**Chapter Fifteen**

When they’d arrived back at Delle, it’d felt like it’d be *months*, when it had barely been one. The blue and orange sphere popped into existence as the stars contracted from streaks to bright points, the bridge crew busy at work.

“We’ve been hailed, forwarding codes and reports,” one of the officers announced, the others monitoring the situation. “Planetary Defense Force is requesting to speak with you, General.”

“Put them through,” Er’izma commanded, turning to look at the holoprojector.

The image of a uniformed man, older, with a shaved head but full white beard appeared. “What is the meaning of this? Who are you?”

“General Er’izma, of the 7th Judiciary Legion of the Republic. We’ve apprehended some pirates, and wish to turn them over, as well as unload confiscated goods,” he stated with a smile.

“Then those ships are captured?” Jorel’s Master nodded at the PDF commander’s question. “Then we’ll be accepting them.”

The Jedi smiled, though there was no good humor in it. “We’ll be sure to consider your offer, Admiral Tanau,” he noted, tone durasteel-hard.

“They're targeting our ships,” one of the crew announced.

“I don’t think you understand,” the general replied. “We will accept your captured ships, or you are obviously the pirates you appear to be. Power down and prepare to be boarded.”

Erizma nodded, casually unhooking his lightsaber, and activating his blade. “You may *try.*”

The communication was cut, and Er’izma turned to his crew. “Mass broadcast our credentials, and our status. Then prepare for combat.”

“But. . . we’re with the *Republic*,” Jorel stated. This should’ve been a routine hello, even if strained, but was going horribly wrong.

“And general Tau is in league with the very pirates in our brig,” his master replied. “Do not worry Padawan, this was not unplanned, and things are not as dire as they appear.

He stared at the display, as the planetary defense force ships started to move, only to slow down, one after another, weapons powering down. The capital ship was the last one to do so, and, moments later, the comms officer announced, “We’re being hailed again, sir.”

Er’izma nodded as he looked back to the holo-terminal where a different man, in a uniform that was about two-thirds as fancy as the last one, appeared. “Our *deepest* apologies, Master Jedi. Please move to the coordinates we’re sending. Would you like us to send shuttles to remove the prisoners, or would you prefer to drop them off directly into holding?”

The Jedi Knight smiled, and this one was warm, as he holstered his saber. “We’ll deliver them to you directly. And what of Mr. Tanau?”

“Arrested, sir. We don’t kill Jedi, sir,” the man replied firmly. “Some of us remember the last time you came through, sir, and know you’re who you claim to be. Thank you for your service, sir.”

“It is my duty to assist,” Er’izma noted. “We’ll move there now.”

The connection was cut, and Jorel had to look to his master. “That was planned?” The implied, *why didn’t you tell me* was pretty clear.

“It was one of several plans,” the older man noted, “Only a fifth of them would involve fighting. And even with skeleton crews, we would have been able to rout Delle’s PDF fairly easily. You will find things are often weakened by laziness, politics, and sometimes, outright corruption, in the case of Mr. Tanau. Against a unified force they lose. Against a unified force of approximately equal strength, they lose *badly.*”

With that menacing statement hanging in the air, the holo-terminal flickered as another connection was established, a harried looking woman appearing. “Master Jedi, I didn’t expect you to return so soon, or with so much. . . *product.*”

Jorel was confused, until he remembered her agreement to buy everything they brought back at market price. His master replied smoothly, with none of the hardness he’d had a moment ago, “Oh, I understand your worry, madam. Our efforts were unexpectedly fortuitous, so shall we say, eighty percent market price, seventy for the ships? We’ll be around for three weeks, so you can arrange for buyers at a more. . . *reasonable* pace.”

Relief blossomed across the woman’s face, and, as she considered his offer, a gleam of greed crept into her eyes as she smiled. “Oh, I’m *sure* I can find someone who would be willing to purchase from someone of your *esteemed* station. Send me the databases, and we’ll get started.”

“I will,” he promised, the call ending, and turning to Jorel. “Now, I believe it’s time for more of your favorite activity. *Paperwork.*”

The padawan froze. “What.”

“You heard her,” the sadistic Jedi prodded. “She’ll need an accounting of *every* weapon, *every* trade good, *every* valuable, *every single thing* we recovered. That shouldn’t take *too* long now, should it?”

Jorel felt his stomach sink. “No Master, I’ll go get started,” he sighed, wondering what he’d done to deserve this fate. A lieutenant walked over, handing him a datapad, which would undoubtably hold the files he’d need to collate.

Looking at it, there was a prompt which only asked if he wanted to send the document.

“Master?” he asked, confused, glancing over as a few of the bridge crew sniggered.

“Go ahead,” his Master instructed. Jorel, looking skeptical, pressed the send button. It took a few moments to process, and then it was done. “Very good, that’s the paperwork done.”

The same lieutenant took the datapad, attempting not to laugh, several of the others not even trying.

“*Master?*” Jorel repeated.

“I believe you requested to know why we were spending so long cataloging everything?” the Jedi Knight noted. “*This* is why, so we don’t need to do so *every* time we move things. Now, take the rest of the day off. You’ll learn how to do *this,*” he waved at the planet, “with time, but for now *I’ll* be dealing with the negotiations. I do believe *you’ve* earned yourself some shore leave. That said, you *will* be taking Sergeant Hisku’biatha’pusi with you, and you *will* be with her at all times. Understood?”

Given what had happened the last time he’d slipped away from her, all he could do was nod, pointedly ignoring Sergeant Hisku’s pointed stare.

<SWPP>

It wasn’t until the next afternoon that he boarded the shuttle to go planetside, along with Sergeant Hisku and two dozen other crewmen. The shuttles the *Dove* used were, just like the fighters, custom built, and with purple accents. More like flying tanks than the graceful personnel carriers he’d trained on in the simulators at the Temple, they were armored, and, like the fighters, were *fast,* but lacked more than token weapons, and had no viewports at all.

The delay in going down had been due to the need to set up local accommodations, as each of the crew would get three days off, with rooms set up for them in a pair of local hotels. Jorel *had* helped sat that up, if only to have something to do, and in doing so had learned how to avoid some of the traps that could be set up by someone ‘helping’ with the paperwork, and thus hiding extra charges. Even with the Lieutenant in charge of it all telling him it wasn’t malicious, more akin to a standard ‘if you fall for this you deserve to lose money’ move, he’d felt it was wrong. He had, however, understood why *they* shouldn’t then feel bad for countering with a push for discounted rates, additional privileges, and the like for the large amount of rooms they were ‘requisitioning’. Requests which, due to negotiating, referencing local laws and customs, and once asking the General to off-handedly mention one of the *other* hotels in the area, were all quickly agreed to.

Now though, for the first time since he’d gone to get his lightsaber crystal, he was going to be setting down on another world. The Pirate asteroid didn’t count. He tamped down on the childish excitement he was feeling, but also on the underlying sense of *unease*. The last trip he’d been on before becoming a Padawan had gone. . . *badly,* really the return from it, but their shuttle wouldn’t be passing, on its own, through supposedly hidden hyperlanes, but just to and from the surface, with a ship larger than *any* other in orbit there, watching them.

But feelings so rarely cared about facts.

Looking around, his command of Mental Shielding only able to do so much to help him ignore his feelings, he tried to find something to distract himself. The other crewman were a mix of rowdy, excited like he was, and calmly satisfied, and were a mix of races, a third sporting the same blue skin and red eyes as his attaché. Sergeant Hisku, in uniform and with her sword, jogged over to the loading ramp, nodding to him as she took position next to him. “Padawan Jorel,” she nodded. “Do you have any plans I should be aware of when we set down?”

He paused, thinking, but shook his head. “No.”

She looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “Do you have any plans you don’t think I should be aware of?”

He shook his head again, smiling this time. “No.”

“How many planets have you been on?” she questioned, dancing around whatever it was she obviously *really* wanted to ask.

“Three,” he smiled. “Kuat, Coruscant, and Ilium.”

Sergeant Hisku frowned, “Kuat? The driveyards?”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “My mother’s a project manager for the shipyards, and my Father is her assistant.” His smile dimmed a bit, as he thought for them again for the first time in close to a year. He’d considered leaving the order, better to try and find them then work in the *dirt,* but now he wouldn’t need to. “At least, they were twelve years ago.”

He hadn’t looked them up, afraid of what he’d find. It hadn’t been a Jedi-like emotion, but, well, that was part of the problem, wasn’t it? Well, he was a Padawan now, and had to look forward. Maybe he’d try to look them up, but later. Maybe, with Er’izma’s permission, he could send them a message. He’d been told he couldn’t at the Temple, but, well, Knight Er’izma was nothing like the Temple Masters.

“Twelve. . . you last saw them when you were five?” she asked, doing the math. “I thought Jedi were Jedi since birth?”

“Some are, or close enough,” he agreed, as their shuttle took off, aware of the other crewman not-so-subtly listening in. “In the Core the midichlorian blood test is pretty standard, but it’s so rare that someone gets a positive that some people don’t bother. My parents didn’t, since it cost extra. That means some Force Sensitives fall through the cracks. If I’d been a year or two older when Master Lineas found me, I would’ve been turned away, as I’d be too old.”

One of the others, a blue-skinned man, the same species as Sergeant Hisku, questioned in disbelief, “Six is too old for humans?”

Jorel, however, didn’t quite repress his wince. “Well, *normally,* but there was an exception pretty recently. A few years after I arrived, there was a boy who was forced into the program late. Poor kid was rushed through the entire thing, the Padawan of the Master who sponsored him, after he became a Knight, took the boy as *his* Padawan when the kid was twelve. I heard the kid had barely passed his initiation, and there were some people who said he only did because he had a Master waiting for him.”

“That doesn’t sound. . . *proper,*” his attaché commented, making Jorel laugh, as of course *that* was what she’d latch on to. “Well it doesn’t!”

He shook his head. “It wasn’t. I was jealous of the kid, at first,” he admitted. “Not very Jedi-like, but the kid wasn’t either and *he* got to be a Padawan. But I talked to Anais, and she helped me understand. Rushed through like that, the kid’s gonna have a hard time of it, without the time to train. He got techniques like *that,*” Jorel said, snapping his fingers, “but he was even worse with his emotions then I was. I just hope he’s okay,” he said, shaking his head, not having heard of what happened to Skywalker since he left with Knight Kenobi.

He’d be fifteen now, if he was still alive. It wasn’t uncommon for Padawans to die, especially if they weren’t ready. Most survived, but finding out that a couple of his Initiate Clan had perished, while hard to hear, was something the Temple Masters had admonished him for being upset over, and weren’t surprised at finding out themselves. The kid was annoying, and arrogant, but he didn’t deserve that fate.

“Anais?” Hisku asked, breaking Jorel out of his thoughts. “You’ve mentioned her before.”

“My. . . *friend,*” he said, realizing he could admit it here without censure. “Apprenticed the same time I was, to Er’izma’s old Master.” While Sergeant Hisku nodded, the oldest of the Crewman’s faces tightened, and he could almost feel the dark current of *fear* that came off them, though they controlled it quickly enough. He turned to the nearest one, an older woman, blonde hair shot through with white and wearing a lieutenant’s badge. “What? Is there something I should know?”

The woman shook her head. “No, Padawan. Only. . .” she looked around, “your friend. How good is she at resisting. . . ***temptation****?*” The way she said the word was laced with meaning that he was surprised to hear from a non-Jedi.

“You mean the Dark Side?” he asked, and the woman nodded. “She’s far better about that then I am. At least, that’s what the Temple Master’s said. *Repeatedly.*”

There was an awkward silence at that, until one of the other crew, a Human, asked the blue skinned man next to him, “So, what’s this place like? Hot, cold, wet, dry?”

“It’s another oven,” the private sighed.

“A desert?” a Twi'lek woman asked, perking up.

“I said an oven, not a *hellscape*,” sniffed the second man.

The Human just laughed, “You think anywhere you can’t see your breath is an oven, so it sounds like a good time? Maybe go out for a hike?” The blue skinned man glared, and the human looked to the Twi’lek. “How ‘bout it, Aolu?”

“You just want to get lucky,” the orange-skinned woman commented dismissively, but with an undercurrent of amusement in her tone.

Jorel sat back, glad to not be the center of attention, even as the other man commented, “I’ll definitely be lucky if I get to spend the evening with you,” prompting a laugh and a nod from the other woman.

It was *very* different from the Temple, Jorel noted, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing.

<SWPP>

They sat down at a Cafe, after having spent some time wandering around the city, the two of them having split off from the group after a quick ‘don’t pick fights, sleep with married people, or do *too* many drugs’ speech from the Captain managing the hotel they were staying at. Jorel had been surprised when his sergeant had handed him a credit chit, informing him that it was ‘his pay’. He hadn’t really thought about it, everything having been provided by the Temple for over a decade, but, the more he thought about it, the more obvious it was that he was going to need money to do anything.

He’d been apparently given a Lieutenant’s pay for his time on the ship, and would get a higher ‘position’ as he settled in and did more. As he hadn’t expected *any* payment, except for in experience, it was a surprise, but not an unpleasant one.

Now, after having wandered around for a while, it was time to take a break. He wasn’t oblivious to the sheen of sweat that glistened on his attaché’s skin, having rolled up the arms of her uniform after the first hour. They’d both ordered cool local drinks, made from some local fruit, and relaxed indoors, the air conditioners making the place almost frigid.

It wasn’t *that* bad outside, though not nearly as comfortably cool as Coruscant, but more like the botanical gardens where the Temple grew medicinal herbs that would not survive transit that he’d had to work in. The fact that Master Halrol had repeatedly informed him that doing so would ‘be good experience for your eventual placement’ had soured any enjoyment he might’ve had in the task though. The fact that such annoyance had been used as further proof of his dirt-filled ‘destiny’ hadn’t helped either. However, that shook loose something that had been bugging him for a while.

“Sergeant Hisku, what are you?” he asked, genuinely curious.

She blinked, surprised, having been mid-sip. She set down her drink and frowned. “Excuse me?” she questioned, sounding offended.

“Like, I’m human, but I’ve never seen someone like you before,” he quickly explained. “Before I became Er’izma’s Padawan.”

“General Er’izma,” she corrected automatically, as she looked at him. “You. . . haven’t?” she asked, confused, and he motioned around them, the only other blue-skinned, red-eyed humanoid in the cafe another member of the *Dove’s* crew, in her off-duty uniform. The other crewmember shot Hisku a wink, and then went back to chatting with a blonde human woman.

“No,” Jorrel agreed. “Whatever you are wasn’t listed under the common, or even common species. But I’ve been inside the Temple for most of my life, so maybe their databas-”

“No,” the Sergeant disagreed, “That. . . that makes sense.” She paused and he could, at the edge of his perception, feel her inner conflict.

Actually, as he sensed out in the Force, he was surprised that he could pick her out as clearly as he could. More than that, though, he could somewhat pick out the other crewman across the room from the dozens of others, something he, at least with his current level of skill, shouldn’t be able to do. Stretching out, he could get a sense of others that stood out a bit more clearly from the others. Not enough to identify them all individually, but they all had a sense of familiarity to them that made them feel a bit like the *Dove*.

“I’m,” Hisku said, again pausing, before grimacing and stating, quickly, “I’m Chiss.”

Jorel took the declaration with a nod. “Okay. I have no idea what that is. Sorry,” he offered, at her annoyed look. “So, from a cold world?”

“How did you know that? You just said you didn’t know what that was,” she accused.

He pointed to the fact that she’d already finished her drink. “Plus, the other guy was complaining about the heat. It’s not that bad.”

“. . . *Yes,* I guess you could say that, if you think this is normal. Kinoss was cold. Not as cold as Csilla, but not as sweltering as this place,” she admitted, motioning to the waiter for another iced beverage.

Jorel nodded, having never heard of either of those places, “Ah, yes, *Csilla*. That explains *everything*.”

She glared at him, “Wait, how have you heard of our capitol, but you’ve never heard of our people?”

“I haven’t,” he shot back with a smile, getting an exasperated groan from his assistant. “So, Outer Rim?”

“I think so?” she replied with a shrug, paying for her second drink and taking a long sip from it. “I haven’t taken Republic Astrogation training yet.”

Jorel sighed, “That’d explain it.” He only knew of the Mon Calamari because there were *thirty-four* Jedi from that insular race, their homeworld *right* on the edge of the border of the Outer Rim, beyond which just lay Wild Space. “So, anything I should know about Chiss? Hidden claws? Water breathing? Acid spit? Pheromones that drive other species mad with lust?”

“What? No!” Hisku sputtered. “Nothing like that! Um, compared to humans we’re a bit stronger and,” she said mumbling the last bit.

“What was that?” he asked, wondering what she was trying to hide, getting a vague sense of embarrassment from her.

She stared at him, then looked to her glass and took another long sip. “How old do you think I am?”

Not having expected the question, he took a moment to stare at her. Sergeant Hisku, while shorter than him, didn’t look particularly young or old, her vivid blue skin making determining age by complexion a bit harder to judge, especially when she blushed purple at his stare, before meeting his eyes challengingly. Shrugging he answered honestly, “Twenty-three, four, maybe five? So, what, are you actually eighty or something?”

She broke eye contact, looking to the side, and muttered, “I’m fourteen.” He blinked, having to take a moment to reassess with this new information, something that she was able to read as she sighed, “*This* is why I didn’t want to tell you. Chiss reach physical maturity at age ten. I am *still* your senior on the *Dove*, even if you’re technically older.”

The defensiveness in her tone, as well as the vague sense of *hurt-frustration-embarrassment* through the Force, helped him figure out exactly how to respond. “That makes sense.”

“Just because you’re. . . what?” she questioned, confused, having taken a moment to really hear him. “But humans always. . .”

He shrugged, “So you learned to use a fresher in one year instead of two. I bet my parents wished I was Chiss, just to save on the diapers. That means you spent less time getting the basics, like ‘how to walk’, and had more time to learn the fun stuff, like how to field-strip a blaster, because your brain wasn’t mush for the first five years. Must’ve eaten like a Wookie, though, for all that growth.” At her stare, he smiled. “Like I said, makes sense.”

She met his look, before glancing away, cheeks purpling once more. “Most people aren’t as logical as Chiss,” she commented, and he took that as the compliment she intended it to be. “I think we’ve been sitting around for long enough,” she said, grabbing her drink and slamming it back, before standing up.

Rolling his eyes at the blatant change in topic, he finished his own, got up, and followed her out. “Sure Sergeant Hisku. Where to next?”

She looked around once the exited onto the street, the sun having passed its zenith. “I. . . don’t really know. Normally, I’m with a group, and just follow them. We could go see a show, tour any art exhibitions, see what sports they play on um, Delle,” she listed off, forgetting the name of the planet for a moment. The teenager, *woman*, Jorel corrected, didn’t seem to have any preferences for him to agree with.

It was actually rather interesting to see her this way, the Padawan thought. On the *Dove* they had always been on a very regimented schedule where what they were going to do was already set. Now, though, she actually acted her age a little, as unsure as he was about what to do next. Jorel was about to suggest looking up the local shows when he had an odd feeling.

He didn’t know why, but he felt like he should head over to the eastern district of the city.

It wasn’t a thought of his own, but it didn’t carry the slick, oily feeling of, as the lieutenant had called it, ***temptation****.* It was almost like a friend had suggested he go there, and then walked away before he could ask why. Jorel knew he didn’t *have* to go there, and that he could easily go with his suggestion, but, well, now he was *curious.*

Looking off in that direction he suggested, “How about we walk around a little bit more, see what we find? And we’ll stop for another drink if you start to overheat again, Sergeant,” he offered with a wink.

“I’ll be fine,” she informed him primly, blushing once more, and the two of them took off, as Jorel wondered what he’d find.