**Arc 2 Chapter 20**

It was a long, *long* day before they were done. Not because of the fighting, other than a little few exchanges of fire, they didn’t have another real battle, and certainly nothing like their first fight. However, Jorel would have preferred another confrontation over what they did instead.

Which was wait, holding needed locations, and defending them from the last few remnants of the congressional forces.

With their wounded comrades right behind them.

And with them unable to help.

The Padawan had thought that not overtly using the Force during the fighting was going to be the hardest part, walking the knife edge of danger of discovery vs the danger of injury, but he’d managed that with ease. Well, from some of the impressed, borderline awed looks some of his men were giving him, he’d not done *that* good a job, but he’d managed to avoid any *completely* overt uses of the Force, like Telekinesis or Barriers, not that he was that good with the latter.

No, it was the hours after, as they’d done their best to ease the suffering of their injured, both his men and Dash’s, Stelog’s Lieutenant having only met minimal resistance, but even then they’d taken nearly as many casualties as the Padawan had. They didn’t even have Bacta patchs, only their scavenged Kolto packs, which were a fraction as effective. Jorel himself had one in his bag, but Hisku had been *adamant* that the only person he was supposed to use that on was *himself.*

He’d mentally added her to that list of one, but the point still stood.

That meant they’d tended to their wounded as best they could, but it hadn’t been enough, losing Dartrav, as well as two of Dash’s men. If only he could have slipped away for a moment, he could have healed them enough for them to pull through, but there was no way to explain the glowing blue drops of solidified Force, nor was he able to distract the others, with the attention of so many focused on him.

So they’d died.

When he could’ve saved them.

But he hadn’t.

Because that *wasn’t his mission.*

Their deaths tore at him, and he’d done his best to make sure there weren’t any more, constantly patrolling their perimeter, trying to feel any danger before it happened. However, Farsight was by far his *worst* skill, be it looking into the distance, or more than a few seconds into the feature, and there was so many disturbances in the Force from the fighting that he only got the faintest of feelings.

Following them, he was right as often as he was wrong, but he’d left his men protecting every direction, and they were able to pin down any attacker long enough for Hisku and him to arrive and lend their aid, his attaché leaning into the ‘never misses’ tell of her Force sensitivity, to line up shot after shot, while he ran interference, at one point picking up a piece of wreckage and hurling into the path of blasterbolt that was headed her way, the bolt spending itself scorching the metal, which went spinning off to the side.

But even those tapered off, and all that was left to wait.

The sun had set when the sounds of repulsorlifts could be heard, a small convoy seemingly headed their way. Jorel tensed, but Dash called out, “Don’t shoot; they’re ours!”

Holding fire, but carefully feeling outwards in the Force, the Jedi watched as the hovertrucks were let in through the gates, a large number of people getting out and hurrying into the factories they’d been defending for the past few hours. A few more moved to where their injured were being kept, carrying bags, and taking out medicine to use on them, changing out the drained kolto packs.

And Jorel didn’t recognize *any* of them.

Moving to Dash, the man talking with one of the new arrivals, the older man waved the woman away and turned towards the Padawan. “Yeah, kid?”

“Who are these people?” the Jedi asked, waving to the dozens upon dozens of unknowns, only able to feel a general sense of relief, excitement, and a hint of apprehension from them.

Dash stared at Jorel before the dark skinned man laughed, shaking his head. “You think we were it for the Resistance?” he questioned. “Kriff, boy, you *did,* didn’t you? No, we’re the tip of the spear, not the whole damn blade!” Laughing he clapped Jorel on the shoulder. “Kid, most don’t have the stones for what we do. They want to help, but to take up a blaster and put your life on the line. . .” He shook his head. “It’d be stupid to turn ‘em away, so the higher ups work with ‘em.”

“But,” Jorel objected, “the boy who couldn’t kill. Why-”

“Why didn’t we push him off on these vhetts?” the man asked, and the Padawan nodded. “Because he didn’t join them, he joined *us*, and he should’ve known what that meant. We got so many fools who think they can handle this, but they can’t, and they run, or *worse.”*

“Worse?” The Padawan asked, having an idea, but it was Hisku who answered.

“They try and turn traitor,” she said, studying Dash. “Try and make a deal with the Congressional Forces. For leniency, or profit.”

Dash nodded. “We never knew if they were spies, or just dishonorable idiots, but it happened. The civies do their job, and some of ‘em think that their jobs mean they’re in charge, but they’re *not*,” the man smiled, showing his teeth. “Ya get what ya pay for, and they ain’t willin’ to pay, like we are, so they get what we *let* ‘em get.”

Something about that rubbed Jorel the wrong way, and he felt compelled to point out, “That makes us sound like pirates.”

The older man frowned, before he nodded with a rueful expression, “Kriff, sounded kinda like that, didn’t I? Didn’t mean it that way, Kid. Just that when *someone* who sat in safety all day comes in and starts tryin’ to tell me and mine what to do,” he jerked his head the way the woman he was talking to went, “I ain’t got no time for ‘em. Walleye tells me to, sure, man’s done more than any of us, but someone who ain’t even willin’ to *fight* ‘gainst the kind of people that glassed Kernast? But they’re willin’ to use what we get, helpin’ themselves to a piece of the pie in the process? I’ll respect what they do for us, but not them, and if they try and pull the same druk the Cong’s did, well, then they ain’t any better than ‘em either.”

Dash looked over to Hisku, who was frowning at him. “And don’t think that *they* see us as any better than the Cong’s either. Some of ‘em are alright, but hearin’ some of ‘em talk ‘bout ‘petition’ the Republic’ and ‘the unnecessity o’ violence’. Puh,” the man spit. “They’re willin’ to be all high and mighty, right until they need ta bleed for their beliefs. And the ones that get a bit bloodied, and get scared? Nah,” he looked back to Jorel, “we don’t need that kind o’ poison. Like a wound that ain’t treated, they’ll rot everyone ‘round them.”

Jorel wanted to argue, that there had to be a better way than just *shooting them,* but, just like healing, convincing Dash *wasn’t his job.* Despite his best attempts, his feelings were easily read, as the older man, clapped him on the shoulder again. “I know it seems harsh, boy, but trust us. Better we lose a few cowards than we lose dozens of good men ‘cause someone sold us out. Now you and your girl grab a few men and go to city hall. Stelog wants ya to check in, but he ain’t in no rush. One thing, though. A tank with a grenade? Really? That’s somethin’ out of the HoloNet.”

The Jedi shrugged. “I, uh, that’s why I did it,” he lied. “They left the top unlocked.”

“Ha! Left it unlocked!” Dash laughed, waving the two of them away. “Glad you’re on *our* side, kid!”

<SWPP>

Being driven through the city, it was. . . odd. He’d expected the streets to be clear. They’re had been *active fighting* only an hour previous, when the last of the Cong forces had tried one final attack, only to be killed to the last man.

Instead, there was traffic.

Not a lot, but they’d used one of the civilian’s cars instead of the military ones, so people weren’t even getting out of their way. Then again, if there *were* any remaining Congressional forces, not announcing who they were was probably a good idea. Soon enough, they were at their destination, waved through by the Resistance fighters holding the perimeter. Jorel and Hisku were shown to a small, out of the way office, Stelog Waleye working at a terminal, absently waving for the two to sit.

A few moments later the leader of their cell turned to them, smiling a bit tiredly. “Good evening, Jorel. How are you holding up after your first command?”

The Padawan took a moment to try and formulate a response, one that was close enough to the truth to be believed, but also non-jedi. “I’m fine,” he shrugged. “What are we doing next?”

“I’m managing our people here, *you’re* doing nothing,” Waleye told him. “Got a report from Dash that you were stalking the perimeter like a starving krath hound. How many people did you lose?”

Jorel winced. “Seven sir. I’m sorry, I should’ve done more. I understand if you don’t want me-”

“And that’s why you’re gonna take a break,” Stelog interrupted. “Dank Farrik, boy, the fact that *any* of your people survived that ambush’s a minor miracle, let alone most! Girl, you’ve been in fights,” he said, turning to Hisku, “how should they have faired, if y’all went in together, and they didn’t have you two?”

The Chiss woman considered the question. “Failure,” she announced. “We had no anti-armor weaponry, and the resistance fighters are. . . undisciplined. A few would survive, either captured or fled.”

“The Cong’s aren’t takin’ prisoners,” the older man informed her. “And you didn’t catch ‘em with their pants down like Kiri did. Boy, how’d you even manage it?”

“Grenade through the top hatch. They left it unlocked,” the Padawan shrugged. “I, uh, had a feeling it’d work.”

Waleye gave him a flat look, before shaking his head, running a hand along his face. “I’m *definitely* getting’ ya a midi test when we take the capitol. Dranus *wept*, Jorel, tryin’ that sort of things how recruits *die.* But, it’s also what makes people like *us* dangerous. Ya did good. Real good, and don’t doubt that, but ya need some time off, and that’s what you’re gonna do. Your new assignment is to head back to base with a few others, and hold it down while we manage things here.”

“Today has been a win, and a big one,” the Resistance leader stated, pride in his voice. “With the base we hit, and the convoys, the local congressional forces don’t have enough to hold this area anymore, and we can get dug in like they were, only better. So you and your girl go back, rest, come down from this, and know that those men didn’t die ‘cause of what you did, the others are living because of it. Understood?”

Jorel turned that thought over in his mind, and *knew* he could’ve done more, but, just like the nameless boy who’d died rather than fight, and who the Jedi did nothing to save, it was another death that was needed to save even more. Dash’s own words also echoed back to him, and the Padawan had wanted to say that wasn’t the way the Jedi worked, but the Jedi weren’t real to these people, not really. They were some abstract, mythical warriors, where Jorel, Hisku, and Stelog’s own Force sensitivity was treated like some special magic that set them apart from others.

**Isn’t it?** a dark part of him asked, and he ignored it. “It doesn’t feel like it,” the young man said, “But, that kind of feeling isn’t the same as the one that told me I could take down the tank. It’s just. . . I wish nobody had to die.”

“Me too,” Waleye agreed, Jorel looking up at him in surprise. “Really. If we could make things better without pickin’ up a blaster, that’d be fine by me. But peace only works when neither side fires a shot, and the Congs have been firing a *lot* of shots, thinkin’ we’d never shoot back. That’s why we need to do things the right way, not the Cong’s way. Do you know why we hit this place today?”

“No, why?” the Jedi asked, the order to move having seemed completely arbitrary.

“’Cause today’s a holiday, so the factories are empty,” Stelog responded. “This way we didn’t have to fight the workers, didn’t have to kill some to get the others in line, and stoppin’ some tibanna-brained idiot who’s heard the Cong’s propaganda and tries to throw a spanner in the works. It’s also why the Cong’s set up that ‘demonstration’ for everyone to see, since they wouldn’t be at their jobs. It woulda been easier to hit ‘em tomorrow, or next week, but a lot more people would die. And, yeah, we probably took heavier losses doing it this way, but that’s on me for ordering it, not on you for makin’ sure the cost wasn’t higher. So, you go back, and know you did a good job.” Stelog smiled, “Understood, soldier?”

“I. . . yes, sir,” the Jedi replied.

“And you, Hisku,” the older man said, turning to look at her. “The boy’s helped you from snappin’, but you need to help him now. Got that?”

“I do, sir,” she replied stiffly.

He winked at her, “Good on ya, lass. Now, I’ve got more documents to review. If I knew winning would take this much paperwork, I mighta dragged my heels a bit,” he chucked. “You two are dismissed. Have a nice night. From what I heard, both of ya earned it.”

<SWPP>

It was a week before they were called back to the city of B’skonako, during which they’d had nothing to do but train, and talk. “Tell me the truth,” Jorel asked Hisku, one evening, after he’d set up the sound bubble to make sure they weren’t overheard. “If it was the Flock, how’d they have handled the attack. How many people would they’ve lost.”

Her answer of “None” hadn’t helped, though she’d kept going, likely because of his dispirited expression. “But we wouldn’t have done things the way you had to. The Resistance,” she lifted her blaster, “their equipment is sub-standard, their discipline even less, and I’m not sure they’ve even heard of tactics.”

“Alright, what if they were here, with this equipment,” he’d argued. “If they were dropped here, and had to do this mission.”

Hisku had considered that, speaking slowly. “If the Flock were to take B’skonako, we would attack at night, not on a holiday. Separate teams entering the city at different points. Timed attacks, so we hit at once. If the enemy was ready, we’d pull back, and try again a different night.” She shot him a look, “And no one would charge a tank.”

“Hey,” he’d smiled, “charging the tank *worked.* Could that have worked if we’d tried it?”

She shook her head. “No. Night operations are. . . *difficult*. I could. You could. The others, no. The one we did wasn’t a real night operation, and *our* part was the only one that worked to plan. And these people. . . they’re not enough. If they could have done it, they would have still taken losses. Less losses. But losses. If you want to know what you should have done, ask the General when we’re done. I’ve led my squad, and that’s all. This, this is not what a sergeant should be doing.”

“But what about an attaché?” he’d asked, but she’d just shook her head.

“I don’t know what an attaché does. Not anymore. Can, can you ask the General, when we get back?” she’d requested.

At that, he’d smiled wryly. “I’m pretty sure he won’t mind if you ask him *yourself.”* At her affronted look, he’d pointed out, “A sergeant might not be able to ask, but an attaché to his Padawan. That’s, just, like two layers. Like. . .” he’d *dredged* his memory, trying to remember all the ranks. “Like a Private asking a Sergeant something! Totally okay!”

She hadn’t said she would, but she hadn’t said she *wouldn’t* either, and Jorel figured that was the best he was going to get.

Now, the two of them were driven into the city in a military speedertruck, and, looking around, the city looked the same. However, reaching out in the Force, it seemed. . . *brighter?* Maybe it was because he’d been there for the express purpose of killing people, but the city of B’skonako just felt. . . better. Calmer. More hopeful.

It wasn’t anything he could pin down, but it just. . . *was.*

When they arrived at city hall, they were once again shown to the same room as before, Stelog sitting behind his desk, still working. The only indicator that he’d left was that he was wearing a different shirt.

“Jorel, Hisku, good to see you both,” he’d nodded. “You feeling better?”

His attaché nodded, and the Padawan answered, “Yeah. Um. If we’ve taken over, why aren’t you in the Mayor’s office?”

“Because I’m not the Mayor,” the man answered easily. “They current Mayor was put in power because of his relationship to the congressional cabal, but he’s agreed to work with us, and they’re be an election after this is over. If he’s done a good enough job to deserve the seat, it’s his. If he’s not, we’ll make sure it goes to whoever the people decide. But you’re not here for me, you’re here for you.”

He could practically feel Hisku perk up, and the Jedi had to admit, after a week of nothing but half-training, he was ready for some action as well. “So what’s our next mission?” he asked.

“You don’t have one. You’re done here,” Waleye informed them both.

The chiss woman stiffened, as Jorel asked carefully, “Are, are you kicking us out of the rebellion?” *Have they realized we’re spies?* he thought, as, while he’d tried to be careful, they hadn’t been careful *enough.*

Stelog’s surprised, booming laughter suggested the Padawan was incorrect. “Oh *Gods* no, Jorel. No, you and Hisku are good. *Real* good. And we need talent like that. No, you and a few others are being transferred to the central continent. We’ve done the majority of the work in this area, and other than defensive work, there’s nothing to do but dig in and help supply the front lines. That’s where *you* two will be going, helping us win this fight once and for all! I put in the request, and it’s been approved.”

The Resistance Cell Leader smiled broadly. “No, this time tomorrow? You two will be working at *Resistance Headquarters.* I’d say make me proud, but I’m sure you will!”