**Arc 2 Chapter 6**

Jorel was coming to realize that life in the military was, in its own way, very like life in the Temple. Oh, they couldn’t seem more different in a variety of ways. The food was better, clothes were more comfortable, and, he had a definite sense of doing *something* as part of Knight Er’izma’s legion, however informally, but the pace of life could be described in the exact same way.

Hurry up and *wait.*

Oh, a Jedi wants to talk to a lowly initiate like you? *Better hurry!* Oh, he’s actually busy with something so you needed to sit until he was ready, where any distraction would be held against you for ‘lacking focus’? *Better Wait!*

And both states of activity and inactivity came without warning, without explanation, and without any set *end*. Well, in the Temple they had. In the Flock Jorel found he often found he had all three, though that didn’t make the waiting any less annoying, and without a Temple Elder around to notice his announce he didn’t have to hide it.

*I’m comparing life in the Military to the Temple. Why is the Military winning?* Jorel couldn’t help but think, before shaking his head. No, the only reason things were better was that this was a Jedi-*run* Military unit, which, other than not supposed to exist because of something he vaguely remembered hearing about in the Temple, wasn’t that bad.

In a way, Jorel thought he should be grateful, being left behind to sit around. Getting dragged down on diplomatic contacts was *really kriffing boring.* He’d only been brought to a half-dozen, but they were always tedious. They’d arrive, the locals would be surprised, they’d meet with the leaders, the leaders would flagrantly lie to their faces, Er’izma would, with varying degrees of subtlety, remind them of the small army he had at the ready, and then the leaders would be, if not honest, then *less* duplicitous.

Then would come out the double-talk, and the ‘I’m a Jedi, who are you trying to fool, I know exactly what you mean’ implications from Er’izma, and then the haggling, *so much haggling,* and then they’d be done. Heck, most of the time they didn’t even *need* to use their forces, just the threat was enough, prompting the Padawan to ask if they *really* needed to tow around a small army wherever they went, now *intimately* aware of how many credits doing so actually *cost*.

“Ah, welcome to the paradox of war, young Jorel,” Er’izma had smiled. “For it is when you have the required forces, that you do not need to use them, and only when you do not have the required forces, does their need make itself known. It is because of their presence that we may do things the. . . *subtle* way.”

“‘Subtle way’?” Jorel had repeated incredulously. “What’s subtle about a battlecruiser in orbit above their capital city?”

“The fact that the capital city is *not on fire,*” the Knight had replied easily. “Jedi are not unkillable gods, Padawan, even if many *act* as if they are, so sure that the Force will protect them *personally,* instead of the galaxy as a whole. Even those who present a façade of invincibility know that if, for example, the king of the planet they’re there to help is trying to kill them, they are going to need a good amount of chaos and misdirection to get to the one that can call off the hunters. Or at least the Force tells them what they have to do, which is on the *outside* the same,” the older man had said, having made clear his distaste of trusting the Force without reservation. “Which works, right up until it doesn’t.”

Jorel thought he could see where this was going, but had to ask, “But they’re still trying to kill *Jedi.* They have to know that it won’t work, or, if it does, it’s only a matter of time before more show up.”

“That *is* what the Temple suggests,” Er’izma had nodded, “but to address your main contention. Most do not understand the Force.”

“Most *Jedi* don’t understand the Force,” the Padawan had shot back with a bit of a smug grin. “At least according Grandmaster Yoda.”

Said smug grin died under the unimpressed look of his Jedi Master. The larger man had eventually noted, tone cold, “You’d be best to ignore the words of those like the Grandmaster, Padawan, because they know so much more than you, but worse have forgotten what it was like *not* to know, that they can truly think they are helping, yet set you astray with every phrase. In the most abstract sense, Master Yoda is correct, in that no one truly understands the Force *perfectly.* However, such advice could just as easily lead one to disregard the words of those wiser than themselves *because* they don’t ‘understand’ the Force, just as easily as the blanket advice to trust the words one’s elders could lead to slavish, unthinking obedience. However, *as you know*, that is not what I meant.”

Jorel had nodded, chastised, and tried to return to their original topic. “So, most leaders can’t understand the Force, so they underestimate it?”

“Indeed,” Er’izma nodded. “The masses might see Jedi as unknowable, nigh magical, but leaders, who know full well how the beliefs of the publics may be amiss, may even be *responsible* for the publics misunderstanding of important topics, believe themselves intelligent and wise. Most are the former, but not the latter, and so think themselves superior for ‘understanding’ how the Jedi cannot be even half of what people think they are. However, those people are *acutely* aware of the power of belief, and so they ‘know’ that Jedi are threats which must be removed, but not to be feared enough to obey. A couple dozen turbolaser batteries, aimed at their military installations, however, is something they *can* understand.”

And so Knight Er’izma was meeting with the leaders of the government of the Pengalan system. Well, of Pengalan V, which was the only habitable planet in the system. Pengalan VI was an icy tundra, lacking in any resources, and while there were some mining towns on Pengalan IV, it was a hot, desert planet even *Jorel* didn’t want to go to, let alone the more arctically inclined Chiss. Thankfully, they were rarely deployed, and the more varied climates of Pengalan V, Made of forests and swamps and plains and mountains, seemed much more comfortable.

All of which led to his current circumstances, waiting for his Master to return, having instructed Jorel to stay behind, for reasons he refused to explain. At least, unlike in a diplomatic meeting, Jorel was free to browse the holonet until Er’izma returned. Honestly, he wasn’t sure what he was looking for, and his thoughts turned to Anaïs, but there was no useful push from the Force, telling to look up some planet or another, only a sense of distant longing.

*“The General is returning!”* came the announcement, an hour later, and Jorel dropped his datapad on his desk, standing, Sergreant Hisku, who’d been looking something up on *her* Datapad from his couch, mirroring the action.

They were both armored, in case negotiations became. . . *aggressive*, but they apparently hadn’t. Despite that, though, the Padawan couldn’t help the feeling that things weren’t going to go as smoothly as they seemed.

Sure enough, Hisku looked into the distance, listening to something from the commpiece in her ear, and wheeled around to look at Jorel. “We’re to meet the General in his office.”

Nodding, the two of them made their way through the ship, everyone still at low-alert, and waited for Er’izma to arrive. He did so almost half an hour later, with his XO trailing, the stern-faced Togrutan looking ever more annoyed than normal. Smiling at the Padawan and his attaché, the Knight gestured for the pair to follow him in, taking a seat behind his desk as the older woman stood behind him, and to his right. Mirroring him, Jorel sat in the one of the two chairs before the Jedi’s desk and Sergeant Hisku stood behind him, instead of taking the other seat.

 “Now, I’m sure you’re wondering why I asked you not to attend the meeting with Pengalan’s governmental body,” the Knight announced, waiting for the Padawan’s nod before continuing. “It was to keep open certain. . . *options.* Certain options that some disagree with,” he added, shooting a professionally amused look over his shoulder at Senior Commander Zara. “However, I have to ask, young Jorel, do you think you are ready for deployment?”

*What?* The Padawan thought, surprised, sitting up straighter. His first instinct was to say not only yes, but *hell* yes! However, he could practically feel Sergeant Hisku’s objection behind him, even if, restricted by formality as she was, she wouldn’t say anything until *after* he’d answered. And, more than that, he *knew* what she would say, and, at least in one respect, she *wasn’t wrong.*

“No,” he sighed, after a long moment of thought, the admission almost painful. He’d wanted to go out and *do* something, but he *also* had to be realistic about his capabilities, lest he and Hisku be captured again, *or worse*. “No, I’m not.” Er’izma didn’t reply, only raising a single eyebrow, so the Padawan explained, “Watching the troops take down that fake-freighter, I’m not there yet. I’ve been getting better at fighting on my own, but I haven’t trained with groups yet. That hasn’t been part of what I’ve been learning, Master.” And the implied *because that’s the way you’ve arranged my training* hopefully didn’t need to be said.

The Knight smiled, glad at his Padawan’s ‘humility’ or whatever, but his words surprised the younger man. “Then it’ll be good that you won’t need any of that for the mission I have in mind for you. Are you ready for deployment, not in a formal squad, but as you are now?”

“What are you going to have me *do?*” Jorel asked, confused, but his master just continued to smile enigmatically. “Then, I mean, I guess so? I need to know what you’re asking of me, before I can tell you if I can do it.”

“A good attitude to have, but one the galaxy rarely lets one indulge in, especially in our line of work,” Er’izma agreed, which didn’t answer his question *at all.*

However, Jorel had to ask, “Being a Jedi?”

“*Combat,*” the military leader disagreed, “Though being attuned to the Force makes those problems both exponentially worse, while also many times more survivable. Do you think, if you were in a combat situation, you could extract yourself and Ms. Hisku’biatha’pusi? Assume an enemy force of similar strength to the one you escaped on Dell, and with fighter support in approximately three minutes if needed.”

Without that last bit, Jorel would’ve said no, but if they’d had that back then, they could’ve called in a Strike, bunkered down, and escaped in the confusion. “With that force, and reinforcements, then yes,” he answered confidently. He’d thought about what’d gone wrong, about all the ways they could’ve escaped, or asked for help, or just taken another way out. He wasn’t sure if those would’ve *worked,* but these last few months Jorel hadn’t spent idle, able to work under an instructor that had *pushed* him, in a way the Temple Masters had refused to for years, and he was confident of his abilities to do *that.*

And if he failed, like he’d failed then? He had a poison-covered trump card in his back pocket, a black ace he’d rather not use ever again.

Jorel’s Master nodded, sending the Padawan such an understanding look the younger man wondered if the Knight had read his mind. “In that case, you are being assigned to Captain Victbray Thul for the duration of hostilities here, unless I reassign you. Remember, no matter what he, or anyone else may say or imply, if you have to choose between completing the mission, and surviving, you are to survive, but it must be a decision *between* the two, am I clear?”

“Yes, Master,” the Padawan nodded, recalling their conversation after Dell, and on the worth of his life, compared to that of others. He didn’t *like* what his Master had said, but Jorel *was* a Padawan learner, so he’d go along with it, at least for now.

The older man shifted his gaze to Hisku. “That goes for you as well, Sergeant. The mission may be important, but it does *not* come first, understood?”

While her reply of, “Yes, Sir!” was almost automatic, Jorel could hear the unease in her voice, wanting to disagree but simultaneously not wanting to do so to her commanding officer. Almost despite herself, she spoke again, hesitantly putting forward, “But, sir, that isn’t how I was trained.”

*“Sergeant,”* Commander Zara rebuked, but Er’izma held up a forstalling hand.

“Sergeant,” Er’izma stated, straddling the line between impersonally professional and kind. “If you were part of your previous squadron, you would be correct, but you are not. Your *central* mission, which will not change, is to assist Padawan Drettz, and to keep him, if not in one piece, then alive. If you die, you cannot do that, so, pursuant to that directive, *your* life comes before whatever mission you may have at the moment, unless *I* deem otherwise. I have seen far too many good soldiers throw themselves on a grenade to protect others, when merely kicking the damn thing to the side would’ve almost certainly achieved the same result. *Am I understood?*”

Hisku’s *“Yes, Sir!”* was a lot more crisp, though Jorel, even without meaning to, could still feel her inner turmoil and uncertainty. If *he* could feel it, the General certainly could as well, but made no further comment, instead turning his attention back on the younger man.

“In that case, you are to serve as my eyes and ears on this planet, Padawan Jorel. The Force itself suggested this course of action, which is why you have not been publicly seen at my side by the Pengalan government. They have made many statements about the nature of this conflict, of a revolt by workers in the countryside who refuse to follow the will of the people, but I have. . . *doubts.* You will work *under* Captain Thul to insert yourselves in the ‘Resistance’, and discover that which would be hidden from our forces otherwise. You will keep your armor, but you must hide your lightsaber, and your status as a Jedi. Similarly, Sergeant Hisku’biatha’pusi, you will be issued field-armor to wear. It will not be as complete as your normal set, but should do the job without raising suspicion. Any other questions can be answered by your commanding officer. Dismissed.”

Jorel stood, but had to ask, “Master, if the Force told you we should do this, why didn’t you lead with that?”

“Because, Padawan, what the Force suggested *does not matter,”* the Knight stressed. “If you were not ready, you *might* become so during the mission, perhaps even ‘discover something about yourself’ during the following events,” the older man almost sneered, his disgust rippling outwards through the Force, “or you would’ve *died,* as you almost did on Dell, had you not been *supremely* lucky. Remember, Padawan Jorel, the Force is an *advisor,* not your *Master,* and cannot be trusted the way you are to trust me. I will *not* sacrifice you for *any* reason, the Force has, and will again, if followed blindly.”

The man’s darker feeling subsided as quickly as they had appeared, replaced only with calm weariness. “I have lost Padawans who trusted the Force blindly and implicitly, who put their Faith within that which does not honor such an act, and I will lose Padawans in the future who do not listen. I do not wish for you to be one of them. Stay safe, *both* of you.”

<SWPP>

Navigating the maze of corridors, they found the ready room that was being used by the Captain, two dozen other men and women already seated, going over datapads, all of whom lazily looked up as they walked in. An older man, dark haired, but gray at the temples, nodded to the pair. “Welcome. Glad to see the General was right.”

*That* statement caused the focus of the others to tighten on them, several eyes darting down to the saber on Jorel’s hip. “We got a Paddy?” a reptilian man asked with distaste, green scaled brows knitting in annoyance. “Babysittin’ isn’t what I signed up for.”

“That Padawan could kill you in about thirty seconds flat,” the older man told the Nikto, Jorel only recognizing the species because of a Jedi at the Temple of the same race. “Not like the last two. Read the reports I send you.”

“The last two?” Jorel couldn’t help but ask, frowning, but the Captain shook his head.

“Not important, how much has the General briefed you?” the older man asked in turn.

Sharing a look with Hisku, the Padawan replied, “Not much. We’re undercover, and I can’t show that I’m a Jedi. That’s it.”

Captain Thul sighed, “Alright. We’re doing a pretty standard Guerilla Insertion ploy. Groups like this Resistance tend to recruit from everyone, they have to in order to work, but while they have a central core of personnel, this lets infiltrators in. That’s where *we* come in. We’re gonna be landing in a stealth craft and disembarking in the town of Edgewater, here, probably named because it’s at the edge of the water,” he explained dryly, the display behind him indicating a port-side town. “They’ve got a small port, and from what we can find out, have a bit of a smuggling problem. Alpha team, led by myself, will disperse and spread the rumor that the local government is going to hit it, and hit it hard. They’ve asked us to do so, which means the rumor has the benefit of being true, so the moles the Resistance in the government will confirm our story.”

“Wait, when you say ‘hit’. . .?” Jorel asked.

The older man nodded. “Targeted orbital bombardment. It’s a dumb kriffing move, and one that’ll do the *opposite* of what the government *should* want, which is why *we’re* looking behind the scenes. That town’s gonna be wiped off the map, and a lot of people are going to die, but less than if we warned them. That’ll *also* give us our in. You see we,” he waved around the room, “are ‘smugglers’. After the first ship tried to escape and got shot down, we ran for the hills, and are joining the Resistance to get revenge. Gamma Team, it’ll be your job to steal a ship and set it to fly out remotely, for the *Dove* to blow out of the sky.”

“Yes, Sir,” a horned woman nodded, the protrusions forming a crown that poked up through her hair, and her face marked with markings that almost looked like tribal tattoos. “Wire it to blow in upper atmo if we need it?”

The Captain considered that, then shook his head. “No, we don’t know their surveillance capabilities. If the *Dove* doesn’t hit, either the Cranes will, or someone’ll board it. Delta team, your group will be looking for resistance contacts to offload weapons. We’ll give a crate or two of bugged blasters, with more ‘on your ship’ to sell them. If none of us can make contact, contact us and the real smugglers to offer as an in.”

“Understood,” a Chiss man with long hair nodded, professional expression shifting to a criminal’s easy smile. “War sucks, but it sure does make for good business.”

“Indeed,” Thul remarked dryly, “Beta team, you’ve got Padawan Jorel. You’ll be playing bait, the kind of well-meaning strays smugglers like to put up. You don’t know the situation on the ground, only that your captain, yours truly, decided we were coming here next.” Looking over to Jorel, the Captain explained, “Guerilla movements do a surprising amount of recruiting by ‘informing’ dumb young kids of their ‘plight’. They all whitewash it, but how much they do is part of what we’re here to find out.”

“I’m not a dumb young kid,” Jorel objected, prompting laughs from half the squadron.

“Kid, you’re fresh from the Temple,” the horned woman informed him. “For this, you still are.”

He wanted to argue, but got the sense that any more objections would just be taken as proof, so held his tongue.

“You’ll seem to be enough of one to catch the notice of recruiters,” the Captain informed him. “But you move differently enough it needs to be accounted for. Alpha and Beta teams will be from one ‘ship’, Gamma and Delta from another. When we’re in, try to keep in touch, but don’t push it. They *will* try to separate us to lessen our existing loyalties and leave us dependent on them. Those of you who can operate independently, do so if you have to, those of you who can’t pick one or two others and refuse being cut off from them, but let them split you up into different teams.”

Beside Jorel, Hisku stiffened. “Sir, I have orders to stay with Padawan Jorel,” she stated firmly, ready to fight him on it.

However, Captain Thul just smiled. “I meant the others. I’m aware of the General’s. . . *practices*. No, there’s only one way you’ll be allowed to stick together in a situation like this. It’ll be one you’ll need to sell, and need to *not* budge on.”

“Whatever it is, I’ll do it!” Jorel’s attaché promised, which prompted chuckles from those assembled. “What?”

“*Well,*” the Captain remarked, glancing between the two of them. “The only way you’ll be able to stay together, is if you two were *lovers.*”