she also knew Aayla'Secura somewhat well. They hadn't spent a great deal of time together since the younger Knight became a Padawan, but they *had* spent quite a bit of time together when they were both younger. Back when Shaak Ti had been a young Padawan herself, and Aayla still an older initiate. There was only four years between them, age wise, and Shaak had mentored the younger woman in several ways. Being a less traditional Jedi and thus a helpful sounding board for a preteen empath who was having a lot of issues with emotional control as the Order typically taught it. As a result of that mentoring, Aayla was among the few Knights within the order who Shaak thought of as a genuine friend, rather than just an acquaintance.

Also, the fact that the younger girl had possessed a clear crush on her had been both flattering and amusing.

"Wandering Cavalier, this is Tythe Central Control. Your identification has been verified, and you're cleared to land in Bay 223. You and your companions will be met by a guide. Sending beacon data now."

Shaak Ti was quick to dispel her wandering thoughts and key the comm to respond, acting on the flight instructions absentmindedly even as she did so.

"Copy Tythe Central. Beacon data received, proceeding to Bay 223."

As the controller for system traffic responded with polite niceties, Shaak Ti noted that the bay in question was on the diplomatic arm of the massive station. Clearly, despite herself and the other four Jedi accompanying her having handed in their Jedi Credentials, they had been identified. Not unexpected, but it did make her wonder just who their 'guide' would be, and what sort of

welcome they could expect. The Force didn't seem to be giving off any warnings. So it was unlikely to be a hostile welcome, at the very least...

-Junkfort System-

Aayla smiled widely at the assembled group that had filtered off a trio of freighters now resting in her flagship's hangar. Two of those three freighters would be leaving again shortly, with official thanks of the League of Free Stars, not to mention a free refuel and restock of premium consumables. One of them had even accepted a fairly lucrative courier job that needed doing, though the other had turned a similar job down saying that it wouldn't be right to accept such an obvious kickback for doing an old friend a favor.

As for who they'd dropped off...Aayla recognized many of them, either personally or professionally. It was one of those she recognized on a personal level that she went too first, despite Knight Xiaan'Amersu being one of the more junior among those present. Her fellow Twi'lek spotted her coming and braced, laughing lightly as Aayla hugged her without care for what the other Jedi saw.

"Xiaan! I'd hoped you might come! I didn't want to assume, but..."

Her fellow Twi'lek Knight...or possibly former Knight depending on how things went...pushed her away with a gentle smile.

"Of course I was going to come, Aayla. Not just because of you, either. I know you and the League had *something* to do with the changes to Ryloth recently. And you *know* I've always hated how little we could do about even the legal slavery there. Let alone the illegal slavery coming out of Hutt Space!"

There was a wet chuckle that came from just behind them, and Aayla turned to see Jedi Master Bant Eerin standing beside Ash Jarvee, who had come down to greet their guests with Aayla. Considering that Jarvee was a member of Altisian Jedi, her presence was a bit of a litmus test for the group of recent arrivals. The fact that one of only two Jedi Masters that Aayla had spotted in the group of twenty-three arrivals appeared to be unbothered by Jarvee's presence was hopeful. It was *also* a major surprise to see Master Eerin in the group, however. Given the circumstances, she figured she could get away with a slightly blunt question about that.

"Master Eerin. I'm quite happy you're here, but I admit I hadn't expected to see a Master of the Healing Halls filtering in with our many ah...*former* Knights?"

She made the statement a question with a subtle lilt to the words, and thankfully the Mon Calamari woman didn't seem to take the slightest bit of offense, smiling cheerfully at the question.

"*Former* Master, for now, miss *former* Knight! Or at least *taking a vacation*, as it were, for now. As for seeing those of the Healing Halls out here...whyever would you have expected otherwise? After all, if there's anyone who will be needed to help right the wrongs done to those in Hutt Space, it is a healers. Though I must admit, I'm not quite looking forward to Obi-Wan's next

message. He's going to have a hell of a time keeping his Padawan out of this. Assuming he even tries. One of Obi-Wan's friends going over to your little rebellion-that-isn't will only make that harder."

Aayla's lips twitched, trying not to outright laugh. Obi-Wan was the oddest mix of maverick and straightlaced traditional Jedi. She honestly didn't know how he was going to be reacting to all of this, but she certainly knew his Padawan would be giving him an earful on the topic. Particularly given said Padawan's mother technically worked for the clandestine ops side of the League. Even if in a non-combat role.

"Yes, well...I'm sure he'll manage. Even if he might end up with a few early grey hairs as a result." Stifling another laugh at Bant's own mischievous grin, Aayla continued quickly for the sake of both of them retaining a professional expression. "Now, I don't suppose you and perhaps not-so-former Master Ven'nari could enlighten me who all is with you and for what reasons?"

The Bothan Jedi Master, who had approached while they were talking, snorted at that. She was, like Master Fay, one of the 'nomadic' Jedi of the Order. Those who infamously gave not even lip-service to the Council and simply went where the Force told them to go. She'd also earned her appellation of 'Fire Eater' from her fellow Bothans for more than one reason.

"I admit, I'm impressed so many Coruscant Jedi bothered to move themselves out of the ivory tower to come help. The legal fiction is ridiculous, but I won't say it isn't a pleasant surprise despite that."

A few of the younger Knights that had clearly heard her shifted, not quite sure if they had just been insulted or praised. Aayla knew it was genuinely the latter, though. The infamous woman was among the more...insultingly dismissive...of the nomadic Jedi when it came to the various Councils. Aayla had researched as many of the nomads as she could in the archives, knowing there was a good chance they'd be drawn to the conflict. With an equally good chance they'd just do their own thing rather than connecting to the League. Possibly causing chaos in the process.

The fact she'd felt a burst of pride and approval from the Bothan toward the crowd of 'on vacation' Jedi told Aayla a lot. The woman was just shy of outright giddy that so many Jedi were jumping off the Council's bandwagon to openly do the right thing, rather than the Senate's thing. She had no idea what that would lead to, if anything, but determined it would probably be a good idea to keep an eye on whatever the Master got up to among the group.

"I admit I'm pleased by how many have been trickling in myself. I had been prepared to ride out the course alone, if need be. But many have seen fit to join, both before and after we went *public* with our goals. Indeed, another group roughly this size recently arrived on Tythe, led by Knight Ti."

That group, from what Aayla had heard from Knight Agai'i, had been somewhat more organized. A near delegation-like arrival, instead of the hodgepodge of mixed Jedi she was meeting here, just off Junkfort Station. This group, as far as she could tell, were more the type that had just 'followed their feelings.' Though she suspected Bant of having acted to corral a few of them into acting in the same direction instead of wandering off in smaller groups. It was certainly she who spoke up again to start describing just who had come and why.

“I suspect still more will be trickling in, Aayla. Those who are already here are mostly those who reacted the most strongly or decisively. Knights Elaiza and Tarados, for example.”

Bant pointed the two out, and one of them *immediately* made sense to Aayla. He was a Klatooninian, after all.

“Tarados Gon is from Klatoonine, so you can imagine he is a bit concerned about what you’ve done there. Though I hasten to assure you he isn’t upset about it. Far from it, in fact. He’s long been an advocate for trying to free his species from the Hutts. He might well have some contacts you can use to get things moving there, beyond just quarantining the planet. Similarly, Elaiza is actually from Nar Shaddaa, originally. She’s quite interested in events out this way for some fairly obvious reasons.”

Aayla wanted to snort at the sheer *understatement* of that. She was honestly amazed *any* Jedi was from that moon. So far, they hadn’t had much trouble with the locals there, but any information she might be able to provide them about her home would likely be invaluable. Bant moved on before she could say so, pointing not at a Jedi, but at the Captain of the final freighter. The one that hadn’t left and apparently wasn’t intending to.

“And there are one or two odder additions. Captain Kirthos here is a member of a group you’ve likely never heard of. Indeed, it’s a bit difficult to call them an organized group at all, really. Yet, I think he and a couple of his fellow Wardens of the Sky will be quite useful, given their specialization...”

Aayla blinked, then gaped for a moment as that specialization was briefly highlighted for her. Well, this was an unexpected surprise. Quite possibly one that could be *very* important in the hopefully not-to-distant future...

-Planet of Ylesia-

Jedi Master Ky Narec groaned, old and ill-treated injuries protesting as he settled down into the hiding spot he and his Padawan had secured among the slave colony of Ylesia. They had landed there two days ago, having stowed away aboard a heavy freighter that had visited Rattatak looking for disposable soldiers on behalf of the Hutts. A part of him had been loathe to leave the world when he and Asajj had been making progress against the warlords there, but the truth was that he’d realized they might never get another chance to return to the Republic.

While that wouldn’t have bothered him all that much if it was *only* him, he truly wanted his Padawan to have a chance to do more than fight over a single world of warlords. She was closing in on nineteen now, and immensely talented. With just a little bit of access to better teaching materials, he was pretty sure she’d make Knight by 21. At least, assuming that the Council didn’t make issue out of her being trained almost entirely outside the Order.

He didn’t *think* they would. Such things had happened quite a few times before, and he’d gotten to her when she was only five. Not particularly old for such circumstances. The fact she was so well centered despite all that had happened so far should go a long way to easing any misgivings, too. Which, unfortunately, was also only true if *he* brought her back. Rather than having

her turn up a decade from now with nothing but a message from a long-thought-dead Knight. He wasn't exactly young any longer, and if they'd kept up the fighting on Rattatak, he'd have gotten done in sooner or later. He'd been able to feel that certainty in the Force, and that little detail had pushed him to take the chance to get off world while they could. For his Padawan's sake far more than his own.

Given that something like *half* of all the troublesome elements had been recruited away from the world for some massive FUBAR situation the Hutts were screaming about? Well, it hadn't been all that hard to stow away on the freighter that had brought them here. Of course, finding out more about that situation had also led to him getting them *off* said freighter before it got any deeper into Hutt Space. It was taking the mercenaries the Warlords had been *generously* compensated for into some sort of massive war against the Hutts that he didn't know nearly enough about. *Someone* was certainly causing the Hutts to panic and spend credits like they were going out of style, and he needed more information before he could decide if that was a good thing or not.

A minute or two later, as he was sorting through what he'd learned on his own expedition away from the slave colony, he felt his Padawan arrive.

"Ah, Asajj dear, I sense you've had more luck than I. I found plenty of information circling among the slaves, but little of it could be verified. What have you discovered?"

Asajj smiled at him, bright eyed and eager feeling in the Force as she happily began relaying what she'd discovered while spying on the Spaceport. The information was useful, he had to admit. Though the cheerfulness she radiated as she described all the interesting things she'd seen in the process was something he valued even more. Yes, it had been the right decision to get them off that hell world. Even if they ended up in another, bigger war, the lightness he could feel practically pouring off of her as the sense of *adventure* took hold on his Padawan reassured him. Getting her some exposure to the greater galaxy could only be a good thing...

Chapter 67: Back into the Breach

Izuku, once more back aboard the *Knight Errant*, and more importantly back in orbit over Nal Hutta, was reviewing the latest reports from various forward actions. He had, of course, been keeping abreast of combat operations the entire time, at least as much as he could. But enough of his time had been tied up with other things, particularly diplomatic and R&D matters, that he'd not been fully abreast on the war efforts. He'd made inroads to changing that as they plunged back into Hutt Space, but he'd needed to handle several situations along their route in as well.

Including, as it happened, smashing another merc fleet that been attempting to ambush his forces moving in and out of Hutt Space in the Dohlban system, just *outside* of Hutt Space. Since the world was *technically* a Republic world, even if one so minor as to not matter, they hadn't taken it previously. Something which remained the case even now, as the world itself hadn't had anything to do with the ambush. *This* group of mercs had been made up of 'pirates' who'd been paid mostly to harass the League's logistics shipping, not fight their fleets. Pity for them that Izuku was more than capable of using the Force to track them back to their bases and wipe them out before they could

cause any true mischief. The locals had honestly been quite grateful, though the Hutt influence there was too strong for them to openly ally with the League...yet.

The result of several such minor issues plaguing his return into Hutt Space had been that he hadn't *quite* caught up to the exact current state of the war. Something he was doing now from the many displays of the Flag Bridge, and with the assistance of a few aides to help him organize everything. Frankly, things were looking *mostly* good, but they were also slowing down. That had been inevitable, but it was something they needed to fight for as long as possible. The longer they managed to maintain a pseudo-blitz, the more of Hutt Space they would be in control of when the equilibrium inevitably shifted against them. Humming, he cupped a palm around one world on the main holo-display that was glowing an unexpected color.

"Trotter? What the heck is going on with Diyu?"

The Lieutenant that was his primary military aide snapped to near-attention and immediately answered. A good man with an incredible ability to sort detail, but not a very inventive or creative one.

"Sir! There's a slave revolt going on there, sir. Not one of ours. We'd avoided trying to do more than plant some loose seeds there because of how industrialized the world is. As you know, the War Planning Committee decided not to try rebellions on major industrial centers, as the Hutts were too likely to dump lots of mercs into such worlds to make things extremely bloody. It seems we had a bit of an intelligence failure on this one, though, as it appears the *locals* had been planning to revolt for some time. Possibly for up to a decade, given the level of fighting and the successes they've managed. Whoever is leading them did a damn good job of giving them a chance...but the planning committee was right, too. If you'll look at the data for Ylesia?"

Izuku frowned. There were a few minor systems between Ylesia and Diyu, but...ah. It was immediately obvious what his aide had meant by directing his attention to the system. He nodded and voiced the obvious.

"They are staging through Ylesia. Outside mercs brought in from various places by the Anjiliac kajidic? Looks like an effort completely outside the joint operations against us. Which is causing them to pull in troops from pretty far away. Bastooinie I remember from looking into extra-Hutt Space holdings by the various kajidics. But where the hell is Rattatak?"

His aide, as always, was quick to supply the information.

"Clear out to the galactic west, sir. It's not a Republic World, but it's a known haven for pirates at the like. There's some sort of gladiatorial games there, as well, which is probably why the Hutts had connections to it. Lots of them like that sort of thing. Best we can tell from what our agents in Ylesia report, they basically bought several heavy freighters worth of mercs from a few of the warlords constantly fighting over the planet. Paid them mostly via weapons to keep killing each other with. Old stock from old wars, rather than anything truly modern."

Izuku grimaced. That was one of the problems with the Hutts. They'd been around so, so stupidly *long* that you could never tell what each of the kleptomaniacs might have just sitting around in deep storage. The Anjiliac had probably offloaded junk weapons from the Sith Wars or older on a

backwater where they'd still be useful...and gotten something vaguely like veteran combatants they could use as canon fodder in exchange. Ones from a violent, war-torn world that probably wouldn't blink at slaughtering a bunch of unarmed slaves to put down a revolt.

“What's the situation on the ground on Diyu? Do we have people in contact with the rebels?”

Trotter hesitated.

“Yes, sir. We do have contact. But they are pretty...belligerent. They aren't willing to hand over the fighting or command to us. Meaning anyone we put in is going to be either forced to work under them or *around* them.”

Which would be a poor use of their own ground forces. Trotter didn't say it aloud, but Izuku heard it anyway. Part of the reason they were starting to slow down was that, despite their buildup, they still only had so many ships and so many bodies. Even more than the ships, it took a *lot* of troops to take a hostile world, and despite their force multipliers of droids and mechs, there were just flat out limits to how many worlds they could put significant ground forces on at a time. The Lieutenant was quite right that Diyu, which hadn't been on their list for immediate conquering, wasn't the best place to use what they did have still in reserve.

On the other hand, Izuku had just spent a couple of weeks overseeing an influx of *irregular* forces. Many of which weren't the right types to mesh easily with their own force mixture and tactics. Quite a few of whom had also come with him as he returned to Hutt Space. Either catching a ride or using his forces as a shield against the increasing 'pirate' attacks trying to stop anyone not Hutt aligned from getting into Hutt Space. Most of the groups were ground troops, after all, with minimal ability to protect their assets in space. Considering it, Izuku nodded and started flicking through the assets he had yet to commit to one fight or another.

It didn't take him long to isolate three groups as the core of an idea. A full regiment of Ailon Nova Guard, a group of just over three hundred Echani, and one of the remaining units of the Shattered Shackles. The Nova Guard showing up had been a hell of a surprise, but apparently they had a *loooooonngg* list of grievances and broken contracts that the Hutts had built up over several millennia. Izuku honestly wondered if the Hutts even *realized* that the Nova Guard had been keeping detailed notes about any and all such breaches of contract to be 'paid back in due kind when possible.' Combined with their 'might makes right' sort of philosophy making them admire his current efforts, the Nova Guard had decided to send along a ready regiment to start paying the Hutts back for some of those contract breaches. Along with making it clear that the rest of the Ailon Nova Guard was open to being contracted for more fighting.

Given that was a *sizable* force, Izuku was seriously considering it.

One of the reasons he hadn't pulled the trigger on it yet was that the group were...not exactly on the same philosophical wavelength as him or the League. At all. Which could be a lot of trouble in the long run. Still, the regiment already present were a formidable force that could operate independently. Preferred to do so, in fact. They could easily put the hurt to Hutt forces without having to even interact with the locals. They did, however, have a bit of a flaw in that they

weren't really the types for asymmetric warfare. They wanted straight, highly organized and planned, fights.

The Echani, on the other hand, were the opposite. Sort of. While also a warrior culture, their fighting mentality was *extremely* individualistic. They fought as incredibly capable individuals rather than as a group, and few of the collection that had felt called to respond to the situation in Hutt Space had even known each other beforehand. They were capable of coordination, certainly. But it would honestly be best to deploy them as small groups against strategic targets. Adding them to the equation would add in that asymmetric warfare element that the Nova Guard lacked.

The last group was the most necessary, but smallest in number. Most of the Shattered Shackle had been split up to be used as a core of veterans among the various ground forces. Yet, Izuku and the planning committee had decided to keep a handful of groups, ranging in size from twenty to forty, together. Part of the reasoning had been to have them as a group that could hit legitimate targets in Republic space if needed. They *were* a mercenary unit in good standing there, after all.

The bigger reason, however, had been that the Shattered Shackle had a *reputation* that the League currently did not. Specifically, a reputation among *slaves*. They'd been active long enough to have made their way into whispers among slaves on hundreds of worlds. Thousands, more likely. Which meant they would be a known quantity that slaves were more likely to be willing to trust, in so much as they would trust *anyone*.

That was clearly needed here. Committing one of those groups to work as a go between and bridge between the locals and the two other groups should smooth out the rough points. It still wouldn't be *ideal*. But their presence should make the situation *workable*. All without having to commit too much in the way of the League's own armed forces. It should work, at least somewhat. So long as the other part of his forming plan *also* worked.

"What do the Scouts have to say about defenses in the systems between Diyu and Ylesia? For that matter, what about the defenses of Ylesia itself?"

This time, he could feel his aide's surprise, and the Lieutenant had to actively refer to various reports for a few moments.

"Ummm...there's basically nothing in the systems between Diyu and Ylesia. The systems are occupied, but it's small-time mining and refinery operations. Mostly there to keep specific resources going to Diyu, honestly. As for Ylesia, it's a major spice refining planet. That means it's got decent anti-raider defenses and a few squadrons of fighters. No seriously heavy defenses, though. Anyone after the planet would be after the spice, normally, so it's all geared to defend against a raid-and-run."

Izuku nodded, already looking over the hyperlane between the worlds, looking for particularly narrow points. Just because their interditors weren't ready yet, didn't mean they couldn't pull a more traditional trick. Given the people they were pulling it *on*, it was even ironically appropriate.

“Alright. We’ve got a narrow window here to secure a potentially useful chunk of that whole hyperlane. Which will, just incidentally, also help keep the pressure up if we can push on afterward to seal off another entry point to Hutt Space at the Outland Transit Station. Here’s what we’re going to do...”

Chapter 68: Playing Pirate

—Deep Space—

Izuku was pleased that his plan was working out so far. It had needed a bit of rapid workshopping and some slightly risky orders for their Scouts, but it was looking like there would be an excellent chance of it paying off exactly how he’d hoped. They had started by creating a small fleet of mixed units, just two Volition-class ships and a half dozen Munifex II frigates, combined with an unusually heavy screen of smaller ships. In truth, he might have left the Volitions behind entirely, if he hadn’t needed their brute power for one of the later stages of the operation. He didn’t want to weaken the rest of the Fleet which Admiral Lin was still using to drive forward in areas they’d actually had *plans* for, after all. His own effort was chasing an unexpected and useful opportunity, rather than a vital push.

With the relatively small force, at least by the standards of the war so far, he’d leaned on the Iron Knights again to help him calculate a safe slingshot around Diyu. Technically, as Admiral Lin had recently proven, it was possible to do that with nothing but navicomputer calculations. But Admiral Lin had possessed a much larger number of powerful navicomputers to check and triple check the maneuver. A necessity, given that the Hutts weren’t exactly sticklers for having perfect hyperspace data for their systems and surrounding space. On the contrary, they tended to actively discourage such detailed mapping for their own many and varied reasons. Not least of which was a desire by the various kajidics to sneak around *each other* on a frequent basis.

Somewhere in the Core, it would have been a far simpler maneuver, but that was neither here nor there. Izuku and a pair of Iron Knights had been more than capable of using the Force to better even what the navicomputers could manage, after all. They had carefully used Diyu’s gravity as a tether to slingshot *around* the system, without ever actually entering it. In doing so, no one in the heavily industrialized system, with its excellent sensor net, had seen them pass by.

The next system along the route between Diyu and Ylesia was, thankfully, an empty and unnamed system. In the hyper catalog, it was nothing more than a number, the smallish star and its only planet having nothing to really draw interest of any sort. What *was* of interest was that the system *did* have plenty of asteroid material. Quite large bits, actually, given that the material in the system had failed to clump into additional planets at any point in its past. Those large bits were exactly what he’d needed, and the sole reason he’d brought the pair of Volitions along. The two recently re-designated Battlecruisers had been more than up to the task of spearing two large chunks of asteroid and drawing them in close enough to keep their gravity wells from interfering with a short hyper jump.

Technically, the trick Izuku was intending to pull could be executed by ships as small as a corvette. Pirates, in fact, used the trick all the time. They would tow a chunk of rock with a large

enough mass shadow into a relatively narrow point of a hyperlane, causing any ship traveling it to be pulled out of hyper by their navicomputer's safeties encountering a gravity well that *shouldn't be there*. Those pirates, however, would take a week or more to pull off the trick, as the chunk of rock they were moving was usually significantly bigger than the corvette itself. Obviously, *they* couldn't enter hyper with it tractored to the towing vessel, requiring them to move the asteroid at sub-light speeds. Typically, no farther than the edge of an existing solar system. They generally settled for bringing a ship out of hyper *early*, rather than properly in the middle of nowhere.

Izuku hadn't had a week.

The window of opportunity for the somewhat complex operation he'd planned had been less than three days. Which was why he'd *needed* to bring a pair of Volition-class ships along. The Battlecruisers were big enough that, between them, they could tow a pair of asteroids that would equal the mass needed, *through hyper*. It wasn't easy, and it was another feat that required the help of the Force via a gestalt of him and the Iron Knights. But they'd pulled it off without losing either ship or destroying their drives. The engineers of the ships were pretty pissed at them, given the sheer amount of hours they'd taken off the hyperdrives lifespan, but such was an acceptable result if this worked out. It's not like the League didn't have a plush number of spares, at least for now.

The end result of their foray into a pirate-style ambush was them being able to drop a hyperspace shadow right in the middle of the hyperlane between two systems along the Shag Pabol trade route. Cruder than their future interdictors, the effort would still work to pull the convoy of heavy freighters that were bringing thousands of mercs along that route toward Diyu. Mercs that were intended to put down the revolt there with suitable ruthlessness.

A convoy of freighters that their Scouts had reported should be passing along the route any minute now.

All that remained was the waiting, hoping that their calculations about the amount of mass needed was right. There was always a chance, if these vessels belonged to smugglers, that they'd lowered the standard threshold of their safeties to ignore tricks like this. It wasn't uncommon for individual captains to do so, as it allowed them to plot tighter courses and avoid notice by skimming gravity hazards legitimate shipping would avoid. Something like two thirds of all 'smuggler's routes' the galaxy over consisted of exactly that sort of trick. Doing so also required *extremely* well-tuned drives, though. Which explained why so many of the galaxy's best mechanics could be found aboard smuggler's vessels or in shadow ports that specialized in doing the required modifications and frequent tune-ups.

Thankfully, it also wasn't likely their targets had the modifications in question. Smugglers used almost exclusively medium freighters and smaller for reasons closely related to the trick in question. The larger the ship, the harder it was to make a hyperdrive work as delicately and precisely as needed. Even more critically, the larger the *mass* of the ship, the more vulnerable to being disrupted it was. A fighter, assuming it had a hyperdrive, could actually ignore mass shadows far more easily than even a light freighter. There was even, apparently, a crazy Jedi on the Jedi Council who was capable of calculating jumps so precise that he could take his fighter *through* a planet via hyperspace.

Thankfully, that nut wasn't here, and the half dozen ships carrying their mercs were all bulk carriers. Ships that could carry hundreds or thousands of troops, plus all of their equipment. They were much too big to be attractive for smuggling modifications of the hyperspace skimming type as a result. Even here in Hutt Space, it was likely they would be vulnerable to this little tri...

"Emergence! Hyperspace emergence! Twelve degrees port, thirty-seven up! Ships...six heavy freighters, sir!"

Izuku had sensed them, via the light battle meditation he was maintaining...but he needn't have bothered. He'd already given orders when they'd set the trap, and those orders came into play now. The Defenders and Munifex II frigates he'd brought along had been carefully fanned out in a modified encirclement of the hyperspace trap, aiming to make sure wherever their potential prey came out, it would be under the guns of the ships.

Specifically, under the *Ion Cannons*.

Izuku hadn't brought only Munifexs along *just* because they were less capable than the new Siege-class. A ship which, despite barely being 50 meters larger than the Munifex, had been reclassified as a Cruiser now that the war college had started getting feedback from engagements. Instead, he'd brought the frigates along because they, unlike the Siege-class, were equipped with banks of ion cannon. Fourteen each, in total. Combined with the thirty ion cannons of the Volition-class, and the medium ion cannon of each Defender-class corvettes, aided by yet *more* ion canons from the H-7 bombers they'd deployed, they had a stupidly high density of the disabling weapons on hand.

The H-7s were the bomber class that had been developed for the League fleet based on Nubia's Scurrg H-6 plans, and two squadrons of them were the fastest to jump the new arrivals. In fact, the capital ships barely got a shot off before the squadrons of bombers had disabled the freighters. Ah well, it might have been a *little* overkill to bring all those ion cannon along. But there hadn't been any certainty of exactly where in real space the ships would drop out. Bringing so many had allowed him to make a net from which there had been no chance of escape. Now, he had some ships to take, prisoners to deal with...and some ships with completely legitimate Hutt IFFs to fill with own people.

Cam Syndulla, Captain of the Lylek Breakers, smirked in satisfaction as the space traffic controller for Diyu gave their ships landing clearance without any fuss. Why shouldn't they have, after all? They were a completely expected arrival of six heavy freighters carrying mercenaries to help put down the local slave revolt. They had, thanks to slicers from his own Lylek Breakers, a sub unit of the Shattered Shackle, pulled all of the proper clearance codes pulled from the freighters databanks. Scans undoubtedly showed the ships loaded with lots of people and weapons...but that was *exactly as expected* for this arrival, so why would that concern anyone? Signaling the other ships, he took them down on their assigned flight path, even as he keyed his comm to speak to the Alion Nova Guard Commander in the hold.

"Syndulla here, we've got clearance. As expected, we'll be landing at Fryall Spaceport, which is the primary mustering center for the efforts against the locals. The droid controlled trio of

suicide freighters will slam into the primary air defense for the city seconds after we land, so you'll have a window of total confusion to sweep the port. You already know your goals. My unit will be splitting off to link up with the locals, while the Echani move to take control of their own targets."

The response came promptly.

"Excellent. So far, your people are proving to be quite competent. It is a nice change of pace for the Nova Guard. I do hope it continues."

Cam rolled his eyes, but didn't take offense. He'd gotten a solid briefing on the Nova Guard when he'd been assigned to this operation. Militaristic culture. Tended to be genuinely shocked by the lack of military skill in most of their opponents. The commander was being nothing but honest about this being a pleasant change of pace for his people. Said people were also very, *very* good. Less famous than the Mandalorians, but apparently of pretty comparable in general skill as a culture. Between the surprise destruction of the defenses, the Nova Guard taking the port, and the Echani hopefully taking or destroying various command posts, there was a good chance they'd control the critical infrastructure of the city by nightfall.

It was only one city out of five on the planet, but it was the only one with a dedicated spaceport, and there were several thousand reinforcements ready to land and help them hold it once the ground emplacements had been silenced. Without those, the orbitals would fall easily to the small taskforce Admiral Midoriya had left to help insert the reinforcements and hold the system afterward. It was a little annoying that they were mostly getting more irregulars to keep grinding away at the planet afterward. But he understood the logistics at work. Diyu was an unexpected bonus, rather than a major strategic objective. So it would have to be taken mostly with allied units that were equally surplus to the original war plans.

He honestly approved of the move. Something he could say in general about his ultimate boss. He hadn't once regretted joining up with the Shackles after learning that they were connected to the same movement that had revitalized Ryloth. It was fulfilling work, even if it took him away from Eleni and little Hera too often. Better yet, between the *extremely* good pay that a Captain in the Shattered Shackles got and the solid pay Eleni herself got working a part time desk job back at the new Ryloth Shipyards, little Hera was going to grow up into a much better life than he'd once imagined was possible.

Shaking off the smile that thought brought to his face, Cam forced himself to focus on the job at hand. He couldn't give his little girl the best life if he disappeared from it, after all. So, time to make sure he and his came through the latest round of fighting with as few losses as possible. What was that pity quote the boss had said once? That they goal wasn't to die for your cause, but to make the other poor bastards die for theirs? Something like that, anyway...

Izuku had left one of his Volitions, along with two of the Munifexs and a suitable screen, back to support the operation on Diyu. Just like Ylesia, Diyu relied far more on ground emplacements than orbital defenses, and that combination would be more than adequate to sweep the remaining orbital defenses away so long as the initial ground combat went their way. He'd also, of course, left plenty of ground reinforcements to join the first wave down.

Three more clans worth of Wookiees, ones that had shown after the deal with Attichitcuk and had been willing to wait for him to return to Hutt Space to see where they'd best be put to use. Between them, they had another 2,300 some fighters. Added to that were a few smaller groups, such as a group of some 200 Barabel. That particular saurian species outright revered the Jedi Order, and considered the entire invasion of Hutt Space to obviously be a Jedi supported operation. Not...entirely wrong, in a way. Even if it was more about individual Jedi than the Order. Regardless, he'd managed to gather up just over 7,000 additional irregulars, then paired them with a single heavy battalion of League Army units.

That battalion would add muscle in the form of mechs and power armor, giving a solid show for the League in the efforts. But a single battalion was also cheap for the price if they could end up taking an heavy industrial planet with no more troop commitment than that, plus the irregulars and locals. Heck, even if they needed to be reinforced later, just gaining a solid foothold and capturing a single city would justify the move. It was a good use of the irregulars, while potentially being valuable in the long run if they could take even a fraction of the world's industrial facilities intact.

All of which *did* have a downside in that, by the time he reached Ylesia, his small detachment had been reduced to just the *Knight Errant* and a quartet of Munifex IIs for heavy capital ships. He'd retained a solid number of Defenders and ES-24Cs, both of which the fleet had no shortage of. Despite their need for ships, they were even still outright *selling* certain models of the Defender II. Corvettes were small enough to be built on planet, unlike larger classes of ship, so they'd been able to ramp of production of the model far beyond their ability to crew them. Likewise, between the new yards over Ryloth and the much-expanded Evolution Shipyards, they had a plentiful supply of the carrier variant of the ES design.

All of which meant that he *did* have enough combat power to take Ylesia. But he didn't have so much of it on hand that he could be ham-fisted about the attempt. Ylesia's defenses might have been built to see off raids, but the Hutts had considered that those raids might well include up to frigate weight craft. The planet had been a major spice processing plant for *millennia*, after all. Meaning its defenses had been designed in an era were raiders might have access to much heavier ships than you were likely to see in pirate hands these days. The fact that this portion of Hutt Space was *also* pretty near the border of Wild Space had only encouraged the Hutts to actually maintain the old defenses, sadly.

All in all, there wasn't anything on or over the planet that could match the *Knight Errant* itself. However, if he was stupid about this, he could well lose quite a few of his Defenders. Even, possibly, one or two of the Munifex IIs, as the frigates weren't nearly as tough as the designs created from scratch for the League. Since this was an extra expedition, outside their original operational planning, losing a significant amount of tonnage would make the fight not worth it. Which was, of course, why Izuku had dropped his remaining fleet out of hyper well short of the system to consult the Scouts he'd sent forward, feeling out the system in order to better craft a plan.

He blinked as a new notice popped up on the feeds coming from the system.

"Wait. What? Trotter, run that IFF that just hit the system down!"

His Lieutenant had already been acting, seeming as confused as Izuku himself was, but it still took almost two minutes to get a result. An extreme amount of time for a system as powerful as the Flag Bridge computers of the *Knight Errant*. When the result finally appeared and Trotter sent it to him, Izuku shook his head with a bit of incredulity. The result had come out of the copy of certain files Aayla had quietly pulled from the Jedi Order's archives. Specifically, from the archive of Jedi emergency transponders.

Every Jedi, or almost every Jedi, carried an emergency beacon that would let them alert other Jedi to their presence. The codes for the beacons were useless unless a Jedi turned their unique, highly-encrypted locator device on, but the encryptions were each utterly unique. They paired one-off keys that were never used for anything but single beacons with an exotic transmitter that wouldn't show up on most scanners. They also, notably, didn't have comm capability. The side-stepping of the normal broadcast band limited the amount of data they could send. Instead, they squeezed the most potent emergency beacon possible into a tiny device a Jedi could hide on, or even *in* their body. Then made sure that Jedi knew only to use it when they were *sure* they needed to. Aayla had only grabbed a fully database copy of existing keys on the idea that numerous Jedi might join in on their Hutt Space operations without bothering to make official contact unless something went tits up.

"Jedi Knight Ky Narec. Missing and presumed dead for nearly twenty years. So, either fled from the Order, became a wandering Jedi, or got stranded somewhere? The first isn't likely if he's retained his emergency beacon and turned it on at this juncture. Unless it's a trap, I suppose. We *are* pretty damn close to wild space, though. If he's been operating out there, its entirely possible for either the second or third options to be plausible."

Trotter cleared his throat, sounding suspicious as he added his own two credits.

"It *could* be a lure, sir. The Hutts could have killed him and kept his beacon. They know a lot of Jedi are working with us, so using it as a trap..."

Izuku shook his head.

"It isn't outright *impossible*, but it's pretty unlikely. Those beacons require a biometric check *and* the Force to activate, the combination is a good way to make sure the Jedi in question is still *alive*. It's remotely possible they had him in carbonite or something and pulled him out as bait. But it's probably less probable than him having fallen and setting the trap on his own. Which is, in and of itself, an unlikely outcome. Fallen Jedi tend not to have much self-control and end up getting caught after lashing out, high on the Dark Side and their own supposed 'power.'"

Izuku could feel his aide's doubt. That was fair enough, though. Trotter wasn't Force Sensitive, which meant talks of Light and Dark sides didn't mean much to him. Something only made worse by the fact he was an extremely logical, by-the-books oriented, soul. Speaking of the Force, though, Izuku reminded himself to not be silly and fell into a half-trance. He wasn't *too* surprised to feel the two Iron Knights and the Altisian Jedi he'd brought along already reaching out with the Force in a gesalt...and almost rolled his eyes as he felt a presence reaching back out from the Ylesia system.

Without the gestalt of the three Jedi in his small battle group, the outreaching presence wouldn't have managed to make contact. With the gestalt reaching back, Izuku could sense that the Jedi felt them. Only faintly, most likely. But there was a feeling of delight that came through clear enough from the return 'ping.' The man was *pleased* to have encountered other Jedi. Given that no warning, either from Ky Narec or the Force, came with the contact, he could probably dismiss the 'trap' idea. Falling back out of his own half-trance, Izuku thought for a moment, before addressing his aide again.

"Trotter, get me a comm to Knight Masana, then get the *Fortune's Son* and he crew prepped. I think it might be time for a little bit more subterfuge. It does seem to be the theme for this particular outing so far, after all."

His aide nodded and got on both tasks, even as Izuku flicked through a series of possible targets for the plan that was forming in his mind...

Callista Masana had not been a Jedi Knight for long. Even so, she fully understood why Admiral Midoriya had picked her to sneak down to the planet aboard the *Fortune's Son*. The ship itself was one of several Clandestine Ops ships that had been pulled in before the fighting to serve as a different type of scout. A smuggler-modified freighter, its undercover operations specialists had been operating it inside Hutt Space for years.

Occasionally, it helped move escaped slaves along. More often, it had just acted as a secure courier and intelligence gathered, taking 'legitimate' Hutt contracts and building up a reputation with the slugs. Even under the current circumstances, as they'd be bringing in a load of weapons the locals would be all over, they wouldn't draw attention. Doubly so as they'd taken advantage of the smuggler-modified hyperdrive to skirt around the system in hyperspace, in order to come back in form the Ziugen jump point on the far side of the system.

As for Callista, her job was to sneak in and make contact with the Jedi who was on the ground here. Admiral Midoriya's reasoning for sending *her* had been obvious and sensible. Specifically, Djinn Altis was a name that Ky Narec would most likely *know*. Given when he'd vanished, he likely wouldn't be aware that Master Altis was no longer part of the main Jedi Order, which was something she wouldn't be bringing up just yet. For the moment, she would be a friendly face who would be more familiar-seeming than either of the Iron Knights would have been. Particularly given that the whole Iron Knight thing had happened before Narec vanished. So he might not react to them overly well as a point of first contact.

It wasn't a deception she was overly happy about.

It was, however, one she more or less agreed with. Assuming Narec hadn't gone rogue himself, he would hopefully at least provide on-the-ground intel that might let the Commando Droid teams also sneaking on planet aboard ship take out some of the targets the big boss had selected. If Narec was actually up to causing a little chaos personally, then she and he might well be able to take out another such installation as well. If they could either take over, disable, or destroy just a few critical ground emplacements, then the potential losses among the fleet would

plummet. Either way, she knew Ylesia would be taken. But doing so with the smallest loss of life possible was a worthwhile goal...

Chapter 69: Conquering Paradise

As Izuku watched the local defenders scramble, he took note of something he hadn't really quite processed before, a fact that lanced a sort of dull shock through his system. Ylesia was gorgeous. In fact, it looked remarkably Earth-like to him, though he knew from his brief skim of the details regarding the world that it was somewhat more tropical than Earth had been. It was nevertheless somewhat hauntingly reminiscent of his original home...which created the shock as he realized that he'd somehow gotten *used* to not really paying attention to what planet he was landing on.

He hadn't even noticed the resemblance until this very moment, and there was a part of him that marveled at how completely he'd adjusted in the years since his arrival. Another part was, instead, rather melancholy for a long few moments. Melancholy that he'd barely thought of 'home' in years, and equally disappointed that much of the wonder that he'd first felt in visiting alien worlds had worn off. Not entirely, he supposed. The idea of just *exploring* for the sake of exploring quite appealed to him still, reminding him of the days after he'd first met Aayla. Still, part of that he knew was little more than nostalgia for a less complicated time. Maybe someday, the monumental task he'd picked up willingly would be over. He rather doubted it, though. This crazy thing he was doing was of the sort of scale that consumed both lives and life times with equal ease.

Leaning on the Jedi school of emotional focus for once, Izuku let the momentary distractions filter out into the Force, leaving him clear-headed enough to properly examine the defenses as they closed with the planet. Its defenders weren't eager to come out to meet him, and he didn't exactly blame them. The largest ships in the small swarm that had launched were a few large freighter conversions. Ships that scanned as heavily armed for their size, but weren't proper warships. Pocket corvettes, really. Not an atypical choice for Hutt worlds, and there was a solid half-dozen of them.

Combined with an entire wing of mixed starfighters, it was overkill enough for raiders that he was virtually certain it had already been 'reinforced' since the start of their little crusade. Likely less than half those fighters had originally been present, along with perhaps three or four of the pocket corvette freighter conversions. That, combined with the admittedly impressive ground emplacements around the two cities with proper spaceports, would have been more than enough to discourage raids. The rest of the planet had only wildly scattered settlements, mostly for slaves and kept deliberately low-tech as an easy countermeasure against revolts.

Roughly a quarter of the nearly 200 million population, the majority of the quarter not enslaved, lived in the two cities. Few slaves were allowed there, with the rest of the population being dispersed in those relatively primitive settlements, watched over by guards who had the only guns. Guns which were also the only defense against some admittedly rather dangerous wildlife, in places. That bit of planning had, in fact, kept his own people from attempting to create a slave revolt here. There was simply too little access between the spice processing slave settlements and the main

spaceports to facilitate it. Now, however, it was going to come back to bite the Hutt clan that owned the planet, as it meant Izuku really only needed to capture those two cities.

It was the larger and better defended city that his small fleet was burning toward now, which must be confusing for the locals. While they likely realized he could smash his way through the defenses if he had to, taking on the ones that would give him the most hurt first would likely seem an odd choice. The cities were on opposite sides of the planet, which meant that hitting the smaller and forcing the mobile defenders to try protecting it was the most logical approach. Hitting the larger city while those mobile elements still existed might actually given them some small smidgen of a chance to drive him off. The city even had a single large Ion Battery that could genuinely hurt the *Knight Errant*, after all.

Pity for them they didn't know that the ground assets they'd slipped in had decided to take refugee in audacity. Ah well, they'd be finding out shortly what that meant...

For the first time in a while, Callista had to admit that the Orthodox Jedi *might* have a point about some emotions being dangerous. Mostly because she could see the unholy glee she felt as she impatiently fiddled with her detonator being, potentially, *slightly* addictive. Who knew that the chance to blow up several million credits worth of spice, along with several hundred thousand credits work of weapons, was something that gave one a rush? The fact that they'd been able to arrange to vent the fumes from that spice *straight into the main mustering area*, was probably something that shouldn't have added to the glee.

That Asajj girl of Knight Narec's was a delightfully devious woman.

It was *probably* a bad sign that Callista found the idea of the entire garrison trying to fight an invasion high as fuck on the Hutts' own product funny as fuck.

Ah, well. The big boss *did* make sure they were all aware of the mental health services plan. She could talk to a councilor about this later to find out if she was a horrible person or not. For the moment, she simply did her best not to be *too* giggly about the idea as she watched the small terminal that showed the intentionally obvious approach of the *Knight Errant* and its escorts. The fleet was just about at the point she was supposed to trigger the surprises!

Right...

About...

NOW!

She flipped the cap off the detonator with a deft flick and jabbed down with her thumb. There was a tiny instant of delay as every explosive they'd prepared, much of it stolen from the Hutts' own stores, armed. Then there were a series of immense shakes, roars and visceral thumps as three critical weapons emplacements and a pair of spice warehouses just a *bit* too close to the spaceport went up in flames. Moments later, she smirked as a ding signaled that the Knight-Padawan pair that seemed entirely too gifted at makeshift chaos had done their own part.

The quick and dirty modification to the emergency venting systems in those warehouses would cause them to suck the spice fumes in and down into the tunnels connected to the spaceport's main landing fields. The tunnels normally being a high-security method of moving spice from the warehouses to the port. And the spaceport's landing fields *just so happened* to double as the mustering point for the local garrison. An obvious and logical choice, admittedly, since the port was the most likely place for raiders to be trying to put down assault craft. It was, perhaps, just a little bit of karmic justice that said landing fields were about to be flooded with enough burning spice to give a rancor a contact high!

Honestly, Callista was pretty sure she liked that Asajj girl. Maybe, if she could find herself a Padawan like *that*, she wouldn't be entirely against the idea of taking one...

Izuku's lips twitched, despite his desperate attempt to keep a straight face. The battle in space had very quickly turned against the locals when the primary defensive guns had exploded right before their task force came into range. The mobile defenses and a handful of smaller emplacements, ones that couldn't even reach out of atmosphere properly, hadn't been nearly enough to slow them down. Combined with his own Battle Meditation and the sheer surprise, they hadn't lost a single capital ship. Not even among the Defender IIs. They'd lost a handful of fighters, but even there only two of the fighters lost had possessed living pilots, and one of *them* had managed to eject and be picked up successfully. In total, in space they'd lost less than twenty people. One of their lowest casualty figures of a space battle since their crusade began.

Now, he was fighting outright laughter as he was informed of what had happened on the ground. The plan suggested by Knight Narec's Padawan had proven quite hilariously effective. Something like sixty percent of the total mercenary defenders of the city had been caught up in the smoke pouring out onto the landing fields they were using as a muster point. Ninety plus percent of those caught had, in turn, ended up so stoned out of their minds that they hadn't fought back against the droid-and-power-armor troops that had landed to secure them. There *had* been a few deaths from overdose. But, honestly, compared to how many defenders would have died in a traditional battle? It was a tiny body count even for the enemy.

Better yet, the fact that the assault team hadn't even needed to *slow* to get into the city proper had meant that they'd caught the remaining defenders off guard. There had been shockingly little proper fighting, most of the mercs surrendering outright when power armor they weren't ready for swarmed out of the spaceport. There *had* been a solid amount of shooting involved in taking the only Hutt currently on world, and Izuku wasn't particularly sad that said Hutt had become a casualty of the limited fighting.

He suspected it hadn't exactly been an accident. But he wasn't going to look too closely, given they'd found a torture chamber that this particular Hutt liked using for 'misbehaving slaves.' At least it wasn't a Rancor Pit. Hutts had a disturbing fetish of some kind for feeding sentients to rancors or other predators. Seriously, almost the whole species were sociopathic. He was, at least, glad it wasn't *truly* universal. Hopefully those Hutts he'd found and sent Fay's way would prove it was their culture that was the problem, not the species itself.

Honestly, Besadrii City had been taken far more easily than he'd anticipated. They might have a bit more trouble with the smaller city, forewarned as it now was. But its defenses weren't up to holding his ground forces back, particularly with his fighter wings now in control of the planet's airspace. As there weren't any Hutts there, it was quite likely the locals might even surrender outright. Of course, that presented its own problem of what to do with the prisoners. Which was increasingly becoming a logistics issue for their own forces.

Hmmm...on second thought, taking Ylesia might just have been a more important step than he'd originally thought. All those slave settlements, once empty of slaves, could easily house some of the PoWs that were starting to become a logistics issue for the League. For that matter...Ryll, at least, had completely legitimate medical uses and they now had excellent relations with Ryloth. A few modifications to make the refineries here a bit less ethically dubious and a bit more suited for medical spice processing, and the PoWs could be made to pay for themselves.

Izuku worried over that thought for a moment. It was...potentially a slippery slope. On the other hand, they did have some outsiders demanding to see how PoWs were going to be treated. Having observers on hand that *would* call them out might help keep that slope from being a dangerous one. Shaking his head, he decided it also wasn't a decision he needed to make personally. He'd kick the idea over to the Liberation Council and let them make themselves useful by sorting out the possible ethical and moral ramifications.

For now, he had the remainder of a planet to secure...

Chapter 70: A Moment in Paradise

—Planet of Ylesia—

Izuku hummed in pleasure as Aayla leaned into his side.

They'd had to act vaguely professional when meeting aboard the *Knight Errant* again, after entirely too long apart. After a few stolen kisses in an elevator, they'd had to dive right into a professional debrief for his personas as both Admiral Midoriya and Sovereign of the Liberty Council.

That last title was one that hadn't been used much, and Izuku wasn't entirely happy about it. They'd wanted to firmly steer away from 'Chancellor' for obvious reasons of comparison to the Republic, of course. His own suggestions of 'President' and 'Prime Minister' had been shot down as inaccurate, however.

Strictly speaking, his role wasn't yet an elected one. Some day it would be, and the mechanisms were in place for when that distant day came to be. But currently such was not the case. Effectively, he was far closer to a King or autocrat, even if one with strict limits on certain actions. Given their goals, however, 'King' was also a descriptor to avoid. So, Sovereign it was, at least for now, and Aayla had needed to give a report to *that* persona as well as to his military one.

Now, however, those irritatingly justified hours of professionalism were behind them, and Izuku had arranged a proper escape for them. It had been several days since the capture of Ylesia, more than long enough for the fighting to have already ended. Without any additional actual Hutts

on planet, it had been relatively easy to get the second city of Retchukka to surrender with minimal fighting, and they'd moved on to processing both prisoners and slaves. Izuku wasn't needed for that effort, and Asora had firmly pushed him away from working to have a day off with his lady. Thus it was that they'd taken a speeder out to a remote island on the tropical world, one with no record of having ever been populated by anyone.

Aside from a handful of Mei-designed bodyguard droids that were holding a perimeter against potential interruptions from wildlife or assassins, the two of them were entirely alone. Which, of course, was why Aayla was entirely naked as she leaned against him, with both of them resting on a gorgeously pristine stretch of beach. A bit of Force use had kept any wildlife in the waters away as they splashed and played in the surf, then then two of them had enjoyed a very nice picnic meal on the sands. Well, on a large blanket, at least. Sand got everywhere and wasn't a friend to naked people, so they'd taken appropriate precautions.

Of course, Izuku also had some *other* preparations that they hadn't gotten to yet. They'd certain been 'hands on' while playing in the surf. But they hadn't yet properly reunited in certain ways that both were anticipating. Frankly, just basking in each other's presence had been more important to both of them at first, but the time spent frolicking and snacking in the nude had certainly set a certain mood. One that he was fully prepared to follow through on. Grinning wickedly, he reached out with the Force to the 'picnic basket,' really a high-tech food preservation unit, and unlatched the much cooler 'dessert compartment' at the bottom of the container. There, he laid his mental hands on something he'd searched out an equivalent for in the galaxy.

Whipped cream.

Specifically, the canned variety that you could apply in fun ways.

-Lemon Starts Here-

Aayla stirred from her half-doze at the feel of aroused mischief coming from him, not protesting even a little as he shifted his shoulder out from under her. Even not knowing what he had planned, she could sense the general direction of where this was going, a spike of eager arousal shooting through her as he shifted to straddle her. He pinned her in place with his weight on her stomach, quickly capturing her hands to lift them over her head. Leaning in, he engaged her in a slow kiss that left her moaning and squirming. Not trying to escape, of course, she very much enjoyed being right where she was. But clearly wanting *more*.

Freeing one hand while keeping Aayla's wrists captured with the other, Izuku caught the can of SwiftWhip that had been floating toward them. The stuff wasn't *quite* the same as what he remembered from Earth, being a light purple rather than white, and tasting a bit more like agave nectar than sugar. Still, it was textured about the same as whipped cream, and a nice sweet treat overall. Just as importantly for his initial plans to surprise her, it actually came out a bit *colder* than the Earth variant. Which came into play when he managed to pop off the lid and bring the dispenser tip to one of his lover's nipples without her noticing, thoroughly distracted by the ongoing kiss.

Grinning, he pulled away from that kiss just in time to depress the nozzle, drawing a foaming line of cold, purple whipped treat around her left nipple. Aayla gasped in an indescribable mix of pleasure and shock, back reflexively arching as she instinctively tried to escape the cold. Given how

strong she was, had Izuku not pressed them both down just a bit with the Force, she might have outright bucked him off. As it was, he managed to ride her reaction out, then throw her already scrambling mind into overload by shifting down to suck the treat off, exchanging cold shock for warm pleasure. Aayla moaned, and he grinned around her nipple as he took advantage of that moan to spray a small amount of the treat into her mouth. The startled cry at that quickly turned to surprised delight at the sweet taste, even as he kept up the assault by moving the can to her other nipple.

He assaulted that one just as he had the first, Aayla shuddering in pleasure at the alternating cold and heat as he repeated his earlier pattern. Exchanging his physical grip of her wrists for a telekinetic hold a moment later, he started working his way down her body, applying alternating cold and heat to every sensitive spot he'd found on his lover over the years they'd been together. By the time he caused her to practically howl by spraying the cold dessert over her most sensitive bits, she was half-incoherently begging to cum. Grinning, he refused to oblige her just yet, keeping his attention light enough to edge her as he nibbled and licked away the treat.

Smirking at her babbling pleas, he pulled another item from their things, then surprised her by rapidly shifting, swapping their positions with her ending up dazed and disoriented as she straddled his body. Her disorientation lasted long enough to snap the handcuffs he'd retrieved with the Force around her wrists, trapping her hands and arms behind her back. She jerked at the sound of the lock closing, tugging instinctively at the cuffs. He reached up to flick a nipple, drawing her attention even as he used the can of SwiftWhip to draw a line around his own nipple. Sure, they weren't all that sensitive, but there was a point to be made here.

"Now, now. I wouldn't be fair for only *me* to have dessert. Or only you to have *fun*~. Be a good girl and lick up all the treats and I'll finish up your own happy ending, hmmm?"

A flash of understanding lit Aayla's eyes, and enough thoughts had returned to her fuzzy head to find her voice, playing into the game.

"Of course, Master~. Let your Good Girl have her treats too..."

He might not have gotten as much out of it as his lover as he drew lines with the cold treat for her to lick off his body, but Izuku couldn't and wouldn't pretend that the way she wiggled and squirmed as she went to work wasn't a delight. She intentionally made it as much of a show as possible, twice even going so far as to use her boobs to massage the lines of cream into a mess before cleaning up. Getting an idea from that, Izuku shifted his original plan and flipped them again once it was time for her to go below his waist.

Instead of just encouraging a messy blowjob, he straddled Aayla's chest and grinned. She wasn't quite as *top heavy* as Mei, but she was more than big enough for what he had in mind. He drew a thick line of whipped treat between her breasts...then slapped his throbbing erection down between them. Discarding the can, he used both hands to fold her breasts around his cock and began to slowly thrust. Happily getting into the act, Aayla opened her mouth, extending her slightly-longer-than-human tongue to swirl and scoop, collecting as much of the 'treat' as she could with each thrust. Izuku groaned, knowing he wouldn't last long as this rate. Only keeping it up for a minute or so, he eventually decided enough was enough.

One last flip, this time using the Force, had Aayla face and tits down on the blanket, ass in air. A quick adjustment and he plunged home in her welcoming pussy, drawing desperate sounds from both of them as they fully connected after far too long apart. Trying to hold out as long as he could, he didn't hold back, pounding hard and fast as he could, with Aayla rapidly coming unglued under him. He didn't *quite* make it, cumming hard before his lover, but the pulses of deep heat and the extra-hard slam as he buried himself deep set her off only an instant after him. They both shuddered through their release...then gasped in synch as Izuku used the Force to revitalize himself and started thrusting all over again, albeit at a more sedate pace.

One wasn't nearly enough after such a separation, after all...

-Lemon Continues-

Aayla blinked in surprise as she held the small box in her hand. After *just* three rounds, the two of them had cleaned off, Izuku grinningly assuring her they weren't done yet as she tried to pull him into round four. A quick dip in the ocean had rid them of the sticky leftovers for the most part, and Izuku had made sure to keep the fires stoked a bit as they played grab ass while getting the rest of the way clean with some towels and sanitizer.

Then, he'd produced the clamshell container in Aayla's hands. One he hadn't told her about yet.

"She did *what*?"

There was a mix of awe, confusion, disbelief, and arousal radiating off his lover as she stared at the box. The *familiar* box that Izuku had first encountered when he'd made his most recent visit to Mei. One he'd opened several times since then, mostly just to tease the contents, and only twice to 'use' it. He *was* technically supposed to be *lightly* disciplining Mei, after all. Even if in a way that was fun for both of them.

"She figured out how to make quantum portals just so she could turn herself into a, and this is a direct quote, 'a remote access sex toy for our long distance relationship.'"

Aayla let out an incredulous laugh, even as her arousal spiked a bit at the implications.

"So, she's currently..."

"Stuck in a chastity belt, while the only access to her pussy is in a box a hundred lightyears away, currently in your hands? Yep."

Aayla caressed the box, then grinned.

"Okay, that's fucking hot, and I *want one* the next time we're forced to separate! Even if, maybe, one with a few more safety steps and limitations..."

Izuku chuckled, even as Aayla raised the box to get a retinal scan. He'd already informed her that it was keyed to both of them, though this was the first chance to test it for Aayla. Sure enough, it clicked open without protest, and Aayla pried the clamshell open to *stare* at the interior. There, neatly framed and highlighted by the glow of the portal just as it had been when Izuku first

saw it, was Mei's pussy. The box and belt combo had been well thought through to include grooming and hygiene. Leaving the girl's weeping slit hairless and ready for action.

Izuku hadn't let her change the settings much. Somewhat which mean, even aside from his own teasing, the toys inside had been periodically 'rewarding' her. Usually without letting her actually cum. He'd only had her adjust the programming so that it rewarded her more for *finishing* projects and hitting *major* milestones instead of just making general progress. It only let her actually cum when she *did* hit a major milestone, as determined by her assistant who Izuku had press ganged into writing the milestones up. Of course, he'd also insisted on a lockout mode that she could turn on if she was doing anything dangerous. But the fact that it had opened just now meant she wasn't.

What she *was*, was pretty clearly aroused. Izuku grinned and handed a certain can of sweet treat to Aayla as she stared at Mei's portaled pussy. She blinked, then grinned back at him a little wickedly as she took it and aimed. A moment later, she'd almost certainly made Mei jump a meter wherever she was as she drew a cold line of SwiftWhip over Mei's most sensitive bits...then leaned in to lick it clean with slow deliberation.

There was always room for more dessert, after all. Besides, it wasn't fair that only Aayla and Izuku got to cum their brains out tonight. Mei was part of the relationship too, and she'd so thoughtfully made one of her most important bits accessible for the fun...

-Lemon Ends Here-

Izuku and Aayla were, sadly, back to work the next morning. For their own sanity, it hadn't been hard to justify their little moment in paradise together. They'd been separated for weeks, under both the stress of combat and the stress of leadership, and they'd needed the day and night together to bleed some of it off. No one had even questioned that, given that the two of them had been driving hard from Day 1 of the invasion, whereas most of their minions had gotten at least *some* level of recreation time as part of regular rotation to keep morale high and troops sane.

Thankfully, even if they could have wished for another day of fun, the one day they *had* gotten had done them quite a bit of good. Aayla had particularly enjoyed remotely toying with Mei, once she'd gotten over the complete ridiculousness of what the girl had made as a 'long distance relationship aid.' Refreshed somewhat, they'd both returned to the *Knight Errant*, with Aayla's own temporary flagship having been sent off to join Admiral Lin. Unlike Izuku, Aayla had never been intended to remain as an independent fleet commander. With more and more of their captains and their handful of commadores accruing the experience needed to lead fleet detachments, she was now back where she felt she could do the most good.

That being, of course, helping Izuku ride the thrashing, wild rancor that they'd created with what was now being officially called either the Freedom Crusade or the Hutt Crusade. The former by the League, the latter by some elements of the Republic. That both shared the term Crusade was a quiet admittance that such was what they had started, even if the term often came with potentially dangerous connotations. Owning it to a certain extent had been deemed the less

damaging option, so a Crusade it officially was. Officially, a Crusade targeting the slave and illegal spice trades.

“Admiral Lin is still sounding a bit like she wants to kiss you, Izu. Ziugen was half under our control from a rebellion there already, and Poytta folded without a fight. Now that she has control of the Outland Transit Station, we control every major entrance into Southern Hutt Space. Since their extra-Hutt Space holdings were always more toward galactic south and west, that means they are going to have to go the long way around with more mercenary armies and fleets. At least, if they don’t want to take our garrisons and fleets on directly.”

Izuku nodded, even if his lips twitched a bit at the colorful way Aayla put it. Admiral Lin had been ecstatic at his actions. She’d diverted down from working her way along The Dead Road hyperlane after she’d been told about his capture of Diyu and Ylesia. She’d managed to take Varl and M’Hanna, but had run into a nasty surprise at Tisht that had slowed her down. The world was one of the few outside Boota Hutta that you couldn’t visit without explicit permission from the Hutts, and they’d discovered why when Admiral Lin had run face-first into a Dark Jedi. A *Hutt* Dark Jedi.

Currently, they had the system under quarantine, but were going to need a serious strike force to go in after Beldorion the Hutt. There was some sort of Force amplification that was happening on the planet that had allowed the centuries old Dark Jedi to crush a Siege-class cruiser that had gotten too close to the planet. Admiral Lin might have simply gone around the world. The Hutts had apparently been shooting down anything that tried to come *out* of the system for years, meaning the Darksider didn’t have a lot to work with in the way of ships.

Before she could, though, word of Izuku’s progress had caused her to reroute. Unknown to anyone, save the Hutts themselves, there had been was an old little-used hyperlane between Tisht and Poytta. Something she’d discovered when they’d vacuumed data from the Hutt Patrol ships that they’d smashed before even realizing why they were there. Using that data, Admiral Lin had cut down toward galactic south and forced the refueling stations at Poytta to surrender, before linking up with Izuku’s ships and moving on to Ziugen and the Outland Transit Station.

The Transit Station was in rough shape, having been heavily damaged in a fight between the bounty hunters Montross and Jango Fett shortly before the invasion of Naboo. But it was *functional*, and had been built with an eye to guarding the hyperlane into Hutt Space. Repair and upgrade was already underway, and would shortly be able to turn the station into a fortress that could shut down any attempts to enter Hutt Space from that vector. If Admiral Rin could successfully finish her original job and capture Saqqar and Nar Haaska, the Hutts would be virtually cut off from external help in the eastern half of their holdings.

There was still one route from the east, via the Kessel Run or Zerm into Ulmatra, but that route was the single least attractive way to enter Hutt Space. The Kessel Run was dangerous as hell because of the Maw, and Zerm had absolutely horrific weather that made it just shy of a death world and thus not exactly an attractive stop off point into Hutt Space. Given no other choice, the Hutts would obviously use it, and Ulmatra itself wouldn’t be an easy world to take as thin as they were starting to be stretched. In fact, Admiral Lin was leery of even trying for the moment. But with the Hutts reduced to that risky route for the galactic east, it was most likely they’d simply start

trying to break through from the Republic side on the galactic west. Or through contested corridors with unfriendly neighbors to their southeast.

Both of which were where most of their mercenary fleets were gathering anyway. Dangerous, but holding what they now did, they could potentially eliminate two of the possible fronts. They'd still be facing the need to contain Boota Hutta and fight off incursion from the holdings the Hutts still held to the west. But they were *almost* in a sustainable position for the slugging match that was sure to come. A better position than they'd hoped for, to be honest.

Hopefully, it would be enough...

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