**Chapter 3**

“Are you sure she’ll be okay?” Jorel asked, as their theta-class shuttle lost sight of the corvette, the craft seeming to vanish into the darkness of space. He’d stood in the doorway of the cockpit, watching the other ship as his Master’s shuttle, *and wasn’t that an odd thought*, had followed them up and off the surface.

“I’m sure there’s some airspace controller cursing her Master’s name, but that’s nothing new,” Er’izma commented blandly. “Lieutenant Bakar, is our course plotted?”

The humanoid in full white armor nodded, a feminine voice coming from her helmet, “Affirmative Sir. Estimated flight time to Anaxes, 8 hours. Shall I make the jump?” At his Master’s nod, the woman tapped a few keys, the shuttle spinning about to orient itself, and the stars streaked out into the tunnel of Hyperspace.

She turned her chair around, around, reaching up and popping her helmet off as the other humanoid in armor continued to monitor the sensor screens. Removing the headgear, she was revealed to be an older, olive-skinned human, who had two long burn scars stretching across her cheek, from ear to chin. “So, you’re the newest brat our commander’s picked up,” she observed, running a gauntleted hand through graying brown hair. “Bit old, aren’t ya?”

“Be nice,” Er’izma chided. “Or else I’ll assign you to show him the ropes.” The woman grimaced and turned back to her console without a word.

“Master?” Jorel asked, following the Jedi as he headed to the rear of the ship, entering a richly appointed seating area, looking more like something some feudal lord would have instead of a Jedi. “Where are we going?”

“Didn’t you hear?” his Master questioned right back. “Anaxas, the fortress world. Our ship will be waiting for us there, and should have finished its resupplying. Unless something attracts our attention, we’ll be out of the Core within two weeks, if barely.” Opening a cabinet, he pulled out two white cups, along with a steaming cylinder. “Tea?”

Accepting a cup of the hot beverage, Jorel took a seat across the table from his master. “Is it a ship like Lucian’s?”

“*Master* Lucian’s,” the older man corrected. “And no, it’s not quite as subtle as his. But, we’re not here to talk about our destination, we’re here to talk about *you.* While this is no place to demonstrate your skills, we can at least talk to pass the time. You stated that your focus lay in Force Control, and combat, but you did not mention your Mental Shields. There was no reason to ask about them before, but we must lay down your foundations if we are to build you up to Knighthood. As. . . well meaning as Master Lucian was, there is a good chance that your Trials may be of. . . higher than average difficulty.”

“Master?” Jorel asked. “Why?”

The Knight sighed, taking a sip of his tea, and gesturing the Padawan to do the same. It was oddly sweet, with a flavor he couldn’t place. “Because Mastor Halrol is many things, young one. Forgiving, understanding, or forgetting, are not among them. Connected is. Your friend was taken out from under his nose and, if I am not mistaken, lost the man no small amount of political capitol in the process.”

Jorel felt some part of himself go cold, fingers tightening on his cup. “Are you, are you saying he was *selling* her?”

Er’izma cocked an eyebrow, motioning with one hand upwards as he took a deep breath, lowering it as he let it out. Motioning towards Jorel, he repeated the process, like one would instruct the smallest of younglings.

His master repeated the process twice more, pausing to take a sip each time, and was doing it once again before Jorel copied the man’s breath patterns. Thrice. Ready to say something if the Knight wanted him to try again, the man instead smiled peacefully. “Nothing so crass or crude, my Padawan. Political transactions are not financial ones, with prices, refunds, and guarantees,” he explained, with no comment about his apprentice’s resistance to his instruction, to which said apprentice was grateful. It *had* been childish, which had only proved his Master’s approach correct.

“No, he’ll lose prestige for having had his suggestions and insights into the. . . *Force*, not being accurate,” the Knight explained. “It would be just the same as if he assured a Knight or fellow Master that the High Council was going to make a certain decision, only to be completely incorrect. He does not control the High Council, of course, but his *insight* into what will happen has power. A power that, today, was greatly diminished.”

Taking another sip of tea, and smiling to himself, he continued. “Though nearly as great will be the reduction of sway stemming from his loss of control. Someone more my caliber? As if I wouldn’t choose those I saw great potential in, and as if I have not been proven correct every time.” He shook his head. “Gossip travels at speeds so great it could enter hyperspace, Padawan Jorel. I very much doubt there will be a soul in that temple who will not have heard some version of events before the week is out, which is one of *many* reasons I am glad to leave that world behind for another several years.”

The explanation helped, though Jorel was still unsure of exactly what his Master meant. “So it wasn’t having Anaïs for this Master that would hurt him, but being wrong about her being there at all when Master Skaa arrives?”

His master’s smile was wide. “*Exactly*. After all, Jedi are renowned for their ability to receive wisdom about the future from the Force, and one who is correct more than most would surely be more in touch with the Force. One might even say he was a better Jedi, if one were inclined to make those comparisons.”

“But he wasn’t understanding the will of the Force,” Jorel argued, “he was making sure it happened!”

A shrug was given in reply. “Prove it. And even if you do, surely that means that Master Halrol’s words would have weight to them regardless of his connection to the Force, and others would surely do well to listen to that Master Jedi’s. . . *wisdom.* At least, before today. He’ll recover, those like him always do, but Master Lucian has done him a small injury today, just as he had fifty years ago, and it is clear that Padawan Halrol never forgave him, despite what words he must’ve mouthed to others.”

Jorel didn’t have anything to say to that, not having considered that his instructors might’ve *helped* the Force along. His introspective reverie was disturbed at the sound of liquid pouring, his master replenishing both of their teas, the steam rising from it. “But, as I said, we are not here to discuss others, but you, and your abilities. Why did you not mention your Mental Shields? They are quite impressive for one your age, and well-hidden besides. Had I not been evaluating you, and had you not been so open with Padawan Vand-Ryssa, I wouldn’t have noticed them.”

Jorel frowned at his master. If he’d had something like that, he *would’ve* mentioned it, at least before he decided to wreck his chances to help Anaïs. “I’m sorry Master, but I haven’t mastered that technique. If my instructors are to be believed, the only thing I am worse at is Force Healing, and possibly Farsight.”

“Really?” the Knight asked, bemused. “In that case, ***eat your cup,***” he instructed, his command reverberating in the air, a presence backing his words.

Jorel glanced at porcelain cup, which did *not* look edible, then back at his Master. “Master?”

“You heard me Padawan,” Er’izma said, still amused. “I said ***eat your cup, Padawan.***” Once again, the command seemed to reverberate, the tension increasing in the air as the words bounced around in his skull and Jorel found himself raising his cup to his mouth, ready to bite, before, with significant force of will, he held it out at arm’s length in front of himself.

The order was ridiculous, and he would very likely hurt himself doing so, but he had the oddest feeling that he should do it regardless. Calling upon the Force himself, infusing it within his body to stop his hands from shaking, he carefully placed the cup on the table. “Master, please explain why you wish me to do so, then I will, but it seems, um, unwise to do so.”

The oppressive feeling in the air vanished, and the Knight grinned broadly. “That, my Padawan, was you displaying your Mental Shields to me.”

“I. . .” Jorel trailed off. “What did you do to me, Master?” he requested, confused and a little worried.

“Force Confusion,” the Knight shrugged.

Jorel stared at the man. He’d seen that ability, he’d *used* that ability, though not very well. Whatever his Master had just done was *not that ability.* “Master, that technique is used to confuse or persuade those of weak wills. To make yourself invisible to those without the Force.”

“Is not invisibility a command to not notice?” the Knight smiled. “And if one is proficient enough, it works on users of the Force as well, though only those without proper mental shielding.” He nodded to Jorel, who was once again feeling out of his depth. “No, I do believe you are competent at it, though if even with it your instructors thought you unable to use it, I can tell we’ll have a great deal of meditation practice in the future. In fact, I believe we’ll start now. From the beginning, as I’m not sure what else they have missed in their surety of their assessment of your skills. Now, with me, in through the nose, hold, out through the mouth. Again, in through the nose, hold, and out through the mouth.”

As his Master ran through the *basest* of meditation exercises with him, as if he were a youngling fresh off the recruitment cruiser, Jorel had to admit, as demeaning as this was, it still beat farming.

Hours later, with only a small break to eat, Jorel had to admit he’d felt calmer than he had in months. It may have been the fact that he was a Padawan at last, his worth proven as he’d apparently mastered *two* techniques instead of one, and he hadn’t had to abandon his friend to the fate in the Agri-corp he feared for himself to do so. Or it was the calming tea, the several hours of deep meditation *without* an instructor who constantly criticized his form, and the fact that it was four in the morning to his body, which was lethargic with tiredness. He’d say it was the former, though the latter likely helped.

As the shuttle exited Hyperspace with a slight jerk, Jorel heard the door open, but did not open his eyes, continuing the exercise. Lieutenant Bakar’s voice came down the hall, “We’ve been hailed, and exchanged codes, sir. We’ll be at the *Dove* in thirty minutes.”

“Thank you,” he heard his Master call back, going silent once more. Continuing the meditation, he remained silent, only opening his eyes when he heard his Master sigh, getting up from his meditative stance. Matching the other man’s movements, Jorel drank the last of his tea, and asked, “Master. What would you have done if you were wrong, and I’d tried to eat my cup?”

In an instant, the aforementioned cup slipped through his fingers, floating to his master, who put the two of them away, along with the tea pot. Jorel hadn’t even had time to try to hold onto it before it was out of his grasp. “Oh.”

“Indeed,” his Master agreed, closing the cabinet and making his way to the cockpit. “Now, let’s go take a look at your new home, shall we?”

They entered the pilot’s area, Lieutenant Bakar helmeted once more. The planet stretched out below them, teal seas and purple landmasses, with smattering of bright green here and there. Ships, a great many ships, hung in orbit over it. Not as many as Coruscant, but still more than he’d expected to see. They varied in size from tiny shuttles, almost dots as they moved this way and that, to corvettes, to frigates and freight haulers. A few larger cruisers were present, and he could spot three ships far larger than the others hanging above the planet.

Without looking at the readings he wasn’t sure which was larger, but the closest one must’ve been over six hundred meters in length, an enormous steel wedge with divots on either side, and a long rectangular section missing from the front third of the center. Long purple stripes, the same color as the pilot’s armor, ran the length of the ship. Every other ship gave it a wide berth, though that might’ve been due to the fact that it was higher up, further away from the planet than the other two capital ships.

“What do you know of Anaxes, Padawan?” his master asked, breaking his train of thought.

“Um, it’s been considered a fortress world, and is known as ‘Defender of the Core’. It produces military technology, and trains Planetary defense officers,” Jorel rattled off, remembering his lessons. “It’s on the Perlemian Trade Route, which leads northeast out of the core, forming the northern edge of the territory known unofficially as The Slice.”

Er’izma nodded, pleased. “Good. And if we are to come to Coruscant, or one of its neighboring systems, again, we are under Senatorial orders to rest our ship here.”

Jorel wanted to ask about that, along with the other command from the Galactic Senate he’d found in the Knight’s file, but he realized that, instead of heading to one of the Frigates nearby, their shuttle had started to head for the capital ship. The capital ship that shared the same colors as their pilots. Remaining silent, the shuttle descended down between the battleship’s prongs, banks of laser cannons at rest on either side of them, heading towards the top of two enormous hangers that laid at the end of the pseudo-trench.

They passed through the magnetic shielding, entering the bay’s atmosphere, and Jorel could spot rows upon rows of white and purple armored figures, standing in two columns, near the back. His Master sighed, “She didn’t need to.”

“Not my call, sir,” Bakar replied smugly. “Take it up with the first officer.”

Er’izma let out another long sigh, not saying anything else. Their shuttle turned around, settling down so softly Jorel barely felt it. “Thank you Lieutenant Smalaus,” he stated, the silent armored figure nodding in reply. “Well, let’s go meet the others, Padawan.”

His Master walked out of the cockpit, and down the boarding ramp, Jorel following behind, *thoroughly* confused at what was going on. Did his Master work with whoever commanded this ship? Was their ship docked on this battleship? The enormous hanger bays could’ve held a ship like Anaïs’ Master had, though barely, but he’d seen at least three such hangers on their approach, the two in front and one to the side, so there was probably a fourth on the other side. Was this ship going to take them to their final destination, but it would take them awhile to get there? He wasn’t sure, his Master wasn’t talking, and he didn’t know if he should ask or not.

A tall Togruta, pale blue with black markings, stood waiting for them in a dark purple military uniform, of a similar make as Er’izma’s. An older human, similarly dressed, stood off to the side. As Jorel and his Master disembarked, the older man, who stood ramrod straight, yelled “Captain on deck!” and the assembled military shifted, changing their stance as one.

Er’izma shook his head as he walked up to the Togruta, who was also standing completely straight. “You don’t need to do this every time I get back, Onaassa,” he chided lightly.

“It is right and proper to greet the Captain when he returns from central command,” the woman, Onaassa, replied, looking past the Knight to Jorel as Er’izma just shook his head once more. “And this is your Padawan? Doesn’t look like much.”

Tamping down the familiar annoyance at being dismissed, Jorel almost missed his Master’s reply of, “He put himself between his fellow Padawan and Master Lucian when he revealed himself.”

“Hmm,” the older Togruta, said, looking over Jorel once more, reevaluating him. “Then maybe we’ll make something of him yet.”

His Master laughed, and started walking down the rows of troopers, nodding to them both as he commented, “I certainly believe so. How is everyone, Major Zara?”

The woman fell in step beside him, tapping away at her datapad as Jorel, without any directions, followed after them. “Restless, as we always are when we are under the guns of Anaxes.”

“Then set course for Delle. Let’s shake the grease of the Core off our boots and return to our mission,” Er’izma instructed, passing through the hanger doors, those in the hallway beyond glancing up at him and moving out of his way. It might’ve been Jorel’s imagination, but it looked like they moved faster after the crew saw his Master. It didn’t seem to be the worried ‘please don’t pay attention to me’ that most people usually displayed when spotting Jedi. Jorel had seen that reaction the few times he’d been out in Coruscant proper. No, it was almost as if they had an extra spring in their step.

That wasn’t the odd thing about this ship, *other than the ship itself*, he amended, not having recognized the make at all. The Jedi Temple, while cold and austere, held a certain sense of home that was hard to put into words. A unity and strength to it that could not easily be explained. This ship, in some ways, felt similar. Coruscant, meanwhile, was a chaotic mess, and shadowy, with muted flares of something here and there, but sporadic and widespread. This ship was different.

“And what of your Padawan?” the Togrutan’s voice asked, bringing him out of his thoughts. “I have several candidates to assist him into settling into his role, as experience has shown is necessary, unless he’s exceptional there as well?” At his master’s negatory head shake, she nodded, “Then in that case I believe that he could be assigned to Second Lieutenant Tiqho'hut'varkaq, Sergeant Major Gastav, Second Lieutenant Dez’kofi, Secon-”

“Sergeant Hisku’biatha’pusi will be the one to show Jorel how to fit in with the crew,” the Knight observed blandly, as if noting the weather.

The Major fell silent for a long moment. “Are you sur-”

“I am.”

Jorel had to speak up, “Um, Master? Aren’t *you* going to be the one teaching me?” Part of him, an unpleasant part, wondered if this was why he was chosen. If this is how his Master was able to take so many Padawans, by offloading his duties onto others. It wasn’t very Jedi, but nothing about this situation seemed to fall in with what would be considered proper for a Jedi. *But wait,* he thought. Every Padawan his Master taught passed their Knighthood trials, so he must be doing *something* right.

In response to Jorel’s question, the Togrutan shot him an annoyed look, while Er’izma glanced back at his Padawan, smiling serenely, “And when it comes to the ways of the Jedi, I shall. However, do you *really* require my direct presence to learn how to navigate the ship’s corridors, understand our computer network, or any of the hundred other things one needs to know when living on a vessel such as this? Unless standards have risen in unexpected directions, Padawan Jorel, I very much doubt this was covered in the Temple’s training.”

Nodding to an officer who was walking towards them, an older woman in a uniform like the Togrutans, he added, “But now, I believe it would be best to show you to your quarters, right next to mine. Second Lieutenant Benant will show you to them. There is a great deal I must do before I may rest, but I’m sure this has been an unusual and trying day. Get some sleep, Padawan, and we’ll begin our lessons tomorrow.”

Jorel followed the woman down countless metal corridors, up lifts, and was left to his own thoughts as the officer didn’t say a word, returning to the odd feeling he’d had ever since he’d arrived. Despite the steel walls, it felt oddly warm, in a way that had nothing to do with temperature. While the power of the force was far more muted here than in the temple, it was still there. It hadn’t been in space or on the streets of Coruscant, and the sense of unity here was even greater, as if to compensate.

His Master’s force presence seemed to almost disappear into the surroundings, but had done so naturally, like a Wookie among the trees, unlike Anaïs’ master, who’s presence had gone so suddenly and completely it was as if it wasn’t there at all. Jorel could still feel the Knight’s presence on the ship, one brighter star in a constellation, half-hidden by the light of dawn, but it seemed almost unremarkable, one of many, instead of the bastion of strength it’d been before.

The Padawan entered his quarters, simultaneously more lavish than even those of visiting Knights in the Temple, but with a close, utilitarian feel that reminded one that they were on a ship. Two side doors were on either wall, one leading to a refresher and one to an oddly large bedroom. In the main room rested a desk, computer turned off, a meditation mat, a couch, a window outside, empty shelves, and more. It seemed. . . *vacant*, in a way the Temple hadn’t been. There, the blank space had been carefully constructed, the spartan decorations giving a sense of austereness reflective of the Jedi path. Here, the room seemed like it was waiting to be filled, rather than bare for the sake of bareness.

In his room, Jorel took out the small bundle of momentos, placing them on the bedside table. A bit of hull from the Crucible, damaged in the attack. The wrecked focusing lens of his first lightsaber. Bits and pieces, each with a memory, each with a lesson his old teachers had neglected. He was glad he was able to take them, even though such things were, while not forbidden, ‘highly discouraged’ by the Temple instructors. Looking at the space left on that shelf alone, and the others around this room, he wondered what else he’d gather in his time on this unusual ship, and with his unusual Master.