**Chapter 13**

Jorel *hated* pirates. He had for years. Murderous, rapist, slaving *scum*. But now he had a new reason to hate them. A reason he never would’ve expected, but, in retrospect, should’ve been obvious.

Pirates kept *terrible* records.

They didn’t record *half* of the things they grabbed, just throwing it in piles to have someone else go through later, and *those* people didn’t keep centralized logs. Sometimes they were on local terminals, some of which had been destroyed taking the place over, or they were recorded in one of over a *dozen* different locations, all named variations on ‘stuff’. There were three ‘loot’ databases, four ‘goods’ lists, and one directory that was *actually* just named ‘stuff’.

And they’d gone through *all* of it.

Not him personally, *thank the Force*. He was just one of four teams that was sorting through the almost literally *mountains* of captured goods. They’d been at it for *weeks* and they were finally, *finally*, done with it, or close. They’d been working without rest to do so, not sure if, or when, they’d have more visitors.

One group had popped in, two Frigates and three corvettes, but Er’izma had sensed them coming. He hadn’t used Battle Meditation, he hadn’t needed to; the gun platforms that their people had repaired, then overcharged, had ripped their attackers apart, leaving only a single Frigate intact to be captured. Doing so had caused several of the gun platforms to detonate, the overpowering only making them only good for the few shots they got off, but every ship they had was going to be packed to maximum capacity as it was, and the *Dove’s* crew stretched thin over all of the vessels. They were at maximum capacity, and they weren’t going to leave anything here intact when they left.

The chances for more pirates to drop by were slim, but they weren’t nonexistent, so everyone was pulling close to double shifts to get it done. Had the pirates kept *complete* records they could’ve grabbed the useful stuff and been gone in a week, but every one of them seemed to have had hold-out stashes, valuables mixed in with dross, and other ways to conceal things of value from everyone else. It was to the point that, short of interrogating everyone, they’d never get the locations of all of it without searching the entire place, even if they hadn’t killed close to ninety percent of the pirates already.

Thankfully, almost all of the slaves were on the asteroid base and the cruiser. Not all of them, it seemed almost every captain had a *personal* slave, but the majority of them had been safely freed and been receiving medical attention from the *Dove’s* substantial medical corp. Every squadron had a medic, and with combat concluded they’d all been hard at work tending to those that’d been in bondage.

He’d met them, having asked Er’izma if he could, and they’d walked among the hundreds of captured innocents. He’d been happy to see them freed, but the longer he’d listened to them, the worse he felt. Some were sure they’d been sent by the Republic. They hadn’t been. Some demanded to know why they hadn’t got there sooner. But the worst? The worst were the ones who stared blankly. Those who, when he gently sensed their minds, didn’t believe this was real, that this was all a dream, and they’d wake up and go back to being starved, beaten, and *worse*.

Jorel didn’t hold their feelings against them, but he hadn’t visited them again, and Er’izma had, after asking if he wanted to, just nodded sadly and let him get back to work.

However there was another group he’d wanted to see, to talk to, but he’d been putting it off. With these last few pieces of loot logged, though, he was running out of time. “Found something I need to go ask about. Force knows I have no idea what’s going on with ths. I’ll be back in a few,” he called to Sergeant Hisku who herself looked on the edge of falling asleep face first into her datapad, empty caf cans taking up a fifth of her desk.

She gave a half-hearted wave, focused on her own task, and he left casually. Normally he’d go to the guards, give them the name of the person and a description of the item, and they’d get back to him in an hour. Not this time. He calmed his nerves, walking down to the old slave pens, where they now kept the captured pirates. Their prisoners were treated better than the slaves were, with proper food and nothing asked of them other than to stay there.

He’d asked Er’izma why they didn’t use the pirates to move everything for them. The dark-skinned man had stopped, turned to look at him, and asked, “Why aren’t we using the prisoners to go to the areas where they’ve secretly stored all the high value weapons and other items, and move them for us?”

That’d killed *that* idea.

It was a few hallways, a turbolift, and a few more hallways, and then he was there. Looking around, there seemed to be more guards than usual, but with them needing less people to move things, that made sense. “Found another doohickey?” one of the guards, a corporal Teegan, asked.

“Yeah, but I’m going to talk to him,” he replied with a casualness he didn’t feel. “It’s their leader’s, and if they lie it might blow up.”

“So it needs that *Jedi* touch?” the helmeted woman asked teasingly, and he nodded. She tapped something into the tiny computer built into her armor, flipping up the arm piece to get to it. The door to her side opened, leading to the pens, the rancid scent causing him to hesitate.

“Aren’t we letting them, you know, *bathe*?” he couldn’t help but ask.

The corporal laughed. “We’ve offered, but they decided they’d rather stay in their pens when they found out we’d be watchin’. Glad the commander sprung for the air filters,” she smiled, her tone giving away her expression despite her full helmet, as she tapped the front of the facepiece. “Puckrev’s in the back, in the solitary cells. Have fun.”

“I’ll try, ma’am,” he replied, not having to fake his unease.

“Hey, I’m not a ma’am until I’m a lieutenant!” she called back in good cheer as he walked inside, the door closing behind him.

The inside was a converted hanger, the storage meant for cargo full of cages, with larger mass-holding areas in the open areas where ships would land. Going through the records, this installation had originally been a Republic military outpost, over a thousand years ago. Somewhere along the way it’d been forgotten, the hyperspace routes lost to time, until the pirates had found it, maybe stumbling across records of it. From there they’d likely re-mapped the hyperspace route, and then had a pre-made, untraceable base.

It’d been in use for over a decade, as a place to hold goods before they was traded on the black markets in the Core, which both were apparently more profitable and, surprisingly, *existed.* That’d been an unpleasant surprise, as for some stupid reason, he’d thought such things had just been something that didn’t *exist* in the Core, starting in the Colonies and going outwards.

That said, when the Puckrev, the pirate in charge when they’d arrived, had taken over, killing the owner before him, he’d decided to stop being a waystation and go into business himself. Ironically, the Bothan he’d killed had been right, and doing so had led to official attention, and his downfall. The logs were never just items, but full of rumors, gossip, and history intermixed with the data, giving a more complete picture of what this place had been like, a little bit of hell hidden away just past the edge of the Core.

Now, with the surviving pirates jeering, hollering, and occasionally spitting at him, as Jorel walked down the halls to talk to the pirate leader, easily leaning out of the way of the projectiles.

Moving to the back, where the individual cells were, the bottom floor of a three-deck storage area, Jorel noted the lights had been broken, keeping the area in perpetual shadow. *Fits* he thought, approaching the human in ragged clothing, leaning against the bars, arms folded.

“So, someone in charge at last,” the leader of the pirates commented, the others falling silent as he talked. “But the Apprentice, not the Master? Should’ve known you Jedi were involved.”

“Trevhar Puckrev?” Jorel asked, keeping himself completely calm.

The man smoothly pushed himself off the back wall, moving smoothly, as he stepped into the dim light, giving a mocking bow. “The one and only, accept no substitutes,” he replied.

Jorel had expected the man to be hardened, scarred, with a voice like gravel. Or maybe diseased, with lesions, voice thin and reedy. To have some outward indication of his corruption. Instead the man was smooth, confident, and charismatic. Feeling him out with the Force, the man’s presence, faint as it was, stood strongly, just as self-assured as he appeared to be. It was one tinged with the Dark Side though, giving lie to the man’s evil in a way that his outward appearance did not.

“And you are?” the prisoner asked, with a sly smile that held the hint of an edge to it.

“Padawan Jorel,” he replied. Jedi were not supposed to lie, and even though he knew *that* was a lie, but he was trying to present the most ‘jedi’-like appearance he could.

Puckrev nodded, “Good to meet you, *Padawan* Jorel. What brings you to my humble abode?”

“Information,” he replied. “I want to know why.”

“Why?” the pirate laughed, as if he didn’t have a care in the world. “You’re going to need to be more specific. Why are you here? Why am I a pirate? Why am I so damn handsome?”

“The second,” Jorel specified, stomping on the twinge of annoyance he felt. This man had killed innocents by the speeder-load, had betrayed his superiors, and had personally tortured over a dozen people to death for fun. Jorel had found the man’s *personal* logs, and, foolishly, read them. “Why hurt people that have done nothing to you?”

His question sent the pirate leader laughing once again. “Oh, I’d heard you Jedi were naïve, but you’re *really* asking me *that*?” Some of the other pirates around him laughed as well, making fun of him.

Jorel ignored them, focusing on the monster in front of him. “That’s not an answer,” he noted, calmly.

“Because I *can,*” Puckrev grinned. “Because me and mine are as much of your Republic as you and yours are. Because for all of your government’s claim to help all, only the Core and the Colonies get something for nothing. Me and mine? The Republic does nothing but take, take, take. We’re just claiming what we’re *owed.*”

“By stealing from the rich and giving it to the poor?” the Padawan asked.

The pirate scoffed, “By stealing from the lazy and giving it to *me.* *I’ve* worked for it. *I’ve* bled for it. What have *they* done? Been born right? Sucked up to the government? Bent the knee to steal from others? We all pay taxes, we’re just are a bit more targeted in the taxing then they are.”

“And the rape? The torture? The *slavery?*” Jorel demanded, taking a step forward, his focus narrowing.

“Who do you think we *sell* these people to? The *Rims?*” the other man asked scornfully. “All our products go one way, and all our credits the other. What do you think will happen to the Spice you ‘confiscate’? I’d be shocked if a *fourth* of it makes it to holding.”

“If you mean the cooking spices, we’ll be using them. If you mean the drugs, I’d be surprised too, as it’s currently on it’s way to the nearest star,” he commented, enjoying the scowl that flashed across the pirate’s face.

“*Jedi*,” the caged man spat. “You think you’re so much better than us because you can do magic?”

“No, we *know* we’re better than you because *we don’t hurt innocents*,” the Padawan sneered back, taking a second to pull himself back to center. “So you do this, hurt those who just want to live peacefully, because you’re paid to? Because others do it, that makes it okay? So until everyone *else* is good, *you* shouldn’t have to be?”

The pirate’s eyes narrowed. “No, we do it because we *can*. Because we have the strength to get what we want, so we take it. You think the rich *work?* No, they stay in their shining towers and take it from the weak. We’re just doing the same thing, and we’d keep doing it if those elites didn’t send their attack dogs to stop us,” he accused. “And that’s all you are, little Jedi-ling. A dog of the Republic, keeping the elites fat and happy. If we hadn’t started getting successful enough to threaten *their* monopoly on theft, you’d never be here.”

Jorel stared at the man, focusing on him, and, underdeveloped as his Force Empathy was, he could tell the man *truly believed* what he said. “We’re here because you stole our supplies,” the Jedi pointed out.

“Yes, the lifeblood of trade, which only the Republic is allowed to tax for-”

“No,” Jorel interrupted. “You *literally* stole our supplies. Three hundred units of medicinal bacta. Four thousand ration packs. Twenty-Two shipping containers of tibanna gas. We were going to pick it up in Delle, and that’s where we found out that you’d stolen it. Then we tracked you here.”

Puckrev stared at him, shocked, then started to laugh. This wasn’t mocking, but an angry, malicious sound. “You’re telling me you’re here by *chance?* That for all your moralizing, for all your holier-than-thou behavior, *you’re* here for selfish reasons, because we stole what was *yours?*”

The Padawan bridled at the insinuation. “We *heard* about you because we were restocking supplies. Even if you *hadn’t* stolen *our* supplies, we still would’ve hunted you down like the rats you are.”

“Taken us down? We’re not defeated until we’re in prison,” the pirate promised with a snarl. “So far you’ve just held us for a few weeks on our own ship. Are we actually going to go anywhere, or you going to wait until we escape?”

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” Jorel told them, “And you’ll be in prison, a real prison, before the end of next week.”

The other man smiled, his presence in the Force still brimming with anger and hatred even though he looked calm. “In that case, we better get started.”

Jorel looked at the man, confused, before he felt the Force practically scream in his ears, throwing himself to the side as a knife flew by where his head was a moment ago. Feeling a tug, his lightsaber was pulled away from him, yanked into the hands of the pirates behind him. Only they weren’t in their cages, and their doors standing wide open.

“I believe it’s time to take back what’s ours, boys!” Puckrev called from behind him, the pirates cheering as they opened up their cage doors, a few quickly moving to unlock those that were still secure. Out from under ragged clothing came knives, metal bars, and other scavenged weapons.

Jorel wanted to warn the others, but he didn’t carry a commlink, *Sargent Hisku did.* One of the pirates charged him, but his movements were slow, his stance full of openings, so obvious they *had* to be traps. Instead of falling into them the Padawan, twisted away, the other man’s swing missing by over a foot away.

The murderer that stole his lightsaber yanked something off the weapon’s handle, and Jorel realized he wasn’t a Force Sensitive, the man had used a bit of *string,* so small as to almost be invisible, probably some kind of high-tension wire.

Lighting the Saber, the man swung to the side, cutting through the bars easily as another pirate threw another knife, the weapon slow and easily dodged, but still diverting his attention. With a yell, the lightsaber-weilding thug charged. Even untrained, he was still wielding deadly weapon, but, after the third time Er’izma had used a flick of telekinesis to turn off Jorel’s lightsaber, teaching him to include it in his *own* Force presence, the Padawan had learned the trick.

However, that would be too obvious, so he instead spun the intensity control, lowering the blue blade down to lightest of training levels. Standing still, using Force Control to infuse his body with energy, he waited for the thug to close, dodging another thrown knife from the same man who threw the first, *where was he getting them*, and stepping forward to meet the saber-wielding pirate.

Raising a hand, focusing on his Tutaminis lessons, he caught the blade in his bare hands, using the Force technique to divert the low amounts of energy in the weapon while stopping its swing cold. With his other hand he punched the thug hard, not just knocking him backwards but sending him flying with the crunch of breaking cartilage, while pulling the weapon free by its glowing blade.

Opening his fist, he caught the lightsaber’s handle with his open hand, flexing the one that’d stopped the saber as it *still* stung, even as he used Telekinesis to turn the weapon’s intensity back up. Not to full, he didn’t want to *kill* these people, just disable them.

No, he did *want* to kill them, but he wasn’t going to if he could help it. Burns should be enough.

“The hell?” one of the pirates, a lizard-like Barabel, this one with a metal rod in his hands, questioned. Not waiting for an answer though, he charged forward, weapon raised.

*Nice of them to come one at a time,* Jorel thought, seeing the obvious feint, but trying to discern the true blow. The pirate, likely assuming that the Jedi was going to try to counter his secondary hit, swung, following through with his feint. However, not wanting whatever plan the fighter had to come to fruition, Jorel didn’t take the trapped opening, but deflected the bar, knocking it aside instead of burning through it like he normally would.

Quickly stepping to the side, the Barabel’s stance over-extended, he slashed the male across the cheek, a sizzling sound easily heard over the massed making their way to the door, which opened with a collective shout, the sound of blaster-fire distant.

The creature swore as it stumbled, even as two more charged Jorel, similarly full of trapped openings, along with *another knife.* Carefully dodging around their likely feints, he tagged them too, but the Barabel was already charging him once more, as additional pirates started to encircle him.

He dodged and struck the Barabel again, this time across the back of the neck. It stumbled, falling, but was starting to get back to its feet in seconds, as Jorel knocked down another three, one attacking directly while the other two tried to change their attacks at the last minute to strike him unexpectedly. All were turned away, burned, badly, but that wasn’t stopping them.

*There’s too many,* he thought. If it was one, or two, or maybe even *five*, he could defeat them all without killing any. Not that they deserved to live, but was that why he was trying to spare them? Jorel *hated* pirates, for what they’d done, for what they’d continue to do. Was Jorel trying to not kill them, because to kill them would be what he *wanted* to do?

He could almost hear Er’izma’s voice: ‘But is putting yourself in danger to prove yourself above them not merely pride? We killed them when we arrived, do you think yourself better than the others on the *Dove?’*

His Master’s presence *was* there, worried and angry over the bond they shared, new as it still was. It wasn’t enough to communicate over, like he’d read some Masters and Padawans could, but he could feel the *be safe, I’m coming*, even if it wasn’t in words.

No, surrounded by enemies wasn’t the time to prove he was better than they were, and not doing something just because he wanted to was just as bad as doing it *because* he wanted to, wasn’t it. Flicking the saber to full, he turned as a group of six rushed him, not believing he’d kill them while trying their best to murder him.

That was the last mistake they’d make.

He could see the attack paths they were telegraphing, and their likely counters and *true* strikes. Most had tried to follow through on their feints when they’d seen he’d known they were, but a few others had tried to use them as the feints they originally were, striking from another angle at the last second. However, they were all assuming he’d have to block, to physical push them back.

That was no longer the case.

With the Force strumming through his body, he waited until they were almost upon him, and *moved.* The first strike cut the leading pirate in half vertically, a rising strike with a bit of telekinesis to push the bisected corpse under the feet of the others. With his saber high, he twisted it, biting through the head of one attacker, decapitating the other.

The fourth tried to strike with a scrap-metal hammer, but the head was cut off in a downward strike that also took the man’s arm, and part of his side. Stepping forward once again, one foot on the first attacker’s corpse, or the left half of it, the fifth was killed with a cross-body strike across the shoulders, the sixth dying as Jorel continued the spin, killing the her in exactly the same manner.

Then, immersed in the Force as he was, the Padawan was blind-sided by the six explosions of ***Death*** around him, like grenades made of the Dark Side, the darkness, the *emptiness* of it clawing at his soul.

Stumbling, the corpse he’d been standing on twisted as he missed his next step, sending him stumbling. He could feel the harsh laughter of the pirate leader behind him. “And the true face of the Jedi is seen,” the pitiful excuse for a man called. “Peace and light, until you might actually lose something.”

“*Shut up,”* Jorel growled, trying to re-center himself, with only a little success.

Three more charged him, not as confidently as the others had, and he killed the first, the Dark Side washing over him in a putrid wave, his second slash only a glancing blow, while the third got her knife in, slashing for Jorel’s neck.

The Padawan jerked back, the knife stabbing into his upper chest instead, bouncing off his ribcage in a burst of burning cold pain as the woman smiled, her pleasure in his pain singing through the Force with her right in front of him.

Reflexively Jorel blasted with telekinesis, throwing his attacker back as she tried to stab him again, sending the woman sailing through the air, hitting a cage head-first with a sickening crack, the burst of Dark from her death no longer assault him, but reaching out to him.

***She tried to kill you, so you killed her,*** it seemed to whisper. ***They all deserve to die, for what they’ve done. They’d kill you without a second thought, why hesitate?***

Another knife came at him, from the *same kriffing pirate.* Grabbing the blade mid-air, he sent it back at it’s owner at three times the speed, burying it to the hilt in his *kriffing* skull, dropping him even as the Dark Side practically *cooed* its approval, the pirates backing up until the closest was over a dozen feet away.

*And you can Kriff off too!* he told the voice in the back of his head, pushing himself past his hatred, past his fear, past what still haunted his dreams. He wasn’t killing these people because he hated them, or because they deserved to die, *even if they did.* He was killing them because they were trying to kill *him.* If they stayed in their cells, like a glance showed Puckrev was, then he’d let them be. Until then, he was going to treat them *exactly* as they treated others.

No, he was going to treat them *better.* After all, *their* deaths would be quick.

Focusing not on the pleasure of meting out justice, or the enjoyment from seeing, *tasting* their fear as he struck them down, those that enjoyed making other fear themselves, he brought himself back to center blade held at the ready. “This is your last warning,” he told the people that were trying to kill him. “Get back in your cells. Or die. Your choice.”

They didn’t move back, but they didn’t attack, the sounds of blaster-fire still coming from the far doorway, the Force twisting and shifting oddly, but he put it out of his mind, focusing on the task before him beyond all else, blocking out even the Dark Side as it said to ***Kill them and be done with it, before poor little Corporal Teeghan dies, if she hasn’t already.***

Then a few of the several dozen still watching him started to move forward, starting to bring their weapons up, and the fight was joined.

Pushing off the ground with a horizontal form of Force Jump Er’izma had shown him, he closed the distance in an instant, taking the first by surprise, killing him instantly. The others moved but they were slow, slower than even the training droids at the Temple which made *no sense*. They tried to close on him, but didn’t commit to their movements, and he struck them down.

A burst of Telekinesis pushed his attackers half a step back right as three tried to strike him at once, and he twisted around, striking them all, careful of the others, never fully committing to a blow like he’d been *originally* been taught to do with his form, *Djem So,* by the Temple’s teachers.

Some stumbled backwards with glancing blows, burns instead of cuts, but Jorel kept himself centered, moving to target after target, eliminating them and turning to the next, but they would not stop. He barely noticed the Dark Side now, paying attention to his enemies, their techniques and speed, or lack thereof.

Two pirates, calling for the others to clear, drew down on him with holdout blasters, small things, but Jorel, knowing he couldn’t deflect nearly as well as Anaïs could, cheated. Shifting mental gears, he pushed the Force through his voice, as his Master had that first day, commanding them, “***Trip.****”*

Anything more complicated and they might’ve resisted, but the command was enough, causing them both to stumble, their aim wild as they fired. Jorel was on them in a moment, cutting through their weapons, and their bodies, in one smooth motion, barely twisting out of the way as another knife sped towards his back.

Rather than catch it though, he accelerated it, burying it in the back of another pirate as he himself turned towards the thrower, who was already running. Stomping on the urge to chase down his prey, Jorel turned to the next closest pirate, who was already lifting his weapon in preparation, so the Padawan leapt backwards, turning and striking another who hadn’t expected the blow.

A storm of blaster-fire, with an odd sounding reverb, came from the entrance. Turning, a ring of blue light shot for him, which he deflected into the mass of pirates around him, catching one and dropping her without a single mark.

*Stun shot,* Jorel realized, rooting his stance as Er’izma’s Legion poured through the doorway, stunning anything that moved. Four more shots came his way, deflected into two more pirates, a wall, and a cage, before they stopped, all the others dropped. Given that he knew very little of Form V’s other variant, Shien, which specialized in projectile redirection, that wasn’t half bad.

More soldiers came in, stunning several of the downed pirates, catching at least two that had been faking. With the fight over, Jorrel felt his focus break, as he looked around at the dead around him, even as he was annoyed that ***he hadn’t been able to kill more of those-***

*Kindly shut up and go deep-throat a Hutt,* he told the him that was not him, the influence of the Dark Side trying to divert his own thoughts. He felt sick to his stomach, hands shaking slightly, but this wasn’t the first time he felt this way, and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

As he calmed himself, he could feel Er’izma coming and he was *not happy.*

The man seemed fifteen feet tall as he marched inside, body full of tight controlled energy. Striding to Jorel, A pirate that had only been pretending to be stunned lunged forward with a shiv. The Jedi Knight kicked the man to the side with the sound of breaking bones, where the pirate flew thirty feet, hit a cage, and partially exploded in a shower of gore, the metal the now dead man hit bending with a tortured scream that made Jorel wince.

Er’izma didn’t seem to notice.

The Jedi Knight moved to stand in front of his Padawan, not even glancing at the path of dead bodies the younger man had left in his wake. “*Padawan Jorel Drettz,”* The older man stated with the hardness of steel and the coldness of space.

“Master Er’izma,” Jorel replied, not having any defense, or anything to say at all.

“I am but a *humble* Knight, so please, *enlighten me.* What made you decide to come down the prisoners, *without* your attaché, *without* informing me of your plans, *without* seemingly a plan at all, and led you to *kill several dozen of our prisoners?*”

Jorel winced, knowing how this looked. “I, I needed to know.”

“Know *what?* If you could kill pirates?” his master demanded. “I believe you *already knew that.”*

“No!” he disagreed, trying to find balance, but he *couldn’t*, “I needed to know *why!”*

Er’izma was silent as a firing squad, staring at his Padawan. Finally, instead of the retort of blaster-fire, he instead quietly repeated “Why?”

“He wanted to know why we do it!” Puckrev called over the now silent slave pens.

The Jedi Knight’s head snapped to the side with the speed of a striking snake, so fast Jorel’s own neck throbbed in sympathy. The Knight held up a hand and the Force *flexed,* bringing Puckrev, cell and all, flying over, dropping it on a few corpses with the sound of tearing flesh, the man inside holding the bars to keep himself standing. “***Explain***.”

“He wanted to know why I’m a pirate. Why I do what I do, ‘hurting the innocent’ and all that sith-spit. So I told him, that everyone does it, that I’m not special in what I do, only how I do it. Idiot doesn’t realize how the world *really* works,” the pirate practically babbled, his scorn of Jorel still coming through. “All wrapped up in his pampered ideals, tried to just burn my men instead of cut them, like *that’d* stop them, but he showed his true colors, showed how he’s a killer just like the rest of us, that-”

“***Silence***,” Er’izma commanded, and Puckrev, while he still tried to talk, made no more noise. The Jedi’s presence in the Force, an Army at your throat, relaxed, fading back into the Force around them. The Legionnaires standing guard relaxed slightly, able to feel it with only the little amount of Force sensitivity all living beings had. “Padawan, why did you leave Sergeant Hisku’Biatha’pusi in your office and come here alone?”

The question wasn’t angry, just tired, which, somehow, made Jorel feel *worse*. “If I brought her, I wouldn’t have been able to talk. He’d have insulted you, or the ship, or something else, and she would’ve insulted him right back, and we would’ve gone nowhere, and I wouldn’t’ve learned *anything.”*

The Jedi Knight let out a long sigh. “She is. . . *enthusiastic* about defending the honor of the Legion, that is true. But what made you think you’d learn anything by talking to *him*?”

“Because he’s the one who’s a raping, slaving, murdering, torturing pirate?” Jorel asked, thinking it obvious. “And no one in the Legion is? I’ve read his logs, I *know* what he did, but I needed to know *why.”*

“And you thought he would just tell you?” Er’izma asked, a bit of humor creeping into his tone. “Or that you’d, with your vast wisdom and knowledge of psychology would be able to pierce through the lies, even the ones he tells himself, and find the truth?”

When it was put like *that*, then it seemed stupid, but, “I have the Force. I could tell when he was lying.”

“Oh, I hadn’t realized your Force Empathy had reached such lofty heights that you could not only read the emotions of your target, but do so when they were surrounded by others, and pierce through even the lies they tell themselves, which ring with the same clarity as truths within the Force,” the older man remarked, tone thick with sarcasm. “Please teach this *humble learner* of your ways, *wise master*, for that is a depth of skill I, in my *several hundred years*, have not been able to achieve.”

“I. . .” the Padawan trailed off. “But, the Temple said. . . oh.”

Er’izma nodded, “Yes, the Temple said one could use the Force to *sense* lies, and, from a certain point of view, it does. However, from every other, it only assists, able to identify blatant lies, but only their presence, not the truth they obscure, and the lies we tell ourselves, the ones that we believe as strongly as we believe the truth, ring through the Force not with some inner quality of ‘truth’, but with our *conviction*, young Padawan.”

“I. . .” Jorel tried again, admitting as his shoulders dropped. “I kriffed up pretty badly, didn’t I Master?”

“Not the worst I’ve seen,” the Knight commented, which was comforting until he remembered that the man had been teaching for *centuries.* However the *much* older man laughed, almost as if he could read the younger man’s mind. Which he might be able to. “While one can judge one’s motivations through one’s words, *people lie*, pirates especially, only lawyers and *politicians* do so more often. No, if you want to learn of a man’s mind, one must look at his *actions.*”

Jorel nodded, “Which I couldn’t get from talking to him.”

Er’izma, however, shook his head in disagreement. “Talking *is* an action, Padawan, and can be *very* telling.”

“All it told *me* was that I suck,” the young man grumbled. “If the pirates weren’t so cautious, I would’ve died.”

“Pirates are many thing,” the Knight observed, “but cautious is rarely one of them. At least not the ones that attract *our* attention. Datapad,” he ordered, a soldier bringing one over. Tapping at it, the commander laughed. “As I thought.”

Turning the datapad towards him, Jorel watched the security camera recording of his fight. His first thought was his form still needed work, his second was that he’d gotten lucky, but the third? The third was that he was *fast.* Not a blur, that would’ve been ridiculous, but with a speed closer to a Knight’s than a Padawan’s.

He hadn’t *felt* that fast. He’d just felt like *himself*, and the *pirates* were the ones moving slow. “So, I was fine?”

“Against unarmed fighters, yes,” Er’izma answered easily. “You have some room for improvement, but your performance speaks for itself. If they had been *armed,* however? You would’ve died in *seconds* Padawan, make no mistake.”

Jorel stared at himself fighting. “But, if I’ve been getting better, then why are you still just as easily able to beat me as you were before?”

The Knight chuckled. “If I were to meet you with my full ability, you would be defeated in seconds, and what would you learn? Other than you could ‘never’ win? No, I make sure you have a level you can learn from and press you to do better. Then, when you have learned, I increase my own level of skill, and we repeat. In a few months I would’ve had you enter a tournament, and you would’ve seen how far you’ve come. That said, pirates are *not* soldiers, and their form was *atrocious.* Even unarmed, this many trained combatants would likely have defeated you, though possibly not.”

“But, Sergeant Hisku’s just as far behind me as she is when I started teaching her,” he argued.

Er’izma nodded, smiling. “Yes, her progress *is* quite impressive, though she might be under the same misconception you are.”

Glancing at the trail of corpses he’d left, and watching him *make* those corpses, he had to ask. “I. . . I’ve only been a Padawan for a bit over a *month.* Is being able to do *that* normal?”

“You mean is a Padawan, who’s had twice as long as most Initiates to hone their specialization, and received further training by a *master* of their specialization, performs better than normal *in their specialization?*” the older man asked, with a raised eyebrow. Before Jorel could admit that’s been a stupid question, the Jedi shrugged, “You could’ve done better.”

“I, *what?”* Jorel sputtered at the unexpected conclusion.

“You shouldn’t have played with them to start with, and you aren’t used to the Dark Side one faces when killing,” his master identified instantly. “Though your base is much more developed than most guardians at you *age*. Both are things that you’ll be trained to handle better. Honestly-”

“You!” came a familiar voice from the doorway, causing Jorel to wince and his master to smile.

“Hi Sergeant Hisku,” he called weakly. “How are you?”

“How am I? How am *I?”* she demanded, striding right up to him, not paying attention the carnage around them. “I’m wondering *what the heck you were thinking!?”*

“I wanted to ask their leader some questions,” he answered automatically.

“Then why are you standing in the middle of the holding area?” she questioned, not losing any steam.

Jorel blinked, “Uh, because that’s where he is?”

“And the reason you didn’t ask one of the guards to bring him to one of the interrogation rooms *is?*” she pressed.

That. . . was actually a really good question. “Whups,” he shrugged.

She stared at him, Force presence practically vibrating with outraged anger, and with something else underneath it he couldn’t identify. “*Whups?* *WHUPS?*” she repeated.

Er’izma cleared his throat, having had enough of his padawan’s panic. “I would not take too much umbrage with young Mr. Drettz, miss. These sorts of things are why he has *you.*”

“*Excuse me? Are you blaming*. . .” she started to argue, turning, and realizing who she was talking to. She froze, eyes going wide in panic. “I, um, I mean, uh, yes sir commander sir. I-”

“No one is injured, not in a way that a bacta patch can’t fix,” the Commander of the Legion smiled. “Consider this a learning experience, for *both* of you.”

“I, but, I mean, yes, yes sir!” the young woman practically squeaked, as she gave Jorel a look that screamed, ‘*agree!’*

However, a slight bit of movement caught his eye, and a whisper in the Force brushed across his mind. He moved before he realized what he was doing, his saber raised, the red blaster-bolt deflected from its path towards the sergeant’s head, off his blade, and blasting harmlessly against a wall.

Puckrev was holding a small blaster-pistol, fancier than the ones the others had held, but made to be hidden just as theirs had been. A feeling over overwhelming anger took Jorel over as he launched himself forward.

This piece of *druk* had tried to kill one of *his* and was laughing? The man was still silent, but laughing as he shot again, bolt deflected, as Jorel closed. The Padawan’s first slash destroyed the weapon, slicing off part of the human’s hand, breaking the Mind Trick, causing the pirate to cry out in pain. A burst of Telekinesis bent open the cut bars, allowing the Jedi to step inside the cell. Jorel’s second strike, ready to take the pirate’s head and ***kill him for what he tried to do***, was almost completed when the Padawan, feeling like he was trying to hold back an avalanche, slowed the blow, his lightsaber coming to rest a few inches away from the pirate’s face.

“Do it!” spat the pirate, grimacing in pain and staring hatefully at the Padawan. “What, you killed my men, but you’re gonna stop when it comes to me? I’m not going to stop until you or your girlfriend are dead, and I only need to get lucky *once.*”

Holding still, he could feel the others behind him. The legionnaires were tense, Hisku was shocked and worried, but Er’izma? His Master was just waiting. Not telling him not to, not disapproving, but not encouraging him or pointing out why he should either. No, the old man was just waiting, as if this didn’t matter either way.

“One, she is my *assistant* and my *student*, not my *girlfriend*,” Jorel stated, centering himself easily, only instead of calm neutrality he felt like he spoke with the indifferent inevitability of the tide. “Two, there is no luck, only the Force. And three, if, *somehow*, you escape the punishment for your crimes, I *will* track you down and make sure justice is dealt out. Even if it’s a decade from now, when I become a Knight. Or longer, if need be. You are *not* escaping justice, Puckrev, using me to commit suicide because you are too much of a *coward* to do it yourself.”

With a click, his Lightsaber deactivated, and he stepped back. He tried to use Telekinesis to close it back up, but it slipped through his mental fingers, only for his Master to take over, closing it for him. The pirate started to shout something else, but his head slammed backwards into the bars, knocking him out, the lack of another bloom of Dark in the force showing he wasn’t dead.

Turning and nodding to his master in thanks, Jorel said, with complete calmness, “I believe I’m going to go be ill, and maybe shake uncontrollably for a little bit, as I haven’t killed this many people in a *long* time.”

His master nodded. “Sergeant Hisku, if you’d please accompany Padawan Jorel to his quarters,” he requested blandly, as if he was commenting on the weather.

“I’m fine,” the padawan tried to argue. “You don’t need to-”

“Follow the Commander’s orders?” his blue-skinned student asked, obviously shaken but hiding it. “Yeah, I might be *your* attaché, but he’s *your* boss.”

Jorel opened his mouth to disagree, but, well, he couldn’t think of what to say, so he just nodded, carefully picking his way through the stunned and the dead. Stumbling, she caught him, and even though he wanted to walk out of here on his own, a small part of him saying not to rely on her that she was ***weak, and a vulnerability***. He ignored it, leaning on her a little as they walked out of what had once been the slave pens, and was now a battleground.