

Ante Up

[Voice Workshop] Fiction: Catalyst

Nejj Ithurinos

The cantina was crowded, to say the least, but that was to be expected. No one came to Zeltrons without a reason. For most, that reason was to escape their lives off-world. They came to drink, stim, and countless other indulgences. Mostly, visitors came to forget.

All of that, Zeltrons could provide.

For those who lived there, however, things could take on a different spin. When all you've known is 'paradise', how can you truly enjoy it? Where is the comparison to be drawn? It's just the way of things. And, if you're not careful, you can become numb to it. Bored, even. That was how things had progressed for Nejj. He had grown tired of the hedonism, but lacked an alternative. The other Ithurinos children didn't understand him in that regard. They lived for the culture of their homeworld. That thought brought a smirk to Nejj's young face and a quick scoff as he looked across the sabacc table.

Of course the others enjoyed it. Nejj was the youngest and had been subjected to parents who—while loving—just lacked a certain level of care after five prior offspring. Growing up with three older sisters and two older brothers, making him lucky number six, he had the joy of playing to the whims of everyone else. Not that he had much to complain about, seeing as their inclinations were always fun. But what of it had been his? Nejj never got to pick his path. He just followed the one laid out for him.

"I call," came a voice from his right, interrupting the lavender-haired boy's thoughts.

Ithurinos straightened in his seat and quickly glanced around the table. His golden eyes quickly took stock of the situation. As he had hoped, the Kubaz across from him had already folded and was busying itself with a heated conversation—all clicks and whistles instead of anything resembling basic. They were the worst to play against, covered head to two with an elongated snout-like mask. How was he supposed to read their tells? He hadn't been nearly as lucky with the player to his right. Nejj sighed and licked his bottom lip from side to side as he stared down the human.

The man could only be described as squirrely. He was thin to the point of almost sickly with a messy beard and rounded glasses. Tape wrapped around one of the arms of the lenses just before reaching his ear. His hair was greasy and his clothing loose, even ragged, but there was something there. Nejj narrowed his eyes and continued to stare the man down. The human didn't back down, and that's when Nejj realized what he saw staring back at him. Despite all appearances to the contrary, this man was confident. That single fact reframed what was a dishevelled, almost poor appearance into one where the man just didn't care to prove himself to others in such a way.

Interesting.

Nejj broke off and lifted the corners of his cards, taking stock of them. Some quick mental arithmetic laid out his odds of success. They were good, but not great. Great would have been, well, great. He could play it safe...or play the long game. Nejj made a show of his humming and hawing, putting on a careless grin and confidently raising the pot. Not too much, but enough to make him seem confident. "I raise," he stated with the clacking of falling credit chip greeting each word.

A quick fold came from the Zeltron's left. It was a Bothan and—by the way its gaze kept flicking to another Bothan far across the room—was probably a cheat. That meant the remaining players had decent hands. A fair play, if you didn't get caught. That brought it back to the human. He scoffed and met the ante. There was no further need to raise, so both players laid out their cards. Nejj looked down at his hand, both were Staves. One was a ten while the other was a Commander. That made twenty-two. His smile dropped when his gaze shifted to see the other man's Pure Sabacc sitting on the table.

"The pot's mine," the human stated with a smirk, pulling in the pile.

Nejj shrugged, an exaggerated move that made him look more deflated than he actually was. "So it is. Who's still in?"

A series of acknowledgements came from the Bothan and Kubaz, with the human simply tossing more chips into the pile. That was cool with Nejj. Meant his plan could keep going, just as the drinks kept flowing. And so the pile grew, until they came to a Sabacc Shift. That meant it was luck that would determine the outcome. Lovely.

"I raise," the human declared confidently once more, tossing the majority of his chips into the ante.

Nejj glanced up from his cards, face carefully controlled. He tried his best to read the human, but he was the same as ever. With the suits and values in their hand having been randomized, every conclusion was a risky one. Still, he wasn't going to back down from a bully play. "I also raise," Nejj replied, putting everything he had into the pot. "Hm, looks like I'm all in."

That brought two quick folds from the others at the table. Fair enough. But, when it came back to the human, Nejj watched as the man simply stared at the pot. He didn't have enough chips in play to meet what Nejj had tossed in, but he could always bring in something else to spice it up. That, or he could fold. That would be nice too.

Nejj resigned himself to waiting as he turned to enjoy his beverage, halfway through a sip when a loud thud landed on the table. "I call," the human declared.

"What," Nejj managed as he swallowed, "is that?"

The human rapped his fingers across the top of the travelling case he had placed in the center of the table, a smile of pride spreading on his lips. "These are my complete works. Everything I've managed to collect in my studies. You're gonna have to take my word for it, kid, but what I got in here is damn near priceless. Once we're done celebrating here, we're off to the core worlds to get it published."

That caused Nejj to bite his lip a little in frustration. If the man was speaking honestly, he had to be either insane or holding the best hand possible. It was a risk. With a sigh, Nejj's eyes traced the table and took stock of just how many glasses of liquid courage the man had ingested. A few too many, the Zeltron suspected. He weighed his options, looking at the substantial pot. What was the worst that would happen if he lost? The Ithurinos owned the establishment, so it was not like he was going to be in a bad way with a loss...but something about that box had piqued the young man's curiosity. That pushed the scales no matter the cost.

"Alright, let's see what you got."

The human smiled and laid out his cards one at a time, taking it slow. "A pure sabacc."

The table grew quiet as the others looked from the cards to Nejj, trying to gauge his reaction. So, Nejj gave them one. His shoulders sagged and he let out a groan, rolling his head back. "Really? A pure hand? Off a shift?!" The human nodded with a chuckle, no doubt equally shocked by his luck. "Man, it would really suck if I had an Idiot's Array."

That made the man go completely still.

"Well, suck for you, I mean," Nejj continued, tossing down a hand that was just that. The others that had gathered to watch broke out into a din of excitement with more than a few trying to calculate the odds of what had just played out.

As Nejj stretched across the table to drag in his winnings, the human reached out and gripped his arm tightly. "You can't," he managed, all former confidence gone. There was a desperate quality to his words as he pleaded with Nejj.

Too bad Nejj didn't care.

"Actually, I can. Well, I did. Just now. I won. Sorry, champ."

"You can't," he tried again, weaker than the first.

"This is my place you're in, off-worldeer, and you made the bet. Don't ante what you can't do without. That's like the most basic rule of gambling. Now, hands off before I have to call the staff." Nejj stared the man down, his brow furrowed in anger.

It took another few heartbeats, but the man did finally release his hold. Nejj's expression shifted in an instant as he signalled for one of waiters to collect his pot. "Bored now, hope you all enjoy your stay on Zeltros!" Nejj announced with an exaggerated smile. He gave a showy bow before taking his leave, bringing the travelling case with him. The Zeltron gave one look over his shoulder as he went, seeing the human still locked in the same pose, dejection hanging over him like a cloud.

Oh well, wasn't his problem.

Nejj whistled to himself as he slipped into the back rooms of the cantina and found his way to his bunk. The whistling turned to humming as he hopped onto the mattress and turned his focus towards the case. He inspected the seams of it, as if suspicious it might blow up. Still, he kept his face oh so close as he slowly cracked it open and found...a bunch of journals and scraps of paper with a datapad on top. "The frack? This is worthless," he whined in disappointment. "Why was he so upset?"

The Zeltron tapped his foot and began delving through the case, tossing page after page aside. "Datapad might be worth *something*," he mused. Then, Nejj paused. At the bottom of the case was a much thicker volume than any of the others. Emblazoned upon it was a large symbol, not unlike a winged half-circle with spiking lines leading up from the center. As Nejj traced the symbol with his fingertip he felt something. A spark tingling up his spine. With it came curiosity and he carefully pried it open, his gold eyes flicking across the pages.

"Priceless, huh? Guess so."