**Chapter Twenty-One**

Jorel, lightsaber in hand wanted to *leave.* He’d managed to, with Sergeant Hisku’s help, escape his cell, right before he was going to be killed, sneak through a factory/gang headquarters, and make his way to the leader’s office. A leader who was now. . . *preoccupied,* but Jorel knew trying to take advantage of that to cut the head off this metaphorical snake would only end badly for him, so he was perfectly fine to cut and run.

However, the slight, insistent suggestion he was coming to realize was the Force had a *different* idea.

*“Trust in the Force, Jorel. It will never lead you astray as long as you follow it’s Will, Jorel,”* he muttered to himself as, instead of going the way they came, he was directed down a different hallway.

“Is that really necessary,” his attaché asked, red eyes darting around as she followed him near soundlessly.

Jorel had thrown up another veil around them, something to tell others ‘nothing’s out of place here’, but it was draining, and while he’d mostly recovered from doing so earlier, the faint sense of tiredness that had nothing to do with his body told him it hadn’t been enough.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlXrndlCFIk>

They moved [carefully](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlXrndlCFIk), not darting by doorways, but walking as if the belonged, the better to not draw the eyes the padawan could feel pressing on them, only to slide off as they continued. Down one hallway, then another, then up a set of stairs and down a third, they walked past a pair of gang members that looked more like mercenaries, with how much weaponry was on them.

The veil nearly broke, Jorel’s disguise as a worker hurting more than helping where they weren’t supposed to be, but Hisku’s heavy cloak and unholstered blaster held in his direction balanced it out, and other than a curious look, the pair moved on.

Their destination couldn’t come too soon, and they stopped in front of an unremarkable door in a hallway of seemingly unremarkable doors. “Is this where you use your lightsaber to cut your way in,” the Chiss behind him asked, trepidatious, but with the tiniest hint of anticipation.

“No, I shall use an even more powerful Jedi technique,” Jorel replied, with grave seriousness, taking out the key-card he’d pulled off the corpse of the man who’d captured him in the first place. Sliding it through the lock, the door unlatched, and he held it open. “It’s a secret whose origins have been lost to the annals of history,” he informed her, smiling, trying to find the humor of the situation where he could.

“. . . You’re an idiot,” the Sergeant replied, deadpan, though the corner of her mouth quirked upwards before she forced it back down. He just grinned at her, and she walked inside the room.

Following her, they found themselves in a bedroom, a terminal at a desk to the side, and a door leading to a fresher in the back. Looking around, he asked, “Do you know how to slice? I’ve had a little training, but it’s not my thing.” She shook her head. “Okay, I guess it’s me. Can you check the room while I do this?”

When Hisku nodded, Jorel took a seat at the desk, activating the terminal, and not looking forward to doing this. Without a way in, it was *very* hard to get into a secure terminal, and, as a criminal, this was garunteed to be one. When the screen flickered to life, Jorel sighed, the prompt indeed locked, and, trying the basic methods, he got nowhere.

He needed to get in, and the Force was silent, having brought him here, and no farther. Looking around the desk, he looked for clues that would help him figure out. A picture of a loved one, a sports affiliation, even a preferred model of ship, *anything.* Spotting a model of an old Kandosii-class dreadnaught, the kind the Mandalorians used in the Mandalorian wars of conquest, Jorel tried using that as a password.

It was incorrect, and he was told he only had two more attempts.

Closing his eyes he tried to reach out with the Force, trying to find something with a hint of meaning. He couldn’t read the history of objects, no Jedi without the innate talent for Psychometry could, but things that people paid attention to, things they cared for, picked up a little bit of their Force Presence.

The model did have a touch of the now dead man’s Presence, but so did a few other things, none more than the others. The glop grenade in the corner, in a display, had received some more attention than the other items, but that didn’t really help him. Jorel only had two tries left and he *needed* to make them count.

“Found his passwords,” Hisku called from over his shoulder, almost causing Jorel to jump.

Instead, the padawan turned around in his chair, with asking, “Passwords?”

“Yep,” the woman nodded. Holding open a flimsiplast notebook, and snorted. “For the terminal it’s ‘Mando4ever’,” she instructed, spelling it out.

Sure enough, it worked.

Staring in disbelief at the now unlocked terminal, Jorel turned back to the Chiss. “What, did he have it under his pillow or something?” he demanded. She returned with a flat look. “*Seriously?”*

“Under the sheet, but, yeah,” she shrugged, motioning over to the disassembled bed. “Here, for the rest,” she directed, tossing the notebook at him.

Catching it, he turned back to the terminal, and, poking around, found a *wealth* of data. Accounts, evidence, rosters, details of crimes committed by the others, *everything* you’d need to take down the organization. For a few moments Jorel thought Julmat might have been working for the local law enforcement, gathering what was needed, until he found the man’s ‘grand plan’, and found that he wasn’t a good actor, trying to do the right thing, but having made the wrong moves.

No, Julmat was an idiot.

He was planning on ‘turning in’ his boss, giving *just* enough evidence to put her away and prune the parts of the organization that he didn’t like, which, as it turned out, were just the parts that happened to be legitimate business. Jorel hadn’t planned to be a Sentinel like Anaïs, but he’d sat in on some of the lectures she had, and even *he* knew a criminal organization needed some mostly clean business to hide behind, like the factory they were in right now.

But Julmat thought it was noisy. And messy. And thought they could do better by replacing them all with more criminal enterprises, which, as the leader, he’d take a bigger cut of.

*No wonder she killed him,* Jorel thought darkly, before shaking himself out of those thoughts. *What am I doing?* Refocused, he plugged the mem-stik he found on the desk into the terminal, downloading everything. Once they were out, they’d give it to Er’isma, who’d know what to do with it, and hopefully wouldn’t be *too* mad at his apprentice for getting jumped by slavers.

Twice.

In two months.

*He’s gonna kill me,* the apprentice thought morosely, still transferring every datafile he could.

“Found your utility belt,” his partner announced, walking to Jorel and looking over his shoulder. “This is. . . how did you know this’d be here?” she asked, glancing down at him.

Jorel just shrugged. “Didn’t.”

Handing him his belt, which he quickly slipped on, the soldier shook her head. “You know, you’re nothing like the holodramas say Jedi are.”

“You watch holodramas?” Jorel asked, trying to picture the severe young woman curled up with a bowl of popped grain and watching ‘Stars of our Lives’. It didn’t compute. At her glare, she wasn’t going to admit to it, which was probably better for his sanity anyways, and he just shrugged. “Is Master Er’isma? ‘Sides, I’ve been a real *Jedi* for a couple of months. Before that I was just an Initiate.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUaeQBM6miI>

From her look, she didn’t get the difference, and Jorel almost started to explain before a ripple of *something* set his teeth on edge. “It’s time to [leave](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUaeQBM6miI),” he announced, getting the last of the files and pulling out the mem-stik, stowing it in a protective case on his belt, and, on a whim, grabbing the grenade.

Moving to the door, he felt the on-edge feeling get worse, and activated his lightsaber. “Jorel?” Hisku asked, both pistols out and ready. “Aren’t we sneaking out?”

“Might not be an option,” he replied, opening the door with a wave of his hand, both of them now full.

He did so, and someone in the hall shot down it, in a way that might’ve caught him if he’d just stepped out. An angry voice could be heard, kept low, but the tone of ‘you idiot’ came through clearly, even if it was in huttese.

*Oh sithspit,* Jorel swore to himself. They’d taken too long, and someone had found either the two sent to kill them in the jail, or the random thug he’d left in the boss’ waiting room. He hoped their leader had only ordered a few to Julmat’s quarters ‘just in case’, or this was going to get a *lot* harder.

Taking a deep breath, letting the Force infuse his body, he primed the glop grenade in his hand and leapt out into the hallway, taking in the five thugs who’d come to stop them. *Five?* He thought. *I can handle five.*

Tossing the grenade, it slammed into the chestplate of a Tradoshan in the middle, the lizard-man’s eyes going wide in surprise before the nozzles in the sphere started spewing liquid that hardened into foam in less than a second, trapping them and sealing that end of the hallway.

Hisku followed him out, took in the captured goons, and seeing the front one was only half-trapped, trying to force his arm up to shoot the, put three blaster bolts in his chest, killing him. “Now what?” she demanded, an alarm starting to sound.

“Now, *we get out of here,”* he replied, running off in the other direction with Force-assisted speed, the woman trailing behind him, giving him enough time to check the corner of the T intersection instead of barreling around it.

Sure enough, there were a few thugs waiting, but knowing where they were he was able to spring out, hitting the other wall and kicking off it, his lightsaber flashed out, knocking aside the bolt that would’ve hit him as he closed.

With two swings, they fell, dead, and Hisku rounded the corner at a full sprint, just trying to keep up. He nodded to her, charging forward himself, no longer trying to keep his footsteps silent. Running down the hall, he got the faintest hint of danger, like his Master’s feint, hiding his true strike, and a door opened, a woman with a vibroblade lunging out to stab, only to have her blade severed by his own, then her head, as he didn’t stop, following his instincts.

Three more hallways and they were at the entrance of the reinforced section, where a *dozen* armed gunman stood, and the same Weequay who’d sneered at him stared at Jorel’s saber with widened eyes.

Five, he could take, but this he wasn’t so sure about, but as far as he could tell this was the *only* way in or out, at least the only way he knew of, so rather than hesitate, Jorel attacked. The padawan *did* let the feeling of vindictive pleasure at this turnabout pass him by, as he thrust a hand out as the door-guard tried to slam the portal shut.

It wasn’t up to Er’izma’s level, but the alien was blasted backwards, his grip on the door wrenched free and slamming it open, as the other gunman staggered back, the shove unfocused and catching them in its passage, which worked just fine for Jorel. Pushing past what the Force Push had taken out of him, leaping forward, the Jedi slashed almost wildly, trying not to let his fear corrupt his focus, cutting down his foes as they recovered.

Three dropped in an instant, but he’d been right, there *were* too many, and, unlike the pirates, they knew what they were doing. Pulling backwards, they all drew down on him, and fired their blasters.

Jorel ducked behind on gunman as he sent the thug’s aim wide, and let him absorb the shots, but a bolt grazed his thigh. It burned with pain, but it wasn’t enough to stop Jorel, who moved to the next group, cutting down too more, and trying to block the shots from the others. He could *sense* where the shots were going to go, more a feeling than any actual second sight, and tried his best to mitigate the damage, when two bolts flew down the hall, hitting two of the gunmen, giving Jorel enough of a window to avoid being hit.

More fell, as Hisku charged, sending a stream of bolts at the attackers, even as three of the remaining gunman turned to fire at her.

*No!* Jorel thought, knowing she couldn’t see the shots coming like he could. He shoved himself forward, cutting down two before they could fire, one of the ones that’d been aiming for him grazing his arm, and the third shooter pulling his trigger before Jorel could stop him.

The man died the next instant, but his shots sped towards the padawan’s partner, who, twisting, *barely* dodged out of the way, but kept focus downrange as she shot the one who’d shot Jorel.

The Jedi cut down the ones left, even as the soldier fired past him, dropping the Weequay who’d been staggering to his feet, pulling a blaster of his own. “You’re hurt,” she stated, looking at his burned flesh.

“I’ll heal, we need to keep going,” he shot back, feeling danger coming for them.

She nodded, and he lead the way, a claxon going off as more people ran about. A few thugs stopped, spotting his lightsaber, and tried to shoot him, only to be put down either with said blade, or by Hisku.

Shutting it off, hoping it was the right thing to do, they tried to join the chaos, and slip out along with he other workers. Jorel was tired, having pushed himself with the Force, from healing himself, to the using the veil, to those minutes of combat, but they were almost done.

Not having to fake his worried expression, they followed the workers, who were heading for some large loading bay, shepherded by the gang-members who were themselves looking around nervously.

They made it past the entrance, spotting the repulsortrucks half loaded with goods, red, yellow, grey, and blue, before they were outed. One of the workers looked past Jorel at Sergeant Hisku and called out, “Who are you!?” The gunmen turned, her distinctive appearance making her easily visible, and one stepped forward yelling, “Get on the ground!”

Their cover blown, she glanced at Jorel, who activated his saber, drawing attention like a Loadstone, even as he shouted, “The yellow one!” even as he cut down the first gunman, the others shooting in his general direction many of them hitting the other workers, who stampeded in every direction in a blind panic.

Hisku bolted, threading through the others to secure their ride, while Jorel leapt over the heads of the others, the shots from the thugs going wild as they tried to sight in on him. Falling down on another pair of shooters, he dispatched them, barely ducking out of the way of a bolt that would’ve taken his head, and turning for the others.

Blaster bolts fired across the space, the Sergeant taking a few pot-shots as she reached the truck, trying to take the pressure off him. However, more reinforcements ran in, and Jorel wished he still had his grenade, clumped up as they were.

The area was rapidly clearing and, as much as he hated getting non-combatants involved, they had served as cover. Jorel also realized just how *little* the Temple had trained him for this situation. You’d think, given they fought criminals, dealing with mass-fire would be on the agenda, but all of his combat lessons had either been fighting a couple of gunmen, a single shooter, or other Jedi, and he was paying for it now.

Cutting down one of the last of the original gunmen, the others poured fire wherever he ran, trying to give Hisku time. He took another couple shots, thankfully all glancing blows, before the Repulsortruck sputtered to life and the Chiss woman called, “Come on!”

Gathering the last of his strength, Jorrel used half of it to send one more Push at the now twenty-odd gunmen, sending them falling like cut grass, the other half spent for one last infusion of speed as he streaked across the hanger, leaping for the truck’s open door.

One of the gunmen, still on the ground fired, and he turned knocking it away even as an enormous Catar charged through the door and raised an enormous bowcaster, firing it straight for Jorel.

Out of position to block the blow, and without the strength left to try to make a barrier, the Jedi saw death coming for him as the plasma-covered metal quarrel streaked straight for his chest.

However, it did not hit him.

With a twist in the Force, as Hisku, arm outstreached, yelled, “*No!”* Jorel felt a crushing pressure seize him and *pull*, cracking ribs as he was yanked for the truck, the bolt missing him by inches as he slammed into the vehicle hard, out of position, his left arm breaking even as his training pushed him to swing into the door, closing it behind him, shutting off his saber.

Hisku, eyes wide, panting as if she’d run a marathon, hands shaking, stared at him. The sound of blasterfire, as well as the louder noise of the bowcaster, snapper her out of her haze, and she, almost drunkenly, tried to use the controls, lifting the repulsortruck and sending it flying for the exit. As they passed the gunmen, who were still firing, the Catar reached back and pulled out a concussion missile launcher of all things, sighting it on their ship, preparing it to blast it to pieces.

They’d come all this way, gone this far, and they were going to die, because he was too *weak* to protect his partner. If it was just Jorel that would’ve died, he still would’ve been mad, but that was the Jedi way. But his stupidity had dragged her into this, and because of him she was going to *die.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=budMyjUb5ws>

Something in Jorel [**snapped**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=budMyjUb5ws).

Snarling, the Force-user reached out to the tumultuous blackness around him. It **welcomed** him back, the pure **Darkness** that only a sudden, violent **death** could give thick in the air, most of which he’d put there himself. As before, it **filled** him, **embraced** him, willing to **serve** him, if he but asked.

The **pain** he felt **deadened**, though Jorel knew it wasn’t gone, and was careful to wave his good arm, palm out as he focused. The missile fired, and made it only a foot before it froze, **firm** in his **grip.** It’s thruster tried to push it forward, but against **his** **might** it was **nothing**.

Curling his **fist closed**, the missile exploded, the Cathar already **running**, but it **wouldn’t be enough.** Pushing his **Will** into the **Flames**, Jorel **shoved** the blast backwards, **multiplying** it until it was an **inferno** that **incinerated** all in his path, their deaths **sweet** to him as they paid for **attacking their betters.** The Cathar dove through a door, shoving another in the way of Jorel’s **crimson flames**, and the Force-User felt a deep **desire** to **order** his **subordinate** to turn around, so **none would escape his judgement.**

They flew out of sight of the hanger, rising high and fast, one of the repulsors smoking, and Jorel resisted the urge to pick up the truck to **move it by the force of his will, might, and *power* alone**. Because that was *dumb.* With a shuddering breath, the factory starting to disappear and Jorrel let go of the **darkness**, even as it whispered that it didn’t need to go. That he was stronger with it. That if he used it, he could make these slavers **pay** in a way his master **never would.**

Thankfully, but unfortunately, Jorel knew what he was doing, and even though it felt like he was tearing off his own arm, he let the power *go*, though he knew bits of it had stained him in the process.

*Everything* hurt but he knew it would. Part of him was tempted to reach for the **Dark** again. It was thinner here, though enough still wafted up from the city they flew over it would be enough. Even out in nature, the Dark existed, if one knew how to look, and all he needed to do was to be strong enough to get to safety. It’d been *stupid* to release it as quickly as he had, he thought, and if he just-

*No.*

Taking a deep, shuddering, but still calming breath, he tried to turn to the Force, though, as if knowing what he’d done, it stubbornly resisted his call.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvHSeWp6XNc>

Stomping on the thought to ***make*** it come to him, Jorel tried again, not demanding, but [*asking*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvHSeWp6XNc) for help. Not for himself, but for Hisku, as she was looking little better than he was. If she passed out, he needed to be strong enough to get them to safety.

He put himself in the Force’s hands. Being killed by those soaked in Darkness? That was one thing. To die because they were too tired and passed out? That, in a way, seemed much more in line with the will of the Force, causing Jorel to laugh, then wheeze, his ribs shot through with pain even as Hisku tiredly glanced over at him, before, with a start, focused forward as they tried to figure out where they were.

A hint of a thought, almost beyond perception, a whisper in a storm, said, *that way.*

“*That way,*” the Jedi said, pointing with his right hand, and the soldier complied without a single word.

*Thank you,* he thought, trying to stay awake, and, barely, felt the Force. Where it would normally be a stream, it was a trickle, but it was enough for him to work with, and he was grateful for that much.

On his good hand, the barest blue condensation formed, a whisper of water, and he reached over to work it into his broken arm, his training the only reason he didn’t black out from the pain. It was going to be slow, but it gave him something to do, and he already felt the edges of his vision, which had started to blur, clear ever so little.

“So, about what happened-” he started to say, surprised as she interrupted him.

*“I don’t want to talk about it,”* she snapped, and he paused in his healing, surprised.

Starting the process again, the Force maybe a fraction clearer now, he tried again. “But, you used the For-”

“*What part of ‘I don’t want to talk about it’ don’t you understand?”* she practically yelled, and while he wasn’t as surprised, the vehemence of her reaction surprised him.

“But,” he started, “It’s amazing!”

“It’s *cheating,*” she hissed, as if it were a curse, and her hands started to shake again.

Deciding that maybe now *wasn’t* the time, Jorel instead replied, “Are you injured? I could heal you. A little. I’m kinda tapped, but if you’re hurt. . .”

The Sergeant was silent for a long moment, before she let out a tense sigh. “I am uninjured, Padawan Jorel. I am only tired,” she stated with icy formality, even as her voice shook with fatigue. “I apologize for my outburst. It was unprofessional. Please see to your own injuries while I return us to our Rally Point.”

Not knowing what he’d done wrong, but also knowing he couldn’t force her to tell him, even as part of him suggested he *could*, he sat back in the repulsortruck’s seat and focused on healing himself. It was almost ten minutes later that the city below them started to look familiar, and the flashing blue and white of Law enforcement could be seen on hover cars en-route to them. A lot of them. They flew up and surrounded the repulsortruck, a speaker blaring their demanding that Hisku land immediately.

Hisku ignored them, only holding out a hand and requesting, “Comm unit.” He pulled it out from his belt and handed it to her, and, not looking anywhere but straight ahead, announced, “This is Sergeant Hisku’biatha’pusi, attaché to Padawan Jorel Drettz, driving a yellow repulsortruck. We have exfiltrated from the stronghold of a local criminal element. Priority personnel is wounded, though. . . self-repairing,” she paused, glancing over to him, just for a minute, “but is mission killed. Local law has been compromised, and are demanding we surrender to them. Please advise.”

“Sergeant,” an older male voice replied. “We were starting to wonder where you were. Make for the hotel. We’ll call them off, and send an escort to avoid any *misunderstandings*. You aren’t the only ones to have some trouble last night.”

The speeders on either side of their truck threatened to shoot them down if they didn’t comply, and Jorel glanced nervously at Hisku, who stared straight ahead, flying towards the hotel. One of the speeders pulled back behind them after a few seconds, and Hisku, before Jorel could even warn her, pulled the truck up, the ion-bolt from the speeder passing them by.

With the howl of engines, three Cranes, hulls glowing slightly from the speed of reentry, descended on the gathered speeders, some of whom scattered, though most stayed in firing range. One turned and shot the incoming starfighters, but their shields tanked the blow, and the Crane returned in kind, destroying the Law Enforcement speeder in an instant.

The other speeders fled.

“Hey Hissy,” a familiar voice called over the Comms. “Thought you said you were gonna be careful. Heard you were injured.”

The blue skinned woman twitched, the repulsor truck dipping for a moment, before she took several calming breaths and murmured, “*not now,*” under her breath. “Sergeant Zisk’tiashi’logha,” she replied. “I am uninjured, though Padawan Jorel Drettz has been shot. Repeatedly.”

“Oh, well that’s okay then,” Zisk, who was almost certainly flying one of the Cranes, replied.

“Agreed,” Jorel couldn’t help but add, getting a laugh out of the pilot, starting to relax for the first time, instead of just pretending to. They had a fighter escort, and he could see the hotel. *They’d made it.*

*“boys,”* Hisku hissed, before they were at the landing pad, where she carefully put down the ship. A dozen soldiers, in full kit, waited for them, and Jorel waved jauntily, dizzy with relief.

Or blood loss and tiredness.

Probably relief.

Pushing the slow trickle of Force into reinforcing his body, Jorel carefully opened the door and clambered out, two soldiers quickly moving forward to help him, which he appreciated, as, even enhanced, he wasn’t exactly *stable*.

Glancing back, he smiled broadly as he another soldier move to help Hisku, who, after a moment of hesitation, allowed them to support her. They were ferried indoors, carried really, then down an elevator, and into a very large room, far larger than Jorel’s own, not that he’d been in it for more than a few minutes. He wondered how comfy the bed would be in his room.

Inside, at a desk, and sipping something from a glass, Knight Er’izma sat, looking very, *very* displeased. The two of them were deposited into very comfortable chairs, and a cup of water was pressed into Jorel’s hand, which he smiled at, and greedily drank down, not realizing how thirsty he’d been until just then. And had they added something to it? The water tasted *really* good.

Er’izma waited, before looking at the two of them. “You were on your *first* shore leave Padawan, with instructions to *relax*. I awoke to find you and your attaché missing, reports of a Jedi fighting a dozen criminals before storming a burning building, and I was about to instate a full deployment, then you arrive, beaten, blasted, burned, with a squadron’s worth of corrupt law enforcement trying to corner you to kill you, and. . .” Er’izma sniffed, “reeking of the Dark Side. I hope you have a good explanation for all of this.”

The Padawan thought about it, and shrugged. The chair was *really* comfortable, and Hisku was *safe*, even if she was mad at him for some reason, and she could use the Force! What was he doing? Oh, right.

“I have an explanation. Not sure if it’s good,” he offered, today having proven him not to be a good judge. Or good. Or a judge.

“And that explanation would *be?”* his Master pressed, and Jorel blinked as his Master seemed to suddenly be one person, then several hundred, then several thousand, then *more,* and then one again, with thousands of branches reaching around and up into the sky, like a really really weird tree made out of souls.

Jorel shrugged again. “The Force told me to.”

And then he passed out.