### Monuments to the Fallen

by mephistoshollenrufe

**Summary**

It's been over a thousand years since the last Sith-Republic conflict and the galaxy exists in relative peace. Rear Admiral Otieno of the Republic fleet and Jedi Padawan Sib find themselves in alliance when what should be a routine mission turns into something a lot more. It's left to them to find their proof and warn the Republic and Jedi Order that the galaxy isn't as safe as they once thought.

**Notes**

There's apparently no canon beyond "Darth Ruin started it" about the early days of the New Sith Wars, so this is 100% me making stuff up for my own amusement. I follow official canon for the most part (though it obviously doesn't cover this time period at all) and EU/Legends information where it's valuable and I feel like it (God Bless Wookieepedia.) I am confident that something's going to be wrong somewhere, but this story isn't about facts, it's about Lesbians In Space.

See the end of the work for more notes.

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As a child, Sib had heard hundreds of stories about the Jedi and their powers. The wisdom of their council, the depth of their knowledge, the skill of their combat. They were keepers of the peace and their legacy, and the Force they alone controlled, threw every petty squabble into insignificance. They were heroes that stood head and shoulders above all others. The stories had neglected to mention before someone became a Jedi they had to become a Padawan and being a Padawan was a lot of standing in the offices and chambers of the high-and-mighty as you stared at your Master’s backside.

Katdia, who Sib got a side-profile of, kept throwing little smirks at Sib from her seat. Not long ago she would have stood right next to Sib and Katdia hadn’t quite tired of pointing that out. Sib’s Master Gianlo and Katdia’s former Master Jir’zo spoke to each other in a Twi’leki-Basic pidgin, something Sib did not speak, in the seats next to Katdia. There was one open seat left. The antenna-thin Admiral Vargin on the other side of the desk, whom the office belonged to, stared at something on his datapad with one finger resting on his lower-lip. Sib kept her own fidgety fingers behind her back. No need for Master Gianlo to scold her for impatience. Again.

“Damn this!” the Admiral said and threw his datapad onto the desk. Master Gianlo and Jir’zo immediately dropped their conversation and looked at the Admiral. The Admiral ignored their attention and pressed the comlink. “Where the hell is the Rear Admiral?”

There was a moment pause before there was an answer. “The main lift’s malfunctioned. I imagine that’s holding the Rear Admiral,” came the secretary’s static-y voice.

“Damn this building,” the Admiral said with a more subdued vitriol. “And why the hell didn’t you tell me that?”

“Apologies Admiral, I just learned it myself, had to look it up in the building’s system.”

“Ptah!” the Admiral spat and closed the comlink with an unnecessarily dramatic gesture. He threw himself back in his chair. “I’m so sorry to keep you like this,” he said to the seated Jedi.

“Some things are out of our hands,” Master Gianlo said. “But I suspect the Rear Admiral will be here any moment.”

The Admiral frowned at Master Gianlo and hid a vague agreement as he cleared his throat. The non-Force-using population really had no idea the extent of Jedi powers and any hint of mysticism tended to leave them a bit nervous. Premonition was well in the realm of the unnatural to most.

Barely a minute later the Jedi turned at the subtle noise of the outer door sliding open. As the inner doors opened the Admiral’s secretary came in over the comlink to announce Rear Admiral Otieno as she stepped inside. An adarian commodore followed a pace behind.

The Rear Admiral drew up just inside the door and gave a sharp salute. “Apologies! A lift malfunctioned—“

“I know, I know, I heard, just sit down so we can get this started,” the Admiral snapped.

For the briefest second the Rear Admiral paused, her neutral expression wavering, but she
persevered and took the last empty seat next to Katdia. The commodore stood next to Sib, his eyes forward and posture rigid. Looked like a real fun guy.

The Rear Admiral, on the other hand, immediately caught Sib’s interest. She was tall, broad-shouldered, and her black hair was in long braids with one braid holding the others together at the base. The Jedi discouraged relationships but the current council made a few allowances—which Sib gladly snapped up.

And that was all Sib got to see of her for the next half hour as the Admiral droned on about the governor of some middle-rim planet that was having problems with the local laborers for some reason or another. The Rear Admiral sat like there was a rod up her ass the entire time, not even the hint of flagging, as Sib became more and more anxious to get moving. Not tired—Sib wasn’t still a Padawan because she was weak—but she was not someone who could sit still easily. The mysterious Rear Admiral only added to her distraction.

Sib began to drift off towards the end to her next meal, the amazing lightsaber trick she’d seen Jedi Wendei pull, and how bad her dinner at the restaurant another Padawan had dragged her to the night before had been. When the Jedi and Rear Admiral rose Sib jerked to attention. She put on a serious expression but when Master Gianlo faced her he gave the slightest of a puckered frown. Sib’s cheeks immediately began to burn from chagrin, something that would be immediately obvious to everyone in the room (curse her pale skin!), but she kept herself together.

Master Jir’zo, wearing her usual long-sleeved and long-hemmed dress and robe, cleared her throat to get the attention of the room. “Rear Admiral, allow us to introduce ourselves,” she said.

The Rear Admiral had lingered in her seat, looking at a datapad the Admiral had given her, but she rose and turned as Master Jir’zo spoke. Sib’s blush continued, but for a rather different reason this time. “You’re absolutely right, Master Jedi,” Rear Admiral Otieno said, her voice deep and rich but also subtly lilting. Sib wondered if she’d ever done any recruitment videos.

“You may call me Master Jir’zo,” she said and gave a slight nod of her head. “This is Jedi Knight Katdia, Master Gianlo, and this is Sib, Master Gianlo’s Padawan.”

Embarrassment returned again as Sib was referred to as a Padawan in front of the Rear Admiral. The only one in the room and a relatively old one, at that.

But the Rear Admiral just glanced over Sib and gave them all a momentary bow. “This is Commodore Bivu Yanavj,” she said with a small gesture towards the adarian standing next to Sib. He bowed too. “It’s an honor to meet you all, but I’m afraid I do have important business to attend to that I’m already late for, Masters, Padawan.”

“Don’t let us keep you, Rear Admiral,” Master Gianlo said. “And may the Force be with you.”

The Rear Admiral blinked and her pause lasted a beat too long. As if she was caught off-guard by the common phrase. “And with you.”

Commodore Bivu Yanavj was barely able to match the Rear Admiral’s quick, long strides as she left the room. The Jedi left at a much more leisurely pace, though it meant they had to wait for the lift to return.

The four waited in uneasy silence in the Admiral’s reception room. His secretary stared intently at a holoscreen and for all appearances was unaware of them. Katdia caught Sib’s attention and winked at her with the eye on the far side of the other Jedi. Sib contained her grin with great difficulty.

Master Gianlo would really dress her down if he saw her smiling, but Katdia and Sib had been
friends for a good while. They knew each other’s types.

As confined spaces tended to do, the silence in the lift was even worse. Sib drummed her left hand on her thigh and with the right she rubbed her thumb on the rim of her lightsaber blade shroud. In a series of slow and precise movements Master Jir’zo adjusted her lekku from where they sat around her neck to lay over her shoulders. Katdia looked at the ceiling, then at the ground, then at the wall with her thumbs hooked into her belt. Master Gianlo stared at the wall with an unusual tenseness in his grizzled jaw. Sib nearly started bouncing on her toes.

“Master Jir’zo, Jedi Katdia, my Padawan and I shall hang back for a few moments, you two may go ahead to the Temple,” Master Gianlo declared as they neared the end of their ride.

“Of course,” Master Jir’zo said. The lift doors slid open at the bottom floor. She and Katdia stepped out first and Katdia gave her one last “sorry for the shit you’re about to get into” look over her shoulder. Master Gianlo and Sib hung back just long enough to give some distance.

Master Gianlo clasped his hands at his navel, wrist holding wrist, and the loose sleeves of his light brown robe concealed them. He walked a measured, stately pace and Sib forced herself to match it.

Sib’s head immediately began to throb from the noise. The Jedi Temple was never this loud. The main entrance of the fleet headquarters was packed to the brim with bustling officers and enlisted soldiers. The rainbow-hue of alien colors was a marked contrast to the drab greys, browns, and olives of the uniforms. The room was a large un-corralled area with expansive viewports along the outer wall that gave an expansive view of Coruscant’s cityscape, gleaming in the high sun, and the endless river of vehicles. Along the inner wall receptionists dealt with serpentine lines, some of them at least a hundred meters long, and the doors didn’t have even a moment to close from the constant inhale and exhale of bodies.

Ahead, Master Jir’zo’s pink lekku bobbed above the crowd and Sib watched it exit through a different set of doors than Master Gianlo headed towards. The fleet-members parted for them and a few gave nervous nods of their head. Master Gianlo, with his gaunt, venerable face and quintessential Jedi Master outfit of robe, sash, and tunic, had that effect. It was something else Sib lacked.

The fleet headquarter grounds were far more subdued than the interior. A small stretch of ground around the headquarters was clear of buildings and reserved for foot-traffic. The military district stretched for nearly eight kilometers around them and beyond it civilian Coruscant thrived.

“My Padawan,” Master Gianlo said. He turned his stately pace towards the official transport dock. Sib braced herself. “Do you find the work of the Jedi boring?”

“No Master, not at all.”

“Then explain to me why you barely paid attention during the meeting with the Admiral,” Master Gianlo said, his drawl particularly biting. “Or did you think I wouldn’t notice.”

Sib sighed. “I foolishly had.”

“This is why you are not yet a Jedi Knight, Padawan,” Master Gianlo said, tilting his head up to watch a freighter pass some distance off. “Do you understand that? You lack discipline.”

“So I have been told,” Sib said and bit her tongue as soon as she said it.

Master Gianlo leveled his pale eyes on her without breaking step. “That is the other reason you are not yet a Jedi Knight. If a person who does not respect power comes into it than only evil will
“I understand, Master,” Sib replied.

“Do you?” Master Gianlo said, more of a mutter, as if meant only for himself, and returned his gaze forward. Sib clenched her hands and pressed them against her thighs. Her own tunic suddenly felt like it was made of hair and as thick as fur. The desire to tear it off made her fingers twitch.

“I’m trying,” Sib said, but she knew the response to that.


“Yes, Master,” Sib said. “I don’t want to let you down.”

“And yet that is what happens,” Master Gianlo said. Sib glanced at him out of the corner of her eye to gauge exactly how mad he was. His brow was drawn tight, his lips pulled thin, and the lines around his mouth were particularly severe. Very mad.

They walked a minute in silence. Sib bitterly wished she had never chosen to leave Eriadu, her home-planet. Her father had been right. She had been too old to begin training and be successful….

“Sib, I don’t disparage you because I wish to see you fail,” Master Gianlo said, gently. Sib jerked her head towards him—confused at his sudden shift in demeanor.

“No…?”

Master Gianlo sighed, his whole body put into the motion, and looked at Sib out of the corner of his eye. “I wish to see you succeed. I have put many years into your training and my reputation on the line in taking you on as a Padawan.”

“I understand,” Sib said with a small sigh of her own. She didn’t know what she expected—of course it would be something like that, the selfish old man.

“You thought something unkind just now,” Master Gianlo said.

Sib had the decency to blush and not lie. “Yes I did, Master.”

“It’s unbecoming of a Jedi,” Master Gianlo said. “And such thoughts can lead you down a dark path.”

“I have no intention of turning to the dark side, Master,” Sib muttered. “Nor of joining Master Phanius.” Master Phanius had left the Jedi Order around the time she’d arrived, twelve years ago.

“Master Phanius is a great man and it is a great loss to the Jedi Order and the Republic that he has departed,” Master Gianlo returned. “Do not speak of his loss and the dark side in the same breath. Nor should you speak so lightly of the dark side. Never joke about such things.”

“You’re right, Master, I apologize,” Sib said. The horrible burn of embarrassment crept up her neck again. “I’ll do my best on our next mission.”

“Can you at least recall the name of the planet we’re to visit?” Master Gianlo said.

“Garos, Master.”

“Well, that’s better than nothing,” Master Gianlo said with an unusual edge of humor. “I expect you to do more than your best on Garos, Padawan.”
“Of course.”

“And try to learn a few things from Master Jir’zo, hm? Her self-control is exceptional.”

“Yes Master.”

“And stop sneaking looks at Jedi Katdia. I understand she’s your friend but it’s inappropriate in such a setting.”

“Yes Master.”

“And change out of those ridiculous gloves. You look like some nug-brained Tatooine Spice smuggler.”

Rear Admiral Otieno’s fingers ached as she pecked at the datapad. Each question on the post-flight dossier was more inane and finicky than the rest. Commodore Bivu helped, pushing buttons and screens and sorting through the mess beside her, but it would be a good hour before they could call it done. They were already an hour and a half into overtime and, despairing, Otieno had watched Coruscant’s artificial lights brighten as the sun faded over the horizon. At least they were one of the lucky few that had a view.

Commodore Bivu wasn’t someone who complained about bureaucracy, at times even appeared to enjoy it, and Otieno occasionally envied the love of strict social order all the adarians had. Of course, if she had been born an adarian she wouldn’t be a Rear Admiral in the Republic fleet.

“What did you think of those Jedi we met today?” Bivu said, seemingly without prompt, and Otieno frowned with her attention still on the screen.

“They looked like every other Jedi, I guess,” she said. “I don’t think they’ll be particularly useful.”

Bivu frowned at her. “Really? Not useful? But Jedi can do that whole—” Bivu wiggled his fingers at his forehead “—mind thing.”

“Well mind-Forcing everyone isn’t going to solve the problem,” Otieno said. “It’s not practical.”

“But I bet it helps, even if you can’t do it to everyone,” Bivu said. He shrugged. “I don’t know. The uppers think they’re useful so I suppose they’ll be useful.”

Otieno leaned her cheek on her fist and glared at the next line in the form: “number of Tiamin capsules used per fleet-member.” Otieno wasn’t certain what Tiamin capsules even were let alone who distributed them and how to keep track of them. No one seemed to know what Tiamin capsules were. She entered five as she always did. “The Uppers don’t know everything—”

They both started as the intercom on their office door buzzed. “This is Admiral Vargin.”

Otieno and Bivu shot to their feet. Otieno leaned down to open the channel. “Please enter, Admiral Vargin,” Otieno replied. The doors hissed aside and Admiral Vargin strode in looking as sour-faced and serious as he had been in the meeting earlier that day.

They saluted and Admiral Vargin gave them lackluster salute back before clasping his hands behind
him. “Admiral Vargin, what gives us the honor?” Otieno said, but she didn’t have to think too hard for a reasonable conclusion.

“This is about your unacceptable tardiness earlier today,” the Admiral said.

Otieno had already prepared her statement. “I sincerely apologize for that sir, we did everything we could to find the quickest route as soon as we learned the lift was broken,” she said.

“Did you attempt to use a private lift?” the Admiral asked.

Bivu and Otieno glanced at each other in confusion. Private lifts were a very special luxury. “Er—we don’t have the clearance to use a private lift, sir,” Otieno said.

“Had you thought to contact me to ask for my clearance to use one?” the Admiral said with a wry smile that made Otieno want to punch his teeth in.

“We didn’t realize that was an option, sir,” Otieno said in complete honesty.

The Admiral’s lip thinned as if about to smile. “If you had thought to contact me at all you would have learned it was,” the Admiral said.

“We are very sorry that we didn’t contact you sir,” Otieno said. That she would accept as her own fault. Not letting him know had been a stupid move, but finding an open comstation would have just made them even later in the end. They weren’t the only ones affected by the lift failure. Not that Otieno was about to tell the Admiral that.

“That would just be making excuses.

“I don’t want you making a mess of this mission, do you understand?” the Admiral said.

“Of course, sir.”

“A beginning like this doesn’t give me much confidence,” the Admiral said. “We want the Jedi Council to think well of us.”

“I want that as well, sir. We’ll successfully complete this mission.”

The Admiral thrust his pointed chin out a smidgen. “I should expect so. I do not abide failures among my officers. Do you understand that?”

Behind her back, Otieno’s hands tightened into fists. She was going to do something stupid if this continued. “Yes sir.”

“And you understand this as well, Commodore Bivu?” the Admiral turned his attention to Bivu.

“Yes sir,” Bivu said. “Loud and clear.” It was hard to read his expression but his face and neck were very tense.

“Good, I want a full write-up on my desk as soon as you return,” the Admiral said. He saluted them, they saluted back, and he departed as suddenly as he’d arrived.

Otieno fell back into her seat with a sudden craving for a stiff drink. Bivu sat down a moment later. She pressed her palms against her forehead and screwed her eyes up. She considered calling the day a miss and heading home right then and there, but they really did have to get the dossier done. It wasn’t as if the day could get worse.

“That was a lot of yardershit,” Otieno declared. She sat up straight and gave a sharp rap with her knuckles to the desk. “He didn’t have to say anything he said. He already chewed us out when we
got there. What a bastard.”

“Well, I don’t know, we really didn’t think to contact him—”

“Bivu,” Otieno interrupted. “That’s not the point. He didn’t care about what we could have done, he just wanted to embarrass us and make himself feel better. It’s—it’s cruel, it’s an abuse of power.”

Bivu scrunched his entire face up as he considered this. He had such a hard time understanding the concept of abuse of authority—Otieno had to explain it every time. “Should we…should we tell someone?” he said.

Otieno sighed and was glad he at least understood the issue. “No. It wouldn’t do anything.”

“Of course not,” Bivu said with his usual fatalism, but it didn’t sound so resigned as other times.

They turned back to their work, Otieno’s leg starting to bounce slightly as she tried to push out what the Admiral had said. She only succeeded in mulling over it.

“You remember the Jedi that stood beside me? The Padawan?” Bivu said, rather suddenly, and Otieno frowned at him.

“Yes, Padawan Sib, I think?” Otieno said. “What about her?”

“Have you met before? She was looking at you rather oddly.”

“Never seen her before in my life,” Otieno said. “She probably just…didn’t want to look at the Admiral or something. I feel that way all the time.”

“I don’t think it was that.”

Otieno huffed and gave the desk another sharp rap. “Bivu, can we talk about this later? We still have a lot of work to do. We’ll have plenty of time to discuss it when we’re in transit,” Otieno said. “I’m tired and hungry and would like to get home.”

“I apologize,” Bivu muttered. He went back to work with his back unnecessarily rigid, his eyes fixed firmly on his screen, and the jabs at buttons particularly severe. A show of displeasure he’d never give anyone else, but Bivu and Otieno had worked together for enough years that they were familiar with each other and something like friends—for lack of anyone else.

Otieno closed her eyes for a moment, berated herself for her sharpness, and turned to Bivu. “I’m sorry for snapping at you Bivu. I appreciate it a lot when you talk to me but I’m stressed right now and would very much appreciate it if I went without distraction for the moment, okay?” she said. It was a careful recitation of one of the mantras from a self-help holorecord. It was one of the more useful ones she’d read and was glad when Bivu smiled at her, slightly, and nodded. He understood her more than Otieno often gave him credit for.

“Of course, Otieno,” Bivu said and went back to typing in a manner far more contented than before.

Otieno flexed her fingers a moment before going back to her own work. No one would be waiting for her at home, but there was a a good meal packet that she’d been saving for the right occasion. She figured pre-departure stress was as good a reason as any. Fleet food was barely edible. Nothing better than a shitty meal in space.

Chapter End Notes
Master Gianlo looks like Charles Dance and what the hell is the title for a Jedi Knight in casual conversation?

Edited on 8/16/16
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The gang arrives on Garos

Chapter Notes

Turns out I’m bad at this "publishing chapters in a timely manner thing." I really shouldn’t be surprised.

The gleaming halls of the ship wrapped around rooms and machinery like thread around nails. In the labyrinth of the unfamiliar ship Katdia and Sib wandered and consulted the directory only if they wanted to get anywhere. Their journey to Garos wasn’t long, not even two days, but that was enough time for the halls and the depthless marbling of hyperspace to become boring.

“Do you think you’re anywhere close to convincing Master Gianlo to let you become a Knight?” Katdia asked. It was an iteration of a conversation they’d had a thousand times before.

“I think I’m close,” Sib said, but she always felt that way.

“Getting a big crush on the Rear Admiral definitely won’t help your case,” Katdia teased and gave Sib a light poke in the rib.

“There’s nothing in the Jedi code about crushes,” Sib said. “Just children.”

“But you know Master Gianlo will consider it irrational all the same,” Katdia said. “I can’t imagine how the Order expects every Jedi to be an emotionless eunuch.”

Sib’s laugh echoed down the hall. A soldier walking ahead gave a funny look over her shoulder. Besides the Rear Admiral and the Jedi, there were four hundred forty-five Republic soldiers, petty officers, pilots, technicians, and service staff that filled the ship, The Tourbillion, with a beating heart. Sib and Katdia saw very little of them.

Sib pursed her lips in an attempt to stop her giggles. “Why did Master Jir’zo ever let you become a Knight?” Sib asked.

“Because she has reasonable expectations for a person,” Katdia replied. “She’s not so devoted to asceticism as the rest of the Order and our Master Gianlo. But don’t tell anyone that,” Katdia quickly added. “She told me that in confidence.”

“Of course not,” Sib assured and gave Katdia’s elbow a gentle squeeze. It didn’t surprise Sib; Master Jir’zo had always been different (from Jedi and from other Twi’leks) and supportive of difference in others. To an extent. The line that couldn’t be crossed among Jedi was a firm and clear one.

They passed a comstation and a robotized voice chimed there was a message for Katdia. Personal
comms also didn’t work in hyperspace.

“Bet it’s one of the Masters telling us to prepare for landing,” Katdia said and signaled the comstation to continue. Master Jir’zo’s voice informed them Katdia was needed on the bridge. It was only a few hours before they would leave hyperspace and enter Garos’s orbit and Katdia had made an easy guess, but they shared a bemused grin.

As soon as they entered regular space the bridge would be chaos, but for the moment it was silent and empty except for the Jedi, the Rear Admiral, and a pilot at the helm for emergency purposes. No messages could be sent or received in hyperspace and the computer did all course calculations and corrections.

“Master Jir’zo, what was it you wished to speak with me about?” Katdia asked as they mounted the walkway above the control pit.

The two Jedi and the Rear Admiral stood at the forward viewports, bathed in the blue-white hue of hyperspace, and turned to watch the younger Jedi approach.

“Master Gianlo and I wished to discuss your role in this mission with you,” Master Jir’zo said. “Privately. Sib, you needn’t had come.”

“Oh,” Sib said, caught off-guard and feeling a bit stupid. “I’ll leave you—”

“No reason, we were going to speak in the command room anyway,” Master Jir’zo said with a quick, dismissive gesture. “Please join us Katdia.”

The elder Jedi brushed past Sib and Katdia fell into step with them. Katdia wasn’t even able to glance back before they disappeared into an adjacent room.

Rear Admiral Otieno watched the Jedi leave, as Sib had, and this time graced Sib with more than a passing glance before she faced forward. As if there was something to see in hyperspace.

Sib knew when to seize an opportunity and did so with gusto. She sidled up beside the Rear Admiral and imitated her steel-jawed, hands-behind-the-back pose.

“Do you often travel in hyperspace?” Sib asked.

“Somewhat. Every few months, between assignments,” Otieno replied. She turned her head ever so slightly to look at Sib. Her countenance looked like it was cast in obsidian. “Do you?”

“Every month or so, Jedi are rarely stationed,” Sib explained with a casual air.

“aren’t you a Padawan?” Otieno asked. Sib took the slight furrow in her brow as a sign no slight was intentional. It stung anyway.

Sib reminded herself most didn’t understand the Jedi Order and cocked her head to the side. “I’m attached to Master Gianlo and he travels as a Jedi Master would.”

“Oh. Of course,” Otieno said.

They watched each other out of the corner of their eyes like two animals uncertain if the other was prey or predator. This conversation was not what either of them had expected.

“How long—”

“How long—”
Sib nearly pulled the hood of her robe up to hide her face. Otieno handled it without any sign of embarrassment and graciously gave Sib a small nod to continue.

“Do you enjoy being an officer?” Sib asked.

“Oh, yes,” Otieno said. After a moment she seemed to realize she should say something more. “It has…lots of benefits. Like travel.”

“Have you ever dealt with anything more than the sort of problem we’re going to now?” Sib asked, but was resigned to a terse answer.

“I was involved in a territorial dispute with the Hutts once,” Otieno said. “Shots were fired but nothing came of it. No lives or ships lost.”

“That’s nice to hear,” Sib said. She wondered if she should just put the conversation out of its misery and leave—but: “What was it you wanted to ask me?”

“Oh,” Otieno said, as if she’d forgotten it. “Oh. I was going to ask how long you’d been a Jedi.”

“I joined the Order when I was twelve. Which is unusually old,” Sib said, long come to expect the sort of questions to follow.

“Where are you from that you came into it so old?” Otieno said, her brow furrowing again but no other sign of curiosity appearing.

“Eriadu,” Sib said. “But I joined so late because my father refused to have me tested and I had to get to Coruscant on my own.” Sib braced herself for the inevitable comments about her home-planet. Smuggler-ridden, the governor barely able to manage what little legitimate infrastructure and economy existed, corrupted with radical ideas and freeloaders.

“I visited Eriadu once,” Otieno said. Her tone remained neutral. Did she have no feelings about anything? “The vistas are impressive.”

A intelligent answer escaped Sib. “Oh, yes, it is…it is impressive in that aspect,” she said. “Why did you visit it?”

“When I was still a junior officer some Separatists were causing trouble on the trading route,” Otieno explained. “A very lawless place. The governor barely kept the place from falling into anarchy. Not a single soul offered us help. It’s astonishing how some people refuse civilization.”

The illogical loyalty to her home-planet Sib hadn’t shook after twelve years off it rose up and demanded she defend it. “They just have a different idea of what constitutes civilization,” Sib said. “The people of Eriadu are very self-sufficient. They don’t necessarily appreciate the government of a far-off planet telling them what to do.”

“Then they’re fools for not seeing how—” Otieno glanced at Sib and her mouth clicked shut. Sib had a hard time hiding her emotions.

“Rear Admiral?” They both turned as Commodore Bivu stepped onto the bridge. It was a welcome interruption. He gave a short nod to Otieno and Sib. “There’s an issue with the starfighters.”

Otieno leaned her head back and sighed. “I’ll see to it now,” Otieno said. “Jedi—”

Sib gestured for her to leave. “Do your work, Rear Admiral.”
The Rear Admiral did so, her shoulders squared and back straight, and Sib, feeling petty, didn’t watch her go. As if that would mean anything to Otieno. She clearly didn’t give a shit about Sib or anything outside the party-line. Otieno was soured to her, any interest briskly thrown out the door. As if she would be different.

After exiting hyperspace and entering Garos’s orbit the Jedi, Rear Admiral, and a dozen soldiers boarded a shuttle for the planet’s surface. The Rear Admiral took the copilot seat and the rest strapped into the rows of inward-facing seats in the back. They’d been informed Garos’s atmosphere caused particularly bumpy rides. Sib grabbed a seat near the front to watch the descent through the fragile bubble of atmosphere.

Within a half minute, the curvature of the planet disappeared into a single horizon and the flat darkness turned to a shimmering blue. The whine of the shuttle’s engines and the howl of atmosphere passing over their wing replaced the silence of void. The turbulence rapidly increased and Sib gripped her arm-rests. The white-caps of the ocean and the quilt-work of the different tree species of the forest took clear form. There was a subtle shift in weight as the artificial gravity of the shuttle switched off and the crew occupants leaned towards the nose of the shuttle.

As they entered the stratosphere two single-pilot patrol ships appeared from the scattered cloud cover. There was a flurry of communication over the comm. The ships flanked the shuttle as it made its rapid descent towards the capital of Garos. The city sprawled for at least a hundred kilometers on the thin plateau between white-capped mountain and wine-red sea. Sib leaned back and closed her eyes, her head jostled every which way.

The Force rose to the forefront of Sib’s attention, like a gentle wave washing over her, and the slow pulse of everything around her flooded her senses. Not quite a heartbeat, but like the movement of a tide smoothed and compressed. The occupants of the shuttle were first in her mind, but the city below her thrummed in her chest like the beat of a massive, silent drum, with subtle distinctions between each piece of matter.

The shuttle shook once more and Sib’s eyes reflexively snapped open, there wasn’t anything wrong, and the rest of their descent onto the landing dock of the Governor’s Palace was smooth. It was evening, the shadows long and the horizon smeared with red and purple, and a brisk, cold wind came from the sea. As Sib stepped onto the duracrete tarmac she pulled her robe tighter around her shoulders and wished she’d worn something a little thicker. The Icthoki governor Sashenn Nam waited for them with a small retinue.

“Rear Admiral Otieno, Jedi,” the governor said, his arms outstretched, as soon as they could hear him. “I’m extremely pleased to see you, finally.”

“And it is our pleasure to assist you in your duties,” Rear Admiral Otieno said and strode forward, her formal jacket fluttering around her hips, until she and the governor were face-to-face. They shook and the governor’s hand completely enclosed hers.

“As it is ours,” Master Gianlo said. He bowed to the governor.

“Please, come in, step out of the cold,” the governor said and ushered them in. The soldiers followed the Rear Admiral and Jedi in two neat lines.

The inside of the Palace was white and sterile with occasional moments of chrome and gold. Sib was immediately uneasy by the narrow corridors and lack of viewports. It was like walking through the tomb of an emperor.
“I have a meal waiting for us in my private dining hall,” the governor said. “I know you will be glad to have something other than ship rations.”

“Indeed we will, governor,” Otieno said. Her tone and expression was as neutral, as always. Sib wondered where Otieno learned the rote politeness, but then remembered she was mad and resolved Otieno wouldn't get a second of her thoughts.

Sib’s peevishness continued during dinner with the governor, the soldiers had an adjacent room to eat their meal in, as they discussed Republic politics and gossip over the first course. It was a stupid thing to be upset over and she'd probably be over it in a few days, she had a hard time holding a grudge, and a few stern glares from Master Gianlo made it clear he disapproved of her mood, but when an emotion had her it had her. She'd be mad for as long as she could muster the energy. Un-Jedi like, yes, but it was very cathartic.

Despite her own emotions, Sib could sense the extreme uneasiness that gripped the governor. It didn’t escape anyone’s notice. While the governor had no issue talking their ears off he evaded most of the specific questions they asked and what he did reveal was concerning. The labor disputes were more than simple griping about wages and time off: there was strong anti-Republic sentiment riddled through the planet. The governor knew there were leaders, but not who they were nor how many, neither did he know when or how it had started, nor the exact extent, nor if the sentiment had spread beyond the labor sector.

After their meal the governor declared work could be left to the next day and disappeared before they could ask him anything more. A palace manager showed them to their individual suites, all right next to each other, and the soldiers to the dormitory they could stay in a short ways off.

As soon as the palace manager had left the Jedi gathered in the Rear Admiral’s suite. The suites were far better decorated than the halls, showing a sign of taste and originality, but still largely utilitarian.

“The governor was keeping something from us, wasn’t he?” Otieno asked, her gaze switching between the Jedi.

“Definitely,” Master Jir’zo said. “He knows more than he’s letting on.”

“He’s either seen something in the past or seen something that will occur,” Master Gianlo said. The governor, being Iktoci, had a limited ability to see into the future when it related to him. “Something has put great fear in him.”

“We’ll have to talk to the locals then and see if any will speak,” Otieno said. “As soon as possible.”

“Why not tonight?” Katdia suggested. “Sib and I have disguised ourselves before. We can do it again. The sooner the better, as the Rear Admiral said.”

“I agree,” Master Gianlo said. “I will also venture out. It’s best that Master Jir’zo remain behind, I think. If comes searching for us she can make an excuse. And I know she doesn’t enjoy this sort of work.”

Master Jir’zo acknowledged this with a gesture.

“I’ll head out as well,” the Rear Admiral said. “I’m unrecognizable.”

Master Gianlo nodded. “Sib, you and the Rear Admiral will go together,” he said. “Katdia and I will go our own way.”

“Yes, Master.” Sib did her best to hide her annoyance but Master Gianlo’s brow furrowed ever so
slightly at her. Sib often left him baffled, his youth apparently very different, which was just fine by her.

#

Otieno stuck close to the Jedi as they left the Governor’s Palace and entered the city proper. The place was no Coruscant, but it was the capital of a planet and Otieno and Sib had no trouble disappearing into the night-time crowd of the city center.

Being with Sib was like rubbing salt in a wound. Otieno cringed at the slightest thought of the insult she’d given Sib. She’d been doing so well about watching her mouth. Otieno really had intended to apologize right then and there but the commodore had arrived and Otieno didn’t bother to think and took the easy exit. Now she couldn’t bring herself to apologize.

It took several tries to get a taxi that would bring them to the outlying districts of the city. Sib and Otieno looked inoffensive in their civilian clothes, but it was dangerous to go out there. Without the Jedi robes and with her lightsaber stashed...somewhere, Sib was indistinguishable from anyone else. Otieno hadn’t been sure what she expected exactly, but certainly something more. Her mind had a hard time accepting that without the outfit Jedi appeared just like everyone else.

The location of the lightsaber bothered her more than it should have. It was probably under the thick puffjacket Sib wore. The jacket clasped at the neck only to create the look of a cape and the pants she wore were almost skin-tight with a high, thick waist. She’d teased her short, reddish-brown hair so it sat high and tangled. Based on her limited knowledge, Otieno suspected it was a fashionable look and she wondered why a Jedi would even own something like it. Did she have it specifically for times like this? Otieno hadn’t thought Jedi had the opportunity to go out for fun.

Otieno’s own civilian wardrobe hadn’t been updated in several years but it was sufficient for wandering around at night. Otieno’s blaster, a smaller and slimmer model, was in a shoulder holster hidden underneath her own, more practically cut, coat.

Otieno pressed her fist against her leg to keep either from twitching and watched the city pass in a rainbow blur. Something needed to happen or else she’d do something unforgivably stupid again.

“You got experience with smugglers?” Sib asked without looking towards Otieno.

Otieno considered her answer. “I have experience arresting them.”

“Then let me do the talking when we get to The Cantina,” Sib said. “If you talk they’ll catch the scent of a Republic officer in a second. These people are very, very wary,” Sib turned slightly to face Otieno. “There’s a fine line between being a blowhard and being too easy. If you’re too easy they’ll eat you alive. If you’re too tough they’ll laugh at you and you’ll lose all credibility. You can’t be afraid, but you also have to give the right people the right amount and sort of suspect. The underlings aren’t worth your time. All you want to say to an underling is ‘take me to your boss,’ but in a nice way. An underling is an extension of the boss, of course, and any insult to the underling is an insult to the boss. The boss is the one you respect, but you have to respect them like they’re an equal. Do you understand what I’m getting at?”

“I understand,” Otieno said. She’d had a lifetime of experience in following orders and the system sounded very similar to the operations of the Republic fleet. “How do you know all this?”
“I grew up on Eriadu, remember?” Sib snipped and immediately turned away. Otieno’s ears went hot.

Otieno jumped out of the taxi the moment they arrived. Sib paid the console and followed Otieno onto the refuse-littered street. The cantina they sought out was a very particular one that Sib had found after a quick search on the city systems. Otieno had asked what made that one special. Sib had pointed to the number of arrests and raids made at that location. There were none.

A light rain shower had begun during dinner and every dip and pothole in the duracrete street was filled with oil-slicked rain. The faint mist refracted the harsh electrolum lights and made them soft and dreamlike. Water droplets caught in Sib’s hair looked like spider-webs laced into a hairnet.

The Cantina, its name as well its purpose, was neither an easy nor safe place to reach. Otieno hoped those Jedi mind-powers worked like everyone said they did. Otieno had graduated in the top two percent of her academy and consistently did outstanding work, but sneaking around simply wasn’t in her purview.

In the outskirts and slums night-goers were few and consisted only of the dangerous, foolhardy, and drunk. But no one paid them any heed: Otieno had always possessed the air of someone not to fuck with (which was the truth, as a few had discovered) and Sib moved like a cat in its kingdom. No one would be desperate enough to confront them with easier prey on hand.

Sib led the way down a dark, narrow street and then made a turn into an alley where the buildings above their heads came together. A single strip of lighting forty meters down the path was the only illumination. Sib paused for a moment just inside the arch.

Sib motioned Otieno to step closer and when Otieno did so Sib leaned in so close their cheeks nearly touched. “There’s someone between here and the light, hidden in shadow on the left, with ill intention,” Sib murmured into Otieno’s ear, her breath warm and soft. “Let me handle them. Now laugh when I lean away.”

Otieno rustled up a rather pitiful laugh as Sib moved back. Sib raised a brow at her.

This time, as they began down the dark path, Otieno kept several paces behind Sib on the right to ensure she wouldn’t get in the way for whatever the Jedi had planned. The shadow enclosed them and Otieno resisted the temptation to glance behind. She moved her jacket back for better access to her blaster in case Sib needed help. Though more harm than good would come of shooting in a dark corridor.

At the exact midpoint between the light and the corner Sib, only a silhouette, reached lightning-quick towards her left. Whatever she grabbed grunted in surprise as they were pulled out of the cubby they hid in and thrown bodily against the wall.

Sib was on the would-be attacker in a flash with her knee pressed against his throat and his arms pinned underneath a hand and leg. With her other hand she held a nasty looking knife against his throat.

“Will you argue if I tell you to leave?” Sib asked, her voice low.

The man gave the barest shake “no.” Sib’s knife was very close.

“Are you alone?” Sib asked.

The man nodded yes.
“Leave the way we came,” Sib said. She stepped off the man and he scrambled to his feet and sprinted away without a backward glance. Sib flicked the knife closed, at least three inches of folded steel, and tucked it into the back of her waistband.

“Is it normal for a Jedi to carry a knife?” Otieno asked, breathless though she hadn’t done anything herself.

“Not at all,” Sib replied, her tone light but her face hidden. “But I thought a lightsaber might attract too much attention.”

“Of course,” Otieno said.

“Shall we carry on?”

“After you.”

It was another dozen twisting passageways until Sib and Otieno finally arrived at The Cantina. A single light hung above the door and the walls were plain grey. The persistent rain clouds that reflected the light of the city in a ghostly hue were a thin sliver far above them. The passage barely fit two abreast and Otieno walked behind Sib to give her room as they approached the large, red-skinned Zabrak bouncer at The Cantina’s entrance. A small canopy protected him from the rain.

“You got this?” Otieno murmured into Sib’s ear as they approached.

“Of course,” Sib whispered back.

The Zabrak had his eye fixed on them as they drew to a halt in front of him. “What’s your business?” the Zabrak asked. He appeared mostly as a hulking shadow. Only up close could Otieno distinguish his intricate tattoos from his skin and see the dozens of raised scars that crossed his bare fore-arms and face.

“We wish to have a drink,” Sib replied, flat-toned.

The shade of a smile flickered across the Zabrak’s face. “A drink,” he said.

“A drink.”

“Tell me your real business or get out,” the Zabrak said. He uncrossed his arms and casually rested a hand on the military-grade blaster at his hip. Not that a Zabrak needed a blaster to do serious damage, but it had a certain intimidation factor.

Sib raised a hand from her side and gave a subtle, two-fingered gesture. The Zabrak suddenly straightened and a strange distance entered his gaze. “Our business is our own,” Sib said with a gentle persuasion. “You will let us in and you will forget you ever saw us.”

“Of course,” the Zabrak said. He stepped aside and opened the door for them. So that was what a Jedi mind-trick looked like.

The inside of The Cantina was dim, but clean, and hidden speakers played a mellow tune. The sparsely populated bar at its center was ringed three quarters of the way around by raised platforms all stacked on top of the next. About half the tables were occupied, but not full. Corridors extended off the lowest level. Otieno suspected that whatever they wanted would be down one of those.
Sib ran her hands through her tangled hair and shook the rain out. “The bar,” she said and gave Otieno’s elbow a nudge.

The bartender, a young man, went to them immediately. It was a slow night.

Sib held up two fingers, this time calling for drinks, with the ease of someone who had done it a thousand times. “Whiskeys, anything but Corellian,” she asked.

The bartender nodded and silently fixed the drinks. Sib paid with coins she had ready. The bartender slid the coins into a slot behind the bar and turned to help a different customer.

“You can tell this is a good place because they have something besides Corellian,” Sib said, her tone amused but hushed. She downed her glass in one go. “Come on, drink up, it’s a cantina after all. After this we’ll grab some beers and a table.”

Otieno eyed her drink for a moment. She had no objection to alcohol but had never been one to use it recreationally and certainly not during work. She drank it in two careful sips. Sib raised a brow at Otieno and pressed her lips together as if to contain a laugh. Otieno didn’t stick her tongue out.

Sib flagged the bartender and ordered two of the less intoxicating beers. These they took to an empty alcove that gave them a view of the door. The table was smooth metal and the seats comfortable cushions.

“This is a very nice place indeed,” Sib said as she settled in. “Which means it is definitely the place we want to be.”

“Crime lords not interested in hanging out in dingy bars, hm?” Otieno said.

“Not if they can help it,” Sib said. “Now don’t look so nervous. This is an exclusive club, we’re supposed to be here.”

Otieno straightened up and squared her shoulders. She put on her best officer of the Republic face and took a sip of the lukewarm beer.

They drank slowly and in silence, both with an eye towards the entrance and the halls, and waited for something to happen. Otieno wasn’t sure what they were looking for, but she felt she’d know it when she saw it.

Otieno, usually unminding of silence, grew uneasy with the situation very quickly. Sib had not forgiven her a bit, rightfully, and it stung. They had just met and it wasn’t the first time Otieno had insulted someone at first sight, but something about Sib made the cold-shoulder particularly hurtful. For some reason Otieno cared about Sib’s friendship.

Otieno had worked out a thorough and formal apology since she’d first given the insult but it took half the glass to work up the courage. There was something intimidating about Sib, neither in physical appearance nor obvious in personality, but Otieno suspected Jedi neutrality was difficult for her.

“Sib,” Otieno began.

“Hold that thought,” Sib said, her attention on the entrance and her eyes carrying a warning. “Don’t look,” Sib said. “But the woman who just walked in is who we’ve come for.”

Otieno stayed exactly where she was. An apology could wait. “Were we looking for someone specific?” she said and raised the glass to her lips.
“We were looking for anyone important and the woman who just walked in is exactly that,” Sib said.

“How do we know she’s anti-Republic?” Otieno asked. She tracked the woman and her entourage’s movement out of the corner of her eye. They encircled the bar, the woman herself lost behind the wall of her bodyguards, until the bartender stepped out and lead them down one of the halls. The woman remained shielded by her bodyguards the entire time. Otieno had met leaders of state with half so many guards.

“Doesn’t matter if she is,” Sib said. “We find one we find the others. All the underworld bosses are connected.”

“I see,” Otieno said. “How will we do this?”

Sib drummed her fingers on the table for a moment and glanced around the room. “In a few minutes, when the bartender’s returned, I’m going to make the lighting in this room go out. When that happens we’re going to make a speedy move down the hall that the woman went down and see where that takes us. Hopefully we can overhear something interesting and not get caught.”

“Hopefully,” Otieno said. She didn’t have a better plan, and was, she grudgingly admitted to herself, interested in seeing Sib use the Force again. “Should I have my blaster ready?”

“It wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

Otieno finally felt she needed the drink and finished it off. She discretely adjusted her holster and switched the safety off. Years of academy training made her squirm to do so but the blaster had a heavy trigger and was yet to fire by accident.

The bartender returned and resumed his place. A group near the entrance left a moment later.

Sib threw her glass back and finished off the beer.. Sib wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and nudged her glass aside. “Ready?” she said. Otieno wondered if Jedi were allowed to drink and if she wanted to go on an espionage mission with a drunk Jedi. Too late for second thoughts.

Otieno nodded and got ready to jump off her seat. It would be difficult in the dark but Otieno wasn’t about to back down.

Sib raised three fingers, her thumb and little finger touched over her palm, and jerked her hand downwards.

Somewhere above their heads a fuse blew and every light in the room went out all at once. A handful of personal items provided the vague outlines of their owners, but otherwise they were in complete darkness.

Silently Otieno slid from the booth and moved towards the hall, going by memory and touch, until Sib grabbed her wrist and pulled her along. Otieno stumbled at each step down and hit several chairs and tables with her hip. At least one bruise was going to show up the next day. Sib moved like she could see as clear as day.

The occupants muttered as the bartender assured them he’d deal with it. Before anyone could pull out a light Sib and Otieno were gone.

Sib broke into a run with Otieno dragged along behind as soon as they were out of the main room. Otieno brushed her hand along the wall for some sense of distance in the darkness. The corridor was longer than it looked and went well beyond the boundaries of the building. Sib took the turns without pause and Otieno's momentum nearly carried her into the opposite wall each time. To her fortune
there was nothing on the ground to stumble over.

After a few minutes of jogging Otieno pulled Sib to a stop with a gentle tug. Sib immediately came to a halt and grabbed both of Otieno’s forearms. Otieno was unclear why the grabbing but went with it.

“Are you sure about where you’re going?” Otieno asked in a low voice.

“Positive, I can sense them down there,” Sib replied. She was close enough for Otieno to feel her breath on her face as she spoke and for a voiceless whisper to be audible. It took a moment for Otieno to process how close that was.

“Sense? Like…with the Force?” Otieno asked. She was still unclear what the Force could do, it wasn’t something taught in the Academy or discussed among officers, and she kept forgetting to look it up on the holonet. There were a lot of stories she’d heard over the years, of course, but must struck her as apocryphal.

Sib huffed, as if she found it funny. “Exactly. Trust me, it’s not far, just keep holding on to me.”

“You’re the one holding on to me,” Otieno said.

“So it is,” Sib said. She slipped her hand into Otieno’s and squeezed. Otieno squeezed back.

Sib toned down to a light jog and Otieno held on tight. The corridor’s twists became sharp corners that forced them to pause each time and check there wasn’t a split. There never was a split, which made Otieno wonder. What sort of place had a corridor that neither branched nor had doors?

What was the purpose to this corridor? Was it simply a way to get from one place to another? Could it be used as a trap? Were there secret doors along it? Otieno drew her blaster. Its weight and grip felt like an old friend and she forced herself to focus on the facts before her. It was dark, the path was clear, and Sib said there were people up ahead.

Sib slowed to a walk as they rounded a corner and stepped into a pool of dim light from around the next turn. Otieno narrowed her eyes for a moment as her pupils adjusted. Sib looked back at Otieno. Otieno nodded. She was ready.

Their hands dropped back to their sides. Sib flicked open the knife she’d had before. Otieno wasn’t certain the tactical disadvantage of a lightsaber outweighed the risk of high-intensity blasters. But Sib was the Jedi and Otieno would respect that. Surely she knew what she was doing. At least a little bit.

As she was the one with the blaster Otieno carefully rounded the corner first, but the caution was needless. There was no one; only the first door they’d come across and the empty corridor. The door was slightly ajar. Otieno wondered why they didn’t have any sort of security posted and the door wasn’t shut and locked, but who would ever come this far except for those meant to be there?

Sib passed Otieno and stuck her face against the crack. Sib didn’t jump away immediately and Otieno took that as a good sign, but as Sib kept her face pressed against the door Otieno grew impatient. She tugged at Sib’s jacket. Without looking back Sib motioned Otieno towards the door. Otieno held back a few choice words and knelt beneath Sib to look inside for herself.

It took a moment for Otieno to understand what she was seeing. The light inside was dim and they were at a poor angle. The room was very large, that was certain, and the door seemed to lead onto a catwalk above a pit or conference room or arena. Bodyguards and muscle stood on the catwalk. Their attention was on whoever was down below.
Nothing Otieno heard was discernible and she didn’t think the Force improved Sib’s hearing. Otieno huffed and scooted back. She got to her feet and gave Sib’s jacket a hard pull. Sib glared but followed her back around the corner.

“So what’s the plan here? Can you understand what they’re saying?” Otieno asked.

Sib’s hair bounced as she shook her head. “No, can’t hear anything. Can’t see anything.”

“There wasn’t any other entrance, was there?”

“Didn’t see any.”

Otieno hesitated a moment before the next question. “Can…you do anything about the guards?”

Sib raised her shoulders and gave a sort of side-to-side gesture with her head. “I could, that’s a lot of people though, would be tricky even for a Master,” Sib said. “I mean…yeah, I can do it. Not quite like that Zabrak, but yeah. I can convince them that we go to these things all the time and they know who we are.”

Otieno trusted Sib not to exaggerate her skill. Otieno trusted her with their lives, she realized with a jolt, but how badly did they really need this information and how convinced were they the ones inside could give it? Enough to risk this?

The answer came easily. Yes. If Sib said she could do it, she could do it. Otieno trusted this wild-haired Jedi who carried a knife and wore the latest fashion. Otieno wasn’t used to trusting people.

“All right,” Otieno said.

Sib grinned. “This will work, I promise,” she said. “Now here are the risks. One of them may not be Force-susceptible. It happens. If that’s the case that one’s probably going to end up warning the others and breaking the illusion I’ve put on them. If that’s the case we’ll have to get the hell out of there. The other tricky part is they’ll have to see us before I can do it. So there’s going to be a couple seconds where they may or may not attempt to kill us.”

Otieno couldn’t hide the concern that caused her. “Oh.”

“But that shouldn’t be a problem,” Sib quickly added. “They probably won’t know we aren’t supposed to be there.”

Otieno held her tongue. Trust. She trusted Sib. “Well, let’s get started,” she said.

They straightened their clothes and hair, Sib put her knife in her pants pocket, and Otieno holstered her blaster but kept the safety off.

Sib took the lead, Otieno once again very close, and Sib opened the door in an unsuspicious manner.

The bodyguards’ attention immediately turned to them and hands went to weapons. Sib waved her hand in a quick gesture that encompassed the room.

For a moment the bodyguards didn’t move, but then a few gave Sib and Otieno short nods. The rest turned back to what was going on below.

Otieno breathed out and gave Sib a light pat on the back. They went to an empty spot at the railing straight out from the door. Opposite them was a single-person wide staircase.

Beneath them a dozen individuals sat around a circular table, a large holoprojector dormant in the
center, with their interest on a single speaker beneath and left of Otieno. The woman Otieno and Sib had followed sat across the room. She was humanoid with ashy grey skin and hair as white as bone.

They discussed shipments of drugs, tech, and alcohol. Sib had been exactly right that this was some sort of boss meeting, but nothing they said was specific or related to Otieno and Sib's task. Otieno wanted discussions of weapons or mercenaries, something that could link them to rebel activity, not the day-to-days of corporate greed and drug addiction. Could Sib read their minds? Was that a thing Jedi actually did?

“Loila, are those particle shipments on track?” the Mandalorian that acted as secretary asked. Sib gave Otieno a light tap with her elbow. Otieno nodded once. She knew that “particle” was smuggler code for blasters.

Loila, the bookkeeper, flipped through her flimsiplast. “They have been received and paid for,” she said.

“I hear that another shipment will be coming through,” the woman from the bar said. She was one of the more talkative ones at the table. Otieno hadn’t yet caught her name.

“So have I,” another said. Otieno had gathered this one was a representative of the Hutts. “His Excellency would like to know how confident we are these particles shall not be used against us and if such disruption is truly good for us.”

“Of course it’s good for us,” a different one said. “It’s keeping the Republic off our backs, isn’t it? They’re so worried about this dissident business they can’t corral us. I’m getting more shipments through than ever before.”

“And Jobbo should be particularly pleased,” a Kel Dor said, her voice distorted through the breathing mask. “A Republic falling apart is a Republic that can’t protect against the Hutts.”

“That is, of course, true,” the representative said. “But His Excellency would like you all to consider what might replace the Republic.”

“Please, the insurrection will never spread beyond this planet’s scope,” a different one said with a touch of amusement. “It never does. Jobbo does not need to fear for the collapse of the Republic.”

The representative’s lips twitched into a bare-toothed smile. “If His Excellency believed that this would never spread beyond the planet’s borders His Excellency would not have me bring this up,” he said. “This is just one planet in his vast empire. It is inconsequential to him—thought it may be very important to those of you that have only this one planet under your belt.”

There were scattered mutterings at the slight but the secretary banged his fist on the table and it quieted. Only a representative of the Hutts could ever be so bold.

“Jobbo believes that there’s something more going on?” the woman from the bar said, her eyes narrowed.

“His Excellency knows there is something more going on,” the man said. “He has refrained from bringing it up before because he could not be certain, but now he is confident that there is more going on. Consider, for instance, where are the particles actually going? Does anyone know the on-planet stockpile location?”

A poignant silence followed as they realized, those who were in the business of knowing every secret, that they did not know this. The back of Otieno’s neck tingled. Now they were getting somewhere.
“Implying someone off-world is buying all these particles under the guise of disgruntled workers?” the Kel Dor said. “But these dissidents do exist. We have seen their handiwork.”

“Or is someone stirring them up?” the woman from the bar said. Her face pinched into a frown. “Who does Jobbo think is stirring up this trouble?”

The representative held his hands up as if this much was beyond him. “His Excellency has theories, but he doubts you would believe him.”

“Let us hear them!”

The representative’s attention roamed the others for a moment as half looked at him in curiosity and the other half with amusement. The representative sighed in a dramatic fashion. “His Excellency Jobbo the Hutt believes that there is Sith sentiment, if not a new Sith Lord, and he is the one doing this.”

The room broke into uproarious laughter, including the guards on the catwalk, and Sib and Otieno awkwardly joined in so they wouldn’t stand out. A Sith Lord? What was Jobbo the Hutt trying to stir up?

“Jobbo has lost his mind!” the Kel Dor cried. “Sith? There haven’t been Sith in a thousand years!”

“His Excellency is aware, but sources and his own instincts suggest to him a darker power than simple unhappy workers or even Separatists,” the representative said. “And this is why he cares about Garos. The Hutts remember how the Galaxy suffered under the last Sith dominion. He does not wish to see a repeat. It is bad for business.”

Just below Otieno a woman that had said nothing until then stood. Attention immediately turned to her and Otieno leaned forward an inch to get a better look. Otieno could only see the top of her head from their awkward angle.

“It is understandable that Jobbo would, perhaps, be a little jumpy after his last escapade,” the woman said. Otieno had to strain to hear her. “Any of us would be, but you needn’t fear the Sith. As you all may know, I am, for personal reasons, closely tied to these rebels. I support their cause and I have paved the way for these particle shipments. I can personally attest that every particle we have sold them remains on-planet in various locations, prepared for their usage alone. If I do not tell you these locations I am sure you understand. We must keep some things secret from each other so no one of us is tempted to do something foolish.”

The representative of Jobbo the Hutt smiled, but it was strained. “I will inform His Excellency of your confidence, Tantro,” the man said.

“Thank you,” Tantro said.

If Tantro was associating with the Separatists for more than business reasons she would be the one they wanted, but how to find her after this? They could trail her, but something like that wouldn’t escape her notice. They’d get found out right away. And the Sith power? That was no small thing. They’d have to look into the Sith angle, as improbable as it was, just because of the Hutts’ suspicion of it.

“Well if that matter is settled,” the secretary said. “I would like to remind everyone that it is against policy to raise matters with the sole intention of causing trouble. Now, Tantro, speaking of your business—”

Sib grabbed the back of Otieno’s jacket and hauled her towards the door at the same instant the
woman from the bar jumped to her feet and fired at them. The shot hit the ceiling, but if Sib and Otieno hadn’t gotten out of the way at least one of them would have been struck.

“Spies!” the woman yelled. She must have recognized them from the bar.

Sib had thrown open the door and was halfway out it by the time the bodyguards pulled out their weapons and even started to move towards them.

On instinct Otieno whipped out her own blaster and squeezed off a shot at the nearest bodyguard. It caught him square in the chest and he fell backwards. His skin and clothing sizzled and burned. He should have worn armor.

The smell of ozone snapped Otieno out of her shock and as she stumbled into the corridor she fired off several more rounds before Sib used the Force to slam the door shut. A few wild shots from the bodyguards barely missed them in the seconds before the door closed. Once they were in the relative safety of the corridor, and also plunged into darkness, Sib released Otieno.

“Come on!” Sib yelled and ran down the hall—opposite the way they’d came.

Otieno cursed but followed. There was no time to argue which way was best. It sounded like Sib had also locked the door, but that would only last until someone set off an explosion.

Otieno went at a light jog with her hands against the left wall. “Sib!” Otieno hissed and reached out for Sib’s hand or shirt or something to anchor herself on.

“Sorry,” Sib said, her voice a meter ahead, and Otieno jumped as Sib smacked her arms and grabbed at her free hand. “Let’s hurry.”

“I had the same idea,” Otieno said. With Sib in the lead Otieno stopped worrying about hitting a wall, but throwing herself headlong into the dark was a fight against instinct. “So what’s your plan here?” Otieno asked.

“Uh—get the hell out of here?” Sib said. She pulled Otieno around a sharp corner. Otieno was still impressed Sib hadn’t brought them straight into a wall.

“But why did you choose this way to go?” Otieno asked.

“Because the woman from the bar knew we’d come from the bar, right?” Sib said. “So she’d probably expect us to go the way we came from because that was the way we knew.”

“But we do know that way and we don’t know this way,” Otieno said. She was having a hard time keeping her tone level.

“Well it has to lead somewhere, right?” Sib said.

Otieno groaned but couldn’t make an argument otherwise. They had two terrible options and this one was the marginally smarter one.

Behind them an explosion echoed down the hall that left Otieno’s ears ringing. Sib and Otieno both stumbled but kept on. They had a good lead and no reason to lose it. At least some of the voices sounded like they followed Otieno and Sib. Of course they’d cover both their options! And they probably had lights and tech!

Sib skidded to a halt and Otieno barely avoided bowling her over. Otieno pointed her blaster back the way they’d came as she waited for Sib to explain herself. Otieno couldn’t sense anything
different.

“The path ends. There’s nothing more,” Sib said.

“What?” Otieno pushed past Sib and felt the wall they’d come up against. Her touch confirmed what Sib said. “Nothing? Really? There has to be a door.”

“I’m sure there is!” Sib said. “But not one I can get a sense of. It’s very cleverly hid.”

“Can you at least tell me where the lock or control panel might be so I could blast it open?” Otieno said, feeling for one herself. Being trapped in the darkness was the most infuriating part of the entire ordeal.

“There isn’t one, I’m sorry,” Sib said. “I can kind of sense that this section of the wall is thinner than the others, but not how to get past it—actually, hold on.”

Sib fumbled for a moment with something. Otieno turned back the way they'd came. Footsteps grew louder and Otieno's nerves were shot. If she died of a heart attack after all of this she was going to sue the entirety of the Jedi Order. And maybe the Republic for good measure.

“Where are you?” Sib asked.

“Here,” Otieno said. “What are you doing?”

“Ok good, stay right there, yeah?”

“Yeah, okay, but what are you—”

Otieno jumped back as Sib activated her lightsaber. It bathed them in an electric blue light and for the first time offered a glimpse of their surroundings, but Otieno was blind to anything besides the blade itself. Otieno had only ever seen lightsabers from a distance and they never had impressed her, but so close and in darkness its allure was obvious. The weapon’s hum was a subtle dirge and its pale light had a slight pulse that made their shadows grow and fade. It was a deadly weapon of disconcerting beauty. Of course the Jedi would choose it.

“Stand back,” Sib said and gently pushed Otieno away. “I’m going to cut into the wall.”

“You can do that?” Otieno breathed.

“These things can cut through most anything,” Sib replied. The metal protested in a squeal and hiss as Sib cut into it and the blade made a high-pitched wine, but it cut. In only a few moments Sib had made a rough hole large enough for them to slip through. She kicked the piece of metal through. It tumbled out the other side and…nothing. No sound of it hitting the ground or a wall or anything.

“Oh fuck,” Sib muttered as Otieno thought the same. She waited a moment for the molten metal to cool, her lightsaber still activated, and leaned out the hole. “Oh fuck,” she repeated.

“What is it?” Otieno asked. A faint breeze drifted out, which Otieno took as a good sign, but whatever Sib saw could only be bad.

Sib pulled her head out of the hole. “It’s a mining shaft,” Sib said. “About ten meters diameter.”

“Shit,” Otieno said. “Any ideas now?”

Sib turned a disgruntled look on Otieno. “There’s cables running along the sides,” she said. “I think what we can do is go out there, grab onto one, and then crawl up.”
“How far is it?”

“…I don’t know.”

“Well how about we just wait it out on those cables?” Otieno said. “They’ll come down here, see the hole in the wall, and poke their heads out, look around, but I bet you can do a mind-trick to make them forget they saw us, and then when they’ve left we just go back the way we came.”

“Well I don’t have a better plan,” Sib relented. “Fine, let’s do it. And they’re not mind-tricks—.”

“Is that really what you want to be arguing about right now?” Otieno said. “Now get out there.”

“Fine, Rear Admiral,” Sib said with completely unnecessary sarcasm. She pushed the lightsaber into Otieno’s free hand. Otieno stared at it as Sib knelt down to fuss with her boot. What surprised Otieno most was its weight; it was barely a kilo. Was the blade weightless? It had to be, wasn’t it just plasma? She really needed to do some research. “I have a proper light,” Sib said.

Sib unzipped the knee-high boot of her left leg. Otieno turned her stare on Sib as she opened a hatch in the side of her normal looking leg to reveal a small compartment. She’d had no idea Sib had a prosthetic. Sib popped a small flashlight out, turned it on, and set it on the ground. Otieno handed the lightsaber back over. Sib shut it down and snapped it back into her leg compartment. So that’s where she’d been keeping it. How incredibly clever. Was it her own idea?

Sib zipped her boot back up and stood. “Let’s hurry, they’re very close now. You go first, I’ll hold the light.”

Otieno sat in the hole with her upper-body suspended above the mine-shaft. There was a thick cable with strong supports that they could use as a ladder just to the left. Otieno was strong and climbed recreationally on occasion. It remained the most terrifying thing she’d ever done.

She shoved her fear down deep and got a good grip on the cable before she swung her legs into the abyss and gripped the cable between her thighs. She crawled up far enough for Sib, who sat ready with the flashlight between her teeth, to do the same.

They climbed up the cable a short distance so they wouldn’t immediately be seen. As soon as they were set Otieno shut her eyes tight. Getting dizzy and falling off would be a terrible way to end the day. Sib could handle this. Otieno was letting Sib handle a lot of things. The results of this adventure would reveal if this had been a good idea or not, but for themoment Otieno was content with it. For some still incomprehensible reason, she trusted Sib.

By some miracle their plan went off without a hitch. A pursuer looked into the shaft, Sib used her mind-trick on him, and he reported nothing seen or heard to the ones that stood in the corridor. Sib and Otieno got back into the corridor safely and dared to use the flashlight now that they had a better idea of their path.

It turned out there had been doors along the walls but they were all perfectly flush with the hall and without apparent handles or lock. Probably remote opens. To their continuing luck the doors were labeled with the names of streets and buildings. At a promising door they made their exit. Sib’s lightsaber once again cut through the metal with perfect ease and in only a few minutes they’d crawled out a basement door and into a narrow alley.

Otieno leaned her head back and reveled in the first fresh air she’d breathed in a few hours. They were closer to the city-center than they had started out from and foot-traffic passed on either side of
the alley thought it was still nighttime. Otieno had never been more glad to hear the noise of a crowd.

Sib leaned on her knees and laughed. “Wow,” she said between giggles. “Wow, wow!”

Otieno grinned. “So, uh, is this what it’s like to be a Jedi?” she asked.

“We get our fair share of near-death experiences, but nothing quite like that! I wish it was always like this!” Sib said. She punched the air and a laugh burst out of Otieno.

“Come on,” Otieno said. “Let’s go tell the others what we found and get some rest.”

“I agree whole-heartedly,” Sib said. She knelt and put her lightsaber back in her leg. Otieno was curious how Sib had lost the leg, but that would be impolite to ask, and there was something else Otieno wanted to say. She was still high on adrenaline and the relief of being alive. The alcohol had burned out of her system hours ago. She should say it while she had the courage.

“Sib,” Otieno said.

“Hm?”

“I’d like to apologize for what I said about your home-world,” Otieno said. “It was very rude and I said it without thinking about how you would feel. I have had the misfortune of only seeing the inhabitants of Eriadu that are criminals and they are hardly indicative of the rest of the population.”

Sib tilted her head to the side and her smile turned small and sweet. “I accept your apology,” she said. “You were right, really. Eriadu is filled with criminals. I don’t think a good thing has ever come off that planet.”

“You came off that planet,” Otieno said before she could consider it.

Sib blinked at her, her expression frozen on her face, and Otieno briefly panicked that she had said the wrong thing, but then Sib’s smile broadened and her eyes crinkled. “Thank you,” she said. “You’re not too bad yourself.”

Otieno nearly melted with relief. “I hated that we started on such bad ground.”

“I did too,” Sib said. Her face was flush, her eyes bright, and her hair in complete disarray. She looked ageless and suffused with an exhilarated radiance that could only come after what they’d gone through. Everything was sweeter on the other side.

“I think it’s a reasonable hour for breakfast, let’s find a place,” Sib said. She threw her arm around Otieno’s shoulders. Otieno’s chest warmed with an unexpected fondness and she put her arm around Sib’s waist. Locked together, they swaggered out of the alley and onto the street.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, that’s right, the Hutt character is named Jobbo.

Edited on 8/16/16
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Things heat up on Garos

Chapter Notes

I've revised Sib's age down slightly, but it doesn't really affect anything.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sib and Otieno stumbled into an all-night restaurant just a few blocks off a main square and claimed a booth at the back with a clear view of the entrance. No one had gotten a good look at them, but better safe than dead in a sewer. Sib ordered two plates and messaged the other Jedi to meet at the restaurant. Otieno was on her third cup of caf by the time their food arrived. For several minutes she only poked at what passed for mashed potatoes as Sib devoured her eggs and silently fretted over Otieno’s mood.

Sib was used to the sort of high-stakes, on-the-ground missions they’d just gone through, but as the adrenaline tapered off Otieno just looked shaken and small. The uniform, muscles, and military demeanor hid it, but Otieno had a thin frame and delicate features. At another time Sib might have enjoyed this new realization.

Otieno had seen some sort of action before, but it never would have been like what they’d gone through. The Galaxy was mostly at peace and it was rare for the Republic to get involved with military disputes that resulted in more than superficial violence. Otieno had also shot and killed someone. It was possible she’d never directly caused a death before. Sib knew from personal experience how deeply that altered someone.

“You gotta eat Otieno,” Sib said, gently.

Otieno started and blinked at Sib. Her fork hovered just above her plate, as if trying to find the best morsel, and after a moment Otieno ate a few small bites of the eggs. Then she put her fork down and resumed staring at nothing.

Sib sighed and knocked her knuckles against the table. “Otieno, don’t worry about what they said until you’ve ate,” she said.

Otieno’s attention shifted to Sib again and in small increments her expression returned to something resembling the proper Rear Admiral Otieno. “Do you think there might really be Sith?” she asked. “When the Hutts first said it I just assumed it was exaggeration or they were stirring up trouble, but… I don’t know. What if it wasn’t?”

Sib shrugged. “I don’t know. We shouldn’t discount it, but I haven’t heard anything and the Jedi would be the first to know.”
How much did Otieno know about the Sith? Non-Jedi were mostly uninformed or ill-informed about the Force, but occasionally some surprised her.

And of course there was the Sith War. It had taken place two thousand years prior, but the horrors that had occurred in it still hovered on the horizon behind them like a storm in retreat. It was the Jedi’s greatest fear that the Sith would rise again and the Order would fall to the dark side, however unlikely that might actually be, but Sib didn’t know if the Republic had the same fear. The Jedi didn’t forget like the Republic did.

Otieno nodded slowly and began to eat in slow, deliberate bites. Sib, confident crisis had been averted, finished off the sausage before she attacked the biscuit. The meal was greasy, cheap, and full of chemicals. Master Gianlo insisted on purely healthy and cruelty-free foods, a practice only a few other Jedi shared, that were often bland and unpleasantly textured. Sib understood the sentiment and never went hungry, but she ate out whenever she could.

When the eggs were gone Otieno dropped her fork and stared out the window, a slight furrow in her brow, with her hand pressed against her mouth. She looked pensive, rather than shaken or afraid, but Sib didn’t like the look.

“You did a good job,” Sib said. “You’re—”

“Don’t patronize me,” Otieno snapped. She immediately squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her fist; then exhaled until all the tension was wrung out of her shoulders. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have said that. You’re not being patronizing, you’re being concerned, which I appreciate.”

“Short temper?” Sib asked, playfully. She hadn’t been offended.

Otieno hung her head in her hands. “I’ve been working on it since I became a Rear Admiral. I’ve gotten better, but old habits and all that.”

“Last thing the Republic needs is another sparking cannon in the ranks,” Sib said and was tremendously pleased when it drew a smile from Otieno. “How long have you been a Rear Admiral?”

“Four years in two months,” Otieno said. “I entered the Academy of Carida when I was nineteen.”

“That’s one of the really good ones, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Where are you from?” Sib said. She was thrilled she could ask questions again. Otieno’s apology had come as a relief. Whatever had first caught Sib’s interest had had turned into something else: less magnetism and more personal. It had a greedy edge, like the desire to see the whole of something fascinating she’d only glimpsed through the trees.

“Aurnai. Nowhere special,” Otieno said with a peculiar twitch of her mouth, as if the thought was distasteful. “It’s a place with fairly rigid castes. My family works for one of the Elder Houses as wine merchants.”

“And you were expected to do the same?”

“Of course.”

Sib chewed on her lip for a moment. She could empathize easily. “You think they’re cowards,” Sib said.
Otieno looked up at Sib, her gaze sharp, and Sib knew she’d hit on the truth. “I do,” Otieno said. “The castes remain because people are afraid and bow to wealth and the person with the biggest stick. It’s not like they don’t know there’s more, it’s not like we couldn’t try,” Otieno said. She was nearly spitting. And Sib had thought her own relationship with her home planet was complicated.

“You’re not a coward,” Sib said.

“I’ve worked long and hard to prove I’m not,” Otieno said and lapsed into silence. It was for the best as Master Jir’zo had just entered with a large bag slung over her shoulder. Sib had been aware of her approach for several minutes. They weren’t that far from the Governor’s Palace. Master Jir’zo slid in next to Sib and dropped the bag at their feet.

“How are you two?” she immediately asked.

“We’ll be fine,” Sib said. “We almost died, but we’re fine. No injuries.”

Master Jir’zo looked stricken at the thought. “Almost died? What in the—no, wait, tell me when the others get here to save your breath,” she said. “Anyway, I brought all four of you a change of clothes. Your uniform, Rear Admiral, and your robes, Sib.”

“I’ll take them now,” Otieno said. Master Jir’zo pulled a neat bundle from the bag and handed it over. Otieno half-jogged to the refresher.

“How is the Rear Admiral?” Master Jir’zo asked when Otieno was out of sight.

“She’s shaken up but she’ll live,” Sib said. “I’m trying to get her to eat. She hasn’t been in a situation like last night before.”

“I hope you’re being kind to her,” Master Jir’zo tsked.

“I am! Really! I’m being thoughtful. I even accepted her apology for something rude she’d said early. I’m worried about her too,” Sib said around a bite of oatmeal. Master Jir’zo’s face pinched as Sib spoke with her mouth full. Sib swallowed before continuing. “She’s tough, I can tell. She just needs to sleep for a few hours then she’ll be just fine. I’m dead-tired myself. Can’t imagine how exhausted she must be. There was lots of running and clinging to pipes.”

“Mother of Moons, Sib, I hope it was worth it.”

“It was! Really! We found good stuff!” Sib said. Master Gianlo’s and Katdia’s arrival drew their attention to the door. “Look, you’ll hear the whole thing in a second.”

The Jedi made straight for their table. Katdia’s civvies were a bit more dance club than Sib’s while Master Gianlo dressed like a rural potato farmer who’d gone to the big city. Master Jir’zo had Master Gianlo’s robes ready for him and he went first thing to the other refresher to change. Katdia sat across from Sib and Master Jir’zo.

“Did you guys have any luck?” Sib asked Katdia.

Katdia shook her head with a discouraged sigh. “Spent the night reading the minds of drugdealers and pimps. None of them knew anything. It was gross.”

“I’ll bet—” Sib said and intended to finish but Otieno stepped out of the washroom in her uniform, her other clothes tucked under arm, and Sib lost her train of thought. Otieno looked infinitely calmer with the uniform on, wearing it like a second skin, and not so much like a bantha with its hair shaved off. Otieno still wore her shoulder holster. Master Jir’zo must not have brought the holster that went...
with the belt. The diner probably had a no-weapons policy, but who was going to tell a Rear Admiral accompanied by several Jedi to leave?

There was a brief moment of seat negotiation. The booth would barely be able to fit their five. Sib ended up trapped in the very back of the booth, Otieno on her left and Katdia on her right, and the two Master Jedi at the ends.

A moment later Master Gianlo rejoined them and Sib dove right into their story. Otieno said nothing, her only reaction vague nods, and it occurred to Sib, so suddenly that she stumbled on her words for a moment, that Otieno probably felt at a disadvantage working with four Jedi. Jedi had a bad habit of acting like their opinion was the only one with any value. Otieno had no issue arguing with Sib when it was just them, as she had clearly demonstrated, but Sib was just a Padawan and a couple of years younger than Otieno. Two Jedi Masters and a Jedi Knight were a different matter.

“What did you think of it, Otieno?” Sib asked, when she’d finished the story. The group’s attention shifted to her.

Otieno blinked at them, briefly caught off-guard, but she recovered quickly and cleared her throat. “I agree with what you said. Considering that it was a Hutt representative that said those things about the Sith I think it’s worth considering that angle. I also believe, regardless of whether its actually a Sith or not, we should consider that there’s something more going on. Either an off-world influence or an influence that plans to spread off-world. A…Separatist organization or one of the major terrorist groups, maybe.”

“I concur that there may be something more going on,” Master Gianlo said, “but I can’t believe that there’s anything Sith related beyond one of those imitation groups occurring. If there were a Forceusing Sith, or even someone who has fallen to the dark side, the Council would be aware of it and would have warned us. All the same, you are right that the big picture must be considered.”

Otieno nodded once and folded her hands together on the table. It hadn’t felt like all she wanted to say. Later, Sib could ask later.

“What’s the plan from here on?” Katdia asked.

“We need to learn more about Tantro, firstly,” Master Gianlo said. “Then we will either deal with the issue or confront the governor. I sense though…I sense that something is going to happen very soon, so we should work quickly.”

Sib’s attention was on Otieno’s half-eaten plate of food. It was still warm, barely, and nothing had congealed. She gave the plate a slight nudge, just enough to draw Otieno’s attention to it. Otieno’s eyes flickereded to the food, then to Sib, and finally she picked up her fork and ate without any of the hesitation of before. Sib contained her pleased grin. It wasn’t anything to be smug about, really.

“Can I ask you a question about Jedi skills?” Otieno asked without preamble.

It had been three days since Sib and Otieno had crashed the meeting and the two of them were taking a break at an open-air restaurant from wandering the street for someone that might know something. Sib still lightly sensed the crowd, but they had wandered into a more residential district with pleasant apartments and flower-laden storefronts. Wouldn’t be much suspicious activity in this part. They’d had a little luck, a drug dealer had given them a name and location of a distributor, but the information wouldn’t be good until that night when the distributor showed up at his location. The distributor might not even have connections to Tantro. Everything else they’d found had turned up a
dead-end. Everyone knew of Tantro but nobody could say anything concrete. Even the planetary government’s intelligence division barely knew anything about her, though they had agents out searching. She was a ghost.

“Of course,” Sib said. “Ask away.”

“So,” Otieno said, her gaze looking everywhere but Sib’s face. She wore her uniform just as Sib wore her robes. Today there was a value in their ranks. “Ah, I’ve been doing some research about Jedi.”

Sib grinned. “Don’t believe everything you read on the holonet,” she teased.

Otieno’s lips twitched into a smile for second. “Of course not. I’ve mostly been using the official archives. I was wondering about Master Gianlo’s sense that something was going to happen soon. So Jedi do receive visions of the future? How does that work?”

Master Gianlo’s concern for some future event had grown worse over the past few days to the point Sib, who had little skill in visions, was beginning to get a sense of paranoia herself. The governor remained unhelpful. Master Gianlo had attempted to read his mind, secretly, but Icthoki minds were notoriously difficult for Jedi to enter. It was likely that the governor’s own premonition was nothing more than a vague threat he couldn’t quite articulate. They had no reason to believe he’d deliberately lead his planet to harm.

“Well, some do,” Sib said. “Some Jedi are really attuned to the future, to seeing prophecy or visions or getting a feeling about something. Master Gianlo has strong instincts about things, sometimes, but he doesn’t see proper visions beyond the normal. I’m not particularly good at the mind stuff, honestly. A lot of Jedi can read minds without the person knowing they’re doing so, but if I try to the person knows right away. Master Gianlo and Katdia are really good at that.”

“So Jedi can read minds? How does that work?” Otieno asked. Sib expected the thought to scare Otieno, as was perfectly reasonable, but Otieno appeared only curious about it and Sib didn’t sense she was hiding any emotions.

“Yeah,” Sib said. “Jedi are all varying degrees of skilled in this, but we can read like, the surface thoughts, or someone’s true emotions, or shuffle through memories, even, sometimes, or even change memories. Like I said, I’m not very good at any of that stuff. I can convince people of things, but I can’t dive into their minds. Like Master Gianlo wouldn’t have needed to even verbally interrogate the guy we talked to. He could have just shuffled through his mind.”

“Does it feel like anything? On the receiving end?”

“Sometimes, it depends,” Sib said. “Depends on how far you go.”

Otieno hummed and stared at the table as she considered this. Sib resumed her examination of the crowd. She was curious what Otieno thought but far too nervous at being caught to apply even the lightest pressure. Even if Sib were good at it she wouldn’t have.

Sib’s comm chimed at her. She pulled it from her pocket and jumped to her feet as soon as she’d read the message Master Gianlo had sent.

“Master Gianlo needs us, he gave me an address,” Sib said. Otieno flagged down a taxi without question and as they began the short ride Sib took the opportunity to check the contents of her prosthetic. Otieno watched the street pass in silence.

“If you feel it necessary you have my permission to read my mind,” Otieno said, so quietly Sib
doubted for a moment she’d heard it. Otieno’s expression was neutral, but a softness had entered around the edges of her lips.

“Well, hopefully it won’t come to that,” Sib said. “But thank you. It’s a good skill to have in your pocket.”

“Sib,” Otieno said, then paused. “Is Sib short for something?”

“No,” she said. “Just Sib.” It didn’t take the Force to see that wasn’t what Otieno had wanted to ask, but nothing more was forthcoming. Sib let it drop without concern.

The taxi stopped at the designated corner and Sib paid. They were still in the city core, but towards the industrial end. Master Gianlo waited alone in the shadow of an alley. Except for the jut of his chin and beard, his hood obscured his features.

Sib jumped out first with Otieno a step behind. “Where’s Katdia, Master?” Sib asked. She pulled up her own hood without prompting. She wore a coat, unlike Master Gianlo’s robe, because she found the long robes, however iconic of the Order they were, horribly impractical in moments of action.

“Guarding what I wish to show you,” Master Gianlo said. His brow was pinched and his lips pulled into a tight frown. Something serious was up. “I didn’t want to tell you over the comm, but we found someone who was at the meeting you witnessed. I need your help in prompting a response from her. She is particularly resistant to the Force.”

Sib’s stomach twisted as she understood what that meant. “Of course,” Sib said. “How did you find her?”

“We happened across someone who was meeting with her,” Master Gianlo said. “We chased her into the sewers beneath the city and apprehended her after a short fight.”

Master Gianlo led them to the shuttered storefront of a seven-story apartment building. The door appeared disused and locked, but it opened without resistance. Inside was dark and dusty, slightly damp, with a jumble of furniture shoved into a corner. Master Gianlo went straight to a back room, down a narrow staircase, and into another room where a door was propped open with a piece of duracrete. The door would have been hidden when closed.

Master Gianlo kept the door fixed open behind them. The sewers they stepped into were just tall enough to stand in. Both directions went straight a short ways then connected with other tunnels running perpendicular. In the rainy season the height of the sewers would have been a necessity, but for the moment there was just a few inches of dirty run-off.

Otieno grabbed Sib’s sleeve and gave a light tug. “Sib,” she said.

“Oh yeah,” Sib said, remembering Otieno couldn’t see. Sib quickly popped her flashlight out of her leg and handed it over. Besides the flashlight and occasionally her lightsaber, Sib kept credits, a small repair kit, snacks, a medpac, her knife, and a spare comm in her leg. It was a super-light super-durable bare bones prosthetic with a flesh-colored plastic covering. There were no bionics or mechanical parts but the socket that attached it to her stump had the necessary nerve connections that she could get a bionic leg if she wanted. She never did.

As the flashlight beam swung across the ground small feet scurried away and into the darkness, leaving only echoes in their wake. Master Gianlo went right and Otieno and Sib followed close. He took them to a maintenance room a short distance away. On the other side of the door Sib could sense Katdia and another. Katdia was annoyed and tired and in a very small amount of pain.
“Did Katdia get hurt?” Sib asked.

“A scratch, nothing to worry about,” Master Gianlo said. “Let’s not waste any more time.”

The maintenance room Katdia and their captive waited in was small and without any other exit. Electrical panels were locked tight and the monitor and keyboard set into one wall dark. There was a strip of weak overhead lighting and Otieno turned off the flashlight.

Sib smiled to see their captive was the white-haired woman from the bar—the one that had shot at them. She was cuffed and seated in the middle of the room. Katdia herself stood to the side, lightsaber off but in hand, with a rag pressed against a wound on her shoulder.

“This is Kami, boss of the Varzav Riders,” Master Gianlo announced.

Sib was glad to finally have a name for the face and she knelt in front of Kami. “Remember us, Kami?” she said, grinning. “You almost shot one of us.”

“I wish I had, Jedi scum,” Kami said and spat at Sib’s face. Sib deflected the spit with a quick use of the Force and moved a few paces away. Otieno stood against the wall with one hand on her blaster. Sib could sense Otieno enjoyed this as much as she did.

“Kami, if you cooperate this will be much more pleasant for you,” Master Gianlo warned. He turned to Sib. “She’s been trained against Jedi abilities and is resisting my and Katdia’s attempts. As you have a connection with her already and great strength behind your skills, I would like you to try.”

Sib would be able to get through when Master Gianlo and Katdia couldn’t because Sib lacked subtlety. Where others finessed she could bludgeon. Sib wished every single time her mind didn’t work like it did. Trampling through a person’s mind wasn’t a pleasant feeling, but she understood the necessity and knelt in front of Kami. It was for a good cause, she told herself.

“This isn’t going to be fun,” Sib said. “So you better speak now.” Kami remained silent and glared at Sib. Sib sighed and placed her hands on Kami’s temples. “If that’s how you want to play it.”

Sib began as gently as she could with a pressure at the fringes of Kami’s thoughts. It remained firm.

Sib could sense a general resentment, but nothing coherent or specific. No part of it was outright painful, just uncomfortable, but discomfort could turn to pain given time. Sib pushed hard against Kami’s defenses and felt them bend under the weight. Kami’s expression twisted up, but Sib could sense no pain, just the same resentment.

“I’m going to get through in a moment, you can tell that, make this easier on us both, how ‘bout?” Sib said. “And a cooperating criminal looks a lot better than a resisting one.”

Kami’s face remained pinched but she glanced over at Otieno, looking very official in her uniform. “You want Tantro’s location?” she said, her voice thin.

Sib immediately pulled back her thoughts and Kami’s shoulders sagged. “Her location, associates, any places you know she has, intentions, resources, anything about the dissidents.”

“What do I get in return?” Kami asked.

“A fair trial, less time in prison,” Otieno said. “Protection from anything that may go down from here on out. I’ll personally ensure your good treatment and talk to whoever your judge may be.”

“I can’t be in the general pop. If I turn every boss will want to see me dead,” Kami said.
“I’m certain we can work out protection for you if you cooperate,” Otieno said.

Kami bowed her head and seemed to consider this offer. She raised her head after a moment and looked at Master Gianlo. “Why don’t you Jedi just take what you want and dump me? You could. Who would know?” she said.

“Because that would be uncivilized,” Master Gianlo said.

Kami grinned, bare-toothed and more than a little feral. The Kami in the meeting with the bosses was a different Kami than the one that sat before them. She was calculating, clearly, and clever in a subtle way that Sib hoped would benefit them.

“You Jedi are a funny lot,” Kami said. “I suppose you want the information now rather than later. Fine. I accept your deal. Tantro makes her base on Laumi, on the north end. I can get you more specifics. She deals in weapons, mercenaries, and slaves. She operates in several systems but has her headquarters here for some reason. She has a reputation for ruthlessness and always finishing a job, but is picky about what jobs she takes. She has strong political leanings and will give discounts or refuse jobs based on that. Though she hates the Republic she has ties to ministers and kings and presidents and governors and what-have-you that keeps her from detection and arrest.”

“Including the governor of Garos?”

“No, not him, he’s clean far as I know,” Kami said.

“What about those weapons she said he had nothing to do with? Do you believe her?” Sib asked.

“Not at all,” Kami said. She paused a moment then continued, slower. “I think you’re right to be pursuing her. She’s hiding something. I’ve been investigating myself and considering the number of weapons that have been moving and the number of weapons the rebels have something isn’t adding up. There might be another player, like Jobbo implied, or she’s making a power play and hiding it behind the revolt.”

“Do you believe any of that Sith stuff?” Otieno asked.

“The Sith are make-believe that parents tell their kids to get ‘em to behave. Jobbo was just stirring the pot,” Kami said. She glanced at the Jedi. “But…I’m not much knowledgeable on those things.”

“Do you have anything to add of urgency?” Master Gianlo said.

Kami was silent for a moment. “Well,” Kami said. She hesitated a moment more. “Okay, consider this, I believe I’ll be of more use to you if my capture isn’t a public affair.”

“You want to act as an informant?” Otieno said.

“Right,” Kami said. “You killed my guards. No one knows you’ve captured me. I’ve still got my networks. I don’t claim to be anything more than small time, but I know things and people. I can do some digging on my end. I can, I don’t know, wear a mic to a meeting or something.”

The three women looked to Master Gianlo. He had the best sense of what their path might look like. He rested his chin in his hand and stroked his beard with his thumb.

“We need to trust you,” Master Gianlo said. “Lower your mental defenses and allow me to check if you’re lying or plan to double-cross us.”

Kami frowned. “I don’t enjoy the thought of someone poking around in there,” she said.
“It will only be for a moment and I do not intend to search your memories for more than what I need,” Master Gianlo said. “It would be uncivilized, if you recall.”

Kami pressed her lips into a thin line and narrowed her eyes. “If that’s what it takes. You’re taking me in either way. I’d like it to be said how well I cooperated.”

“It will be first thing on the official report,” Otieno said. “The Republic helps those who help it.”


Master Gianlo knelt and laid his palm on Kami’s temple. Kami grimaced and closed her eyes, her face pinched again, but this time it was from annoyance and not distress. Her emotions read clear without the mental block.

Master Gianlo kept the search less than a minute, as he had promised. “She’s earnest. She won’t betray us and she can deliver on her promises,” Master Gianlo declared as he stood.

“See? I’m an opportunist, not morally bound like you all,” Kami said. “I’m not stupid. I see which way things are going.”

“Sure thing,” Otieno said, her tone heavy with sarcasm. “Jedi, if you don’t mind I’d like to formally arrest her and read her rights.”

“Of course, Rear Admiral,” Master Gianlo said. “I’ll contact the police and explain the situation. Sib, Katdia, assist the Rear Admiral however she wishes.”

“As you say, Master,” Sib said. Master Gianlo stepped out with his comm already at his ear. Otieno began to recite Kami’s rights with relish bordering on unprofessional.

At the police station, which also served as city headquarters, Kami was put into protective custody and whisked away to an interrogation room where she’d be given a lawyer and the conversation would begin. Otieno remained with her for the process. Sib sensed the police were resentful of Otieno’s presence but wary of the consequences. After arresting her, Master Gianlo lent Kami his robe to conceal herself until she was safe. Only the station chief and select sergeants would be allowed to see her.

Master Jir’zo met them at the station and the station chief grudgingly allowed the Jedi use of an empty conference room. After filling Master Jir’zo in on the situation they agreed Master Gianlo and Jir’zo would inform the governor of the situation and Katdia and Sib would remain at the station and assist however they could. The interrogation would probably take several hours.

Katdia and Sib settled into a waiting room and discussed whatever occurred to them until Katdia got tired and decided to meditate and Sib, feeling at least one of them should keep track of what’s going on, fidgeted in her seat and watched the crowd pass. She got bored of that quickly. Her mind returned to the interrogation room despite the futility of such thoughts. There was nothing she could do there.

After a few minutes of indecision Sib tracked Otieno’s thoughts. Without much effort Sib could get a general sense of the room’s emotions. Otieno was pleased and…concerned? Or something like concern. Kami was calm, annoyed, probably at the length of the interview, but overall interested in getting her deal. Who must have been Kami’s lawyer was focused and feeling good about something. The station chief and the sergeant with him were thrilled to have a cooperating criminal of Kami’s caliber.
Katdia’s comm buzzed and startled them both out of meditation. A moment later Sib’s chimed too. The short-range comms of the three officers in the room burst to life in a frenzy of shouted codes and emergencies. Several people in the waiting room looked at their comms in confusion.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Katdia muttered before answering her comm.

Master Jir’zo called Katdia and Master Gianlo called Sib and they ended up as a conference call on Katdia’s comm.

Master Gianlo explained the situation quickly. Dissidents had simultaneously captured the courthouses and police headquarters of three regions. They were heavily armed and had taken at least thirty captives with reports of a few dozen wounded and six dead. Who the dead belonged to was unclear. Sib sent Otieno a quick text to meet them in the waiting room as soon as possible.

The regions were far from the capital, in the southern hemisphere, but the entire city had gone into lockdown. When Otieno joined Katdia and Sib ten minutes later she revealed she’d already ordered her ship into low orbit above the capital and her soldiers were prepared for deployment, but she didn’t want to use them until they knew more. The ten soldiers she’d brought on-planet had appropriated a tank from the police and were guarding the main entrance to the palace.

“Did the governor say he saw this was going to happen?” Sib asked, feeling jittery.

“We were with him when we got word,” Master Gianlo said. “He was earnestly surprised by the news.”

“How could he have *not* seen it? How can an Icthoki *not* see something so obvious?” Otieno asked.

“Maybe it was just bad luck,” Master Jir’zo said, then sighed. “As I say it, it sounds ridiculous.”

“Does it matter?” Katdia snapped. She scowled at nothing in particular and Sib noted the sudden shift in her mood. “He didn’t see it, so what.”

“If someone or something *stopped* him from seeing it then it does matter,” Master Gianlo said. “We have been charged with understanding the deeper issues at play in this matter.”

“Kami said she suspected someone else but didn’t give any specifics,” Sib interjected before Katdia could say anything she couldn’t take back. Sib occasionally said ridiculous shit, but Katdia had a temper. “Maybe this is how we can use her? Send her out to figure out what’s at play here.”

“Throw her right into it,” Master Gianlo muttered. “Are her legal papers in place?”

“The People’s Rep has only given verbal confirmation that the terms are agreed upon. They’re all drawn up but the judge hasn’t signed them yet,” Otieno explained. “I’ll contact the judge immediately and explain the situation. She can do a digital signing and notary. It shouldn’t take ten minutes, if she isn’t too busy. I don’t know what sort of security they have on her.”

“Do that now,” Master Gianlo said. “Katdia, Sib, explain the situation to the chief and Kami. If necessary I’ll have the governor call. Master Jir’zo and I will remain at the palace in case our services are needed.”

“Yes, Master,” Sib said. “Stay safe. May the Force be with you.”

“And to you, my Padawan.”
Otieno was thrown into the center of a cyclone. The governor and chief of planetary security forces, the organization a step up from the police and a step down from the Republic fleet, were doing everything they could to push the responsibility of dealing with the crisis on her without outright asking. The first attempt at foisting everything off on her came in a meeting with the governor and his advisors immediately after they’d gotten rid of Kami.

The drop off had gone without a hitch and Kami disappeared into a sewer drain without further ado. One of the Jedi would meet her twenty-four standard hours later at the same location they’d initially picked her up at. The sergeant graciously used his private vehicle and drove as close as he could to the palace. The police had erected barriers a block out all around the palace After security checks with the guards at the barricade entrance and lots of calls the three women were allowed in and instructed to go straight to the governor.

The governor and his advisors explained the situation as they knew it and Otieno made what she had thought was a simple suggestion to wait it out, maybe after a few hours they’d get cold feet and surrender, but the governor and his advisors had agreed to it without protest or argument and then looked to her for specifics.

Things had only gotten stranger from there. Otieno kept her soldiers on the tank at the front gate but rotated them through for breaks and so they could assist the police and security forces. Some higher-up, possibly the city police chief, had given the impression that the police were to follow the soldier’s orders to the letter (never mind relative ranking and experience that would put a good many of the police above the soldiers). This caused the issue of a bunch of soldiers with a lot of expectations on them and no clear orders about their responsibilities. Fortunately their captain was competent and had no issue taking over their management.

Then there were the cities under siege: Nesbit, Nuff, and Feq. Nuff was handling the general order of “wait it out and keep it under control” very well, but Nesbit and Feq were run by idiots who sent desperate requests for guidance which expected her to know their exact situation from two thousand kilometers away in cities she had never been to.

At least Coruscant couldn’t hassle her. She sent an information packet to them but it would take five hours before it reached their satellites and another five hours before they could respond. The Jedi stayed out of her way and didn’t mind running around on errands. Though Otieno found their talk of “feelings” and “instincts” annoyingly vague. Sib was the most useful out of them: she was practical, always listened, and was good with people in a way the other Jedi and Otieno herself wasn’t. Several coordination tasks Otieno gave directly to her.

Otieno snuck in six hours of restless sleep eight hours after the crisis had started. The security chief interrupted her rest in a loud call over her comm. Otieno hated him on a deeply personal level. Sib met her outside the situation room with caf, a cheese bagel, and no indication she was tired. So far Otieno lacked evidence Jedi actually slept.

Sib pulled Otieno into a comstation booth outside the situation room and adjusted Otieno’s collar, belt, epaulets, and hair as Otieno choked down the bagel. Otieno had finally let her braids out of the bun she usually wore them in while working. The comstation was close quarters and Otieno did her best to not get any crumbs on her uniform after Sib had so kindly brushed it down. The caf she could drink in the room.

“Who’s going to meet Kami today?” Otieno asked between bites.
“Me,” Sib said. “I’m the only one who can read her mind and all that.”

“You don’t like doing that, do you?” Otieno asked. She’d barely had a moment of thought to herself since the crisis started, but Sib’s reaction had been scratching at her. “Breaking into people’s minds.”

Sib made a face and it occurred to Otieno’s sleep deprived and high-strung mind the question might be too invasive. “No, but sometimes it’s necessary.”

“Does Master Gianlo know you don’t?” Otieno said, taking the response as a sign of non-offense.

“I assume so, but I’ve never expressed that I don’t want to do it,” Sib said. “We don’t read each others minds without permission.”

“It’s uncivilized.”

Sib’s toothy, crooked smile reappeared. “Exactly.”

“Can you do me a favor?” Otieno said. “I want you to get the file on the security chief’s history and rough up some ideas on how I could justify firing him as soon as possible to the governor.”

Sib threw her head back and laughed. “Making friends?”

“You know it,” Otieno said. “Also can you figure out who on his staff actually knows what they’re doing? If they exist I haven’t met them. Find out who hates the security chief, they’re probably the one we want.”

“Of course, Otieno, anything to help,” Sib said. “Master Gianlo’s in contact with the Jedi council right now. Secret, just him and Master Jir’zo. They’re communicating by the Force, so there’s no lag or anything.”

“What are they saying?”

“I’m not sure. I think they’re discussing if there’s been any disturbances in the Force that might suggest an inter-planetary malevolence, or something. Jedi stuff. I’m afraid it won’t help you much for now. Katdia’s in the city looking for trouble.”

“As long as they don’t bother me I really don’t care if they’re being useful,” Otieno said. She grimaced when it came out meaner than she’d intended, but Sib didn’t appear offended. Otieno glanced at her watch for an easy out. “I have to go.” She ate the last morsel of bagel and washed it down with the caf.

“No problem,” Sib said. “I’ll update you as soon as I’ve got something.”

“Thank you,” Otieno said over her shoulder as she entered the situation room.

As Otieno had feared, the meeting was long and awful. No one had anything new or interesting to say and Otieno could barely keep her attention on whatever the security chief blathered on about.

Otieno was the first to their feet when the meeting concluded, but the finance minister trapped her into a discussion. He had the impression her knowledge of economics was more advanced than it actually was. It was flattering, but made for a tedious discussion. The rest of her day was the same. Meeting to discussion to interview to another meeting. Citizens demanded the government take action or lift the curfew and travel restrictions. Businesses wanted to reopen, industry wanted their workers, and the terrorists, the official label of the dissidents since their actions had resulted in death and injury, continued to hold hostages and demand reforms that the government either couldn’t or
wouldn’t make

These terrorists were far more radical and anti-Republic than regular protestors: the various labor organizations were repeatedly decrying the groups involved and promising full cooperation. The intelligence department was finding ties to the darkest parts of the underworld, which would mesh with Tantro’s apparent involvement.

Regardless of affiliations and demands, the Republic had a strict “no negotiation” policy. The palace was sending out press releases every hour giving the broad strokes of their plan for dealing with the crisis and generic statements of assurance. The governor gave a speech condemning the attacks shortly after they’d happened. This did little to allay fears.

What they needed to do was to take out the leadership and end the siege before anyone escalated it. Otieno feared three things: that the terrorists would rather die than surrender, that the police or security forces would do something stupid, or there’d be another attack.

Taking out the leaders was easier said than done. Most were in the wind and the rest had only general locations. There was no obvious or easy solution to directly end the siege without risking a shootout. The terrorists had to surrender.

The highlights of Otieno’s day were whenever Sib appeared with food and caf. Each time they disappeared into a closet or empty room for Otieno to snap up the food while Sib updated her on the Jedi’s work and the situation with the security chief. She’d put together a strong argument for his dismissal by the third meeting. Sib suggested the junior deputy chief replace him. He expressed particularly strong feelings on the way things should be done and had the proper qualifications.

Otieno lost track of time until her comm buzzed with a message from Sib that she’d met with Kami and everyone, meaning Otieno and the Jedi, needed to meet. Otieno left her conversation with the minister of transportation and made straight for the Jedi.

They claimed a conference room in an out-of-the-way hall. Sib had a cup of caf for Otieno. She couldn’t imagine where Sib had gotten the time, but she wasn’t going to question something so blessed. The Jedi had waited for her arrival to begin.

“First of all,” Sib said, before any questions. “It went off without a hitch. Kami’s still with us and has done excellent work. She gave me the exact locations of these leaders.” Sib flipped open a small flimsi notepad to a list of seven names and locations. Sib’s handwriting was barely legible. The locations were all down to specific buildings; one even had an apartment number. “She also knows Tantro’s compound and says that one of the bigwigs met with Tantro just a few hours ago in Laumi. She doesn’t know what they discussed but she strongly believes that Tantro is part of another level of leadership. That is the leaders we have the names of, right? And then there’s someone, or multiple someones, above that. Controlling and organizing. Kami thinks its Tantro because she’s been cagey about weapons and her role in this and all that and because of the meeting. Maybe a power play or a zealous belief in politics. Anyway, since we have her location I personally believe we should take her, just to get it done with.”

“I agree,” Master Gianlo said. “I’ve been having a strong sense that there’s something more at play and someone like Tantro would fit.”

“I’ll look into it,” Otieno said. “What else?”

“Well, Kami also says that they’re looking for something in safes and whatnot at the courthouses. She doesn’t know more about it than that. She also gave me these two ledgers,” Sib indicated the two hard-bound flimsis on the table. “Which are copies of her ledger and of Loila’s. You remember
her. She also says that the terrorists had outlined a number of plans that they could do but hadn’t committed to one until just a few hours before.”

“Which would suggest someone at the top making the call,” Otieno said.

“Right, that’s what we both thought. Kami also indicated that the groups were pretty shaky. That the politics holding them together were kind of vague. It’s her opinion that taking out the leadership would effectively end the siege and any chances at one in the future.”

“My opinion as well,” Otieno said. She pulled the notebook with locations to her. Most of the locations were in the cities under siege. “I’ll run these against intelligence and organize my soldiers into strike teams. I don’t trust anyone on this planet to do it. We should be able to start in a few hours.”

“Including Tantro?” Master Gianlo asked.

“Of course,” Otieno said. “And I would like you four to be on that team.” Tantro was clearly a crucial component of this mess and Otieno didn’t want to risk losing her.

The Jedi briefly glanced at each other. None of them made any objection. “We can do it,” Master Jir’zo said. “I believe it would take an hour to get to Laumi?”

“Correct,” Otieno said. There was the chance of retaliatory attack if they captured the leadership, but there was the chance of a firefight breaking out at any moment anyway. It seemed a good way to end the sieges and revolt in one swoop. The governor, and his advisors and staff, would agree to whatever she suggested, so she didn’t have to worry about them. She’d brought the issue of the security chief before the governor an hour ago. She was yet to hear anything about it, but was confident the governor would agree and promote the junior deputy chief. Otieno would ask the man his opinion regardless of whether or not he was promoted. Sib had spoken well of him.

“Okay,” Otieno said. “We’re going to capture their leaders. You four and a team are going to Laumi. I’ll split my soldiers into groups of twenty-five to deal with the seven leaders we know the locations of, and a group to you for assistance. I’ll remain here and coordinate the strikes. The police will be informed at the last possible minute that this is going on. I’ll order the police in the cities to draw back to protective covering and prepare for a fight. Security will have to be kept high for the next few months, but if we have the leaders I don’t see them organizing. I’ll have the governor prepare a statement about the operations to be aired after they’ve occurred. The apartment buildings we’re hitting will have to be evacuated. Hopefully we’ll be able to find out apartment numbers for most of these.” Otieno sighed and stared at the list of names as if something new would appear from them.

“We’ll prepare for our departure,” Master Gianlo said. “Let us know as soon as you have the time set.”

“Of course,” Otieno said. She tore the page from the notebook and tucked it in her pocket. “Take these ledgers to the police and inform them of relevant information.”

“Yes, Rear Admiral,” Master Jir’zo said and collected the ledgers.

The Jedi stood to leave, except for Sib who turned to Otieno. “You need me, Otieno?” Sib asked, quiet.

“Yes,” Otieno said. “Walk with me.”

“Sure thing,” Sib said. She turned to Master Gianlo. “Master Gianlo—”
“Do whatever the Rear Admiral requires,” Master Gianlo said. “You’ll know where to find us.”

Arranging the strike teams and gathering information on the locations they’d hit took two and a half hours. The governor had taken her advice and replaced the security chief with her pick, which greatly expedited the process. Sib had met with Kami around 1300 capital time, bringing them to 1600. At exactly 1800 capital time the operation would start. The Jedi were prepared and would take an air transport with the soldiers in a half-hour. Otieno resigned herself to losing Sib’s help and planned to take a secretary from the palace staff as a placeholder. Until then, Sib was with Otieno and the new security chief, a human man about Otieno’s age who trained in a Republic military academy but had opted to return to his home planet to do political work, working on last minute coordination. Sib would join the other Jedi in a minute.

“Master Gianlo wants to talk to you,” Sib declared. The statement startled Otieno and the security chief. Master Gianlo must have communicated with her via the Force. “He’s on his way. It’s important.”

“I’m sure it is,” Otieno said. “Are you confident about your part?”

“Yeah,” Sib said. She flicked her wrist and the hologram of the building in Laumi they’d be shortly invading spun on its y-axis. “I’m confident.”

“Good,” Otieno said. The door to Otieno’s temporary office opened in a short whir of machinery and Master Gianlo stepped in. “Afternoon, Master Gianlo. What was it you wanted to speak with me about?”

The security chief rose and extended a hand. “Afternoon, Master Jedi,” he said. “I don’t think we’ve been formally introduced.”

Master Gianlo blinked at the security chief, as if the introduction was some great breach of common etiquette, but shook the man’s hand, once, firmly. “I don’t think we have. Master Gianlo.”

“Security Chief Rezz Bartran,” the man said. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“Security Chief Rezz Bartran,” Master Gianlo said and took the last empty seat around the desk. “Jir’zo and I were discussing the issue and we believe you should accompany us to Laumi, Rear Admiral,” he said, addressing Otieno alone.

Otieno’s brow shot up. Sib and the chief were equally startled. She was the commanding officer! She couldn’t just pick up and go to Laumi. “Why in the world would I do that?” Otieno asked. Again she said it meanly, but she was running on caffeine and fumes. She’d given up niceness hours ago.

“Because Tantro will be the most difficult to capture and should something go wrong your immediate assistance would be crucial,” Master Gianlo said. “You are also by the far most intelligent and capable of your crew and the only one I would personally trust to finish the mission should something happen to us.”

“Master Gianlo,” Sib admonished. “Don’t insult her crew like that.”

“I’m not, my Padawan,” Master Gianlo said. “Rear Admiral, your crew is exceptionally well trained and capable. That I consider you above the rest of them is a great compliment to you, not an insult to them.”

Flattery had never swayed her opinion and it didn’t now. It made no sense for her to leave the center of command so suddenly on the off chance the Jedi couldn’t handle a common criminal. She needed to be free to deal with any crisis that arose and not caught up in a shoot-out in Laumi. “I’m sorry
Master Gianlo, I can’t justify it. You have full control over the soldiers I’ve sent with you and you may give them any orders you wish.”

“Rear Admiral, I really do believe that the effort would be better served if you were in the field. You’ve proven your expertise in it.”

“Master Gianlo,” she said, her tone dangerously close to the edge of a political cliff. “I appreciate how highly you consider my abilities, but I can see no justification for joining you. My work is here and I have to be equally available to every mission if this is going to happen smoothly. There are possibly hundreds of lives on the line, remember.”

“I’m perfectly aware of the stakes, Rear Admiral,” Master Gianlo said with an annoyed edge. “It’s partly why I believe you should join us.”

“Master Gianlo, have you had a vision?” Sib asked, cautious.

“I have, Padawan,” Master Gianlo said. “I can not give you a concrete image of it, but I know that it means this will fail if you do not join us.”

Otieno nearly laughed, but there was no joke in his tone. He was entirely earnest, and that really made her ire rise. Otieno dropped off the edge of the cliff. She had no time for this. “I apologize if this insults you, Master Gianlo, but I’m not about to base military strategy on some vision you received,” Otieno said. She was tired of Jedi expecting everyone to hang on their every word and ready for the conversation to be over. Officers didn’t want to deal with Jedi for exactly this reason.

“Otieno, you are young—”

“Master Gianlo, I do not recall giving you permission to refer to me by anything other than my rank,” Otieno snapped, she almost snarled it, and didn’t at all regret her tone just for the look on the old Jedi’s face. Sib immediately hid her mouth behind her hand. Only Otieno could see her trembling grin.

The room was silent for a long and heavy moment. “My apologies, Rear Admiral,” Master Gianlo said, slowly. “I won’t press the issue, but consider the option on its own merits. We depart in twenty-five minutes. Sib?”

Sib cleared her throat and forced her mouth into a straight line. “A minute, I need to finish up here.”

“Of course,” Master Gianlo said and left them with a flourish of his robe.

Otieno crossed her arms and leaned back. She had the strong urge to run a lap around the building. Or punch something. She took a few deep breaths before she said anything more. Emotions wouldn’t get the better of her.

The security chief and Sib stared at her. “What?” she finally grunted.

“If I may, Rear Admiral,” the security chief said. “I would seriously consider the proposal the Jedi made.”

“Why?” Otieno asked. She leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table and turned her datapad back on.

“We’ve identified Tantro as the most dangerous and most valuable target,” the chief said. “It stands to reason that the most attention should be given to her.”
“And I have assigned my best soldiers to deal with her,” Otieno said. “Am I the only one who trusts them?”

“I trust them too, but what if they needed to call in an airstrike? Or back-up? Or if they needed to shut down a section of the city or use one of Laumi’s resources? Even if you give them the authority to make those calls you can demand those resources far quicker. You would also be able to make more difficult calls about damage or casualties. It would be protecting your officers from charges of misconduct.”

“And putting myself in line for them,” Otieno said.

“The higher the officer the more likely the Republic is to look away, you know that,” the chief said. “You are currently the highest authority on this planet. The governor has given you complete control.”

“Which is why I need to remain here,” Otieno said.

“Rear Admiral, I can assure you, I’m fully capable of handling things here,” the chief said with a tone on the edge of insubordinate. “And I don’t think we’ll have to do much coordination anyway. These teams will be extremely quick and extremely self-sufficient. Really, we’ve done everything we can from here. If something comes up we’ll be in contact until the mission itself starts. I can give you status updates as often as you want.”

Otieno rapped her knuckles against the desk as she considered the chief’s opinion. It was by no means wrong, and while he was new she felt confident in her soldiers, and of course there was always Commander Bivu several thousand kilometers above them, but her instincts rebelled against doing something based on a vision.

“Sib, what do you think?” Otieno asked.

Sib frowned and brushed some stray curls behind her ear. “Honestly, as annoying as my Master can be, his visions are always good. I think you should join us. We could use you. Just from our experience you’re great in the field.”

“I froze up,” Otieno mumbled. She didn’t want to admit it, but she had. She’d been too stunned to think when they were being shot at and it had been Sib who’d got them to safety.

“It was your first time and even when you did freeze up you managed to get a perfect shot off,” Sib insisted. “And you thought of the plan that did work, and you kept your head basically the entire time. Besides, that wasn’t your element, sneaking around and whatever.”

Otieno leaned back and crossed her arms again. Sib’s confidence was far more convincing than Master Gianlo’s had been. “Do you both earnestly think that this is tactically the best option? Not a just-as-good option, but the best one?”

“I do,” Sib said.

“Yes sir,” the chief said. “It’s good for moral and having the highest-ranking officer in the field is statistically proven to result in more successful mission.”

Otieno threw her hands up. She couldn’t believe she was doing this. “Then I’ll go. Sib, you’re good here, you can leave and inform Master Gianlo of my decision. I’ll do some final arrangements then meet you on the tarmac.”

“Sure thing.” Sib jumped to it with her characteristic energy.
Otieno grudgingly admitted that she looked forward to being in the field. She lacked practical experience but had gotten some of her highest grades at the academy in the field exercises. It was about time she actually put that practice to use.

Sib gave her belt a quick touch to ensure all her tools were where they should be. Her part of the operation was simple—shut down the security system in Tantro’s base then join back up with the others. She only needed a couple of things for the job. She departed the house they were using as a base at a fast walk. It was five minutes until 1800.

The soldiers and other Jedi were in position around the various entrances they’d found to Tantro’s base. Otieno was going in with Sib at the entrance hidden in the building Sib approached. The building was really just a facade. The real base was in the massive tunnel complex underneath the area.

The streets were empty and she had no trouble retracing her steps along the blind spot in the security cameras the Jedi had discovered earlier. A meter wide alley operated Tantro’s building from the one beside it. Sib hurried to the back of the alley. She’d have to climb up to access the roof.

Sib checked her watch. Two minute until it was time. She did a few experimental jumps then decided a running leap would be best. She moved back a few meters and burst into a Force-assisted sprint as she ran straight for the end of the alley. At the last moment she leaped up and pushed off the wall at an angle so she hit the wall on her left. She used the Force to give her feet a bit of a stick for the split second she needed to push off and up again so she could jump a few meters higher and hit the opposite wall. It took three more leaps until she could grab the ledge of the building and haul herself up.

There weren’t any cameras on the roof, a glaring security flaw, and Sib raced over to the vent that protruded from the roof. It had a ninety-degree turn and a hood to protect it from the rain. It would be just big enough that she could shimmy down it. That was the other reason she’d been given this part of the job.

First she had to turn off the force field that protected the vent from intruders like her. Otieno had given her a small machine that would fry the electrical system. She stuck the machine on the side of the vent and waited a moment. There was a short fizzle and pop and the field disappeared. She snapped on the gas mask Otieno had also given her, all the soldiers had one, and turned on the flashlight built into it. She went in feet first, the contortion required to get through the ninety-degree turn very uncomfortable, and shoved her toes into the corners to control her descent. She just had to cut a couple of wires, connect a signal looper, smash her way through a grate, and then meet up with the team at the entrance.

It was a tight squeeze all the way down. She counted the panels as she descended and wedged herself as best she could into the corners when she found the right one. Placing the looper, even with minimal arm movement available, took only a minute. She was right on time.

Sib had no way of testing if it had worked, but she trusted the information they’d received and her own skills. She tapped her earpiece three times to confirm the job was done, like they’d agreed.

“Copy,” Otieno replied. “We’re moving.”
Sib replaced the panel and put her tools away before sliding down a few more feet to a vent. No one was on the other side so she kicked out the grill and used the Force to keep it from clattering against the ground. She could sense only a handful of people in the building. She’d been instructed to deal with the top floors as the soldiers cleared the ground floor.

There was a group of three on the top floor and with the quick throw of a gas canister all three were out before they could make a fuss. The police would sweep through when the affair was done to make arrests.

Otieno had divided her soldiers into four teams of ten each in order to cover all the entrances. Otieno’s prime team was battering the door to the tunnels down when Sib joined up. Otieno gave a quick thumbs up. Otieno and the soldiers were in anonymous dark fatigues and matte body armor, about a quarter of them non-human, packed to bristling with weapons and equipment. Otieno’s gear was identical except for the stripes on her chest to show rank.

“Secondary, tertiary, quaternary teams, how you looking? Over,” Otieno said over her ear comm. The Jedi had also been given ear comms and the datapads that attached to their forearm that all the soldiers had.

Second team responded with two beeps to confirm, tert’ and quat’ with verbal confirmations they were on track.

Otieno tapped Sib on the shoulder and pointed to the door. Sib nodded and unclipped her lightsaber from her belt. The prime team captain tapped the soldiers at the door on the arm and gestured them back.

“Secondary inside and moving, over,” the secondary team leader informed over the comm.

“Copy that, keep on, over,” Otieno replied.

Sib made short work of the door latch with her lightsaber and slammed it open with a strong kick. Otieno gestured for the soldiers to move into position and confirmed they were inside over the comm.

Before anyone went inside the stairway, plain duracrete with bare bulbs for lighting, primary team leader punched in a series of commands into the datapad on her forearm. Besides interrupting the security systems, the signal looper Sib had installed could control the electrical systems of anything the wires connected to.

For a moment nothing happened and Sib briefly panicked that she’d done it wrong, but all at once the lights down the stairway, and through the entire complex, blinked out.

The soldiers turned on their flashlights and those with gas launchers and heavy blasters, set to stun, went in first. Otieno wanted minimum casualties. Otieno went in the middle of the pack with a heavier blaster than what she’d had on their earlier adventure, also set to stun, and Sib ran just behind the frontline with her lightsaber in hand and ready for action.

Shadows jumped and twitched on the stark walls as they ran two abreast. The tunnel was narrow and smooth-walled. Far ahead of them a door opened and a man stepped out. He jumped when he saw them but before he could raise his blaster a soldier in the lead fired off a round and he fell to the ground, stunned. Sib sensed three more in the room and said this to the soldier with the gas launchers.

In a moment they were at the door and as they passed the lead soldiers unpinned one of the small gas
canisters they carried and threw it in. Three soldiers peeled off to secure the room.

The tunnels were long and twisting with branches and splits frequent, but each soldier had a tracker in their equipment that combined to map out the path on their datapads. It would be a simple matter to backtrack. At every major split two soldiers peeled off. Most returned after a minute to report nothing there or the enemy secured.

Most of Tantro’s underlings were unprepared for them and return fire was scarce and ineffective. Sib only used her powers to inform them of how many were up ahead. It helped that all of Tantro’s people were bad shots. Occasionally the other teams and the groups that had split off checked in to confirm their status. They suffered only a few superficial wounds and no serious setbacks in the initial minutes. Otieno kept track of each team’s progress on her datapad so they wouldn’t accidentally run straight into friendly fire.

All four teams were moving to the center of Tantro’s base and where she’d be holed up. It was, of course, the most heavily fortified and deepest point in the complex. The lights and security features remained shut off, it would take someone physically going to the junction that Sib had messed with to turn them back on, but resistance became heavier as they progressed and word spread.

At a sharp corner, missing a couple of soldiers that hadn’t yet returned from reconnaissance, the Force gave a short, soundless warning, and she barely pulled back the lead soldiers in time to save them from being shot down.

Heavy blaster fire briefly lit up the passage ahead of them and singed the wall opposite in clouds of debris. The number of shots suggested quite a few assailants. The team pressed against the opposite wall and waited for Otieno’s signal to move forward. Sib got Otieno’s attention and gestured to herself. Otieno considered this a moment. She nodded once.

Sib activated her lightsaber, its quiet hum a comfort, and jumped into the hallway, lightsaber held diagonally in front of her. She reflexively deflected the first shot that reached her, then the second, then she raised her hand, and the criminals down the hall froze, the shots stopped. They’d arranged a hasty barricade of boxes and furniture, but it meant nothing. She could feel their pulse through the barricade as easily as breathing. Holding them in place was as simple as raising her hand.

Out of the corner of her eye Sib saw Otieno tap the soldiers with the gas launcher forward. One of them poked the muzzle of the launcher around the corner and let one fly. For a moment white smoke obscured the passage ahead of them. Sib sensed the criminals slip into unconsciousness and only then did she release them. Sib signaled Otieno they were ready to go and started jogging ahead. The moment of action had given her a burst of energy and she rushed ahead of the soldiers, eager for more.

“Secondary team, you’re closing in on us. Keep an eye out and avoid friendly fire, over,” Otieno said over the comm.

“Copy that,” secondary’s team leader said. “We’ll wait for you in the passage ahead. Lots of splits behind us.”

“Same here, over,” Otieno said. “Tertiary team, when you hit the junction at—”

Otieno’s order was cut off by a muffled explosion above their heads.

Sib had only a second of time to react as the ceiling collapsed on them. Without turning, raising only her hand behind her, she used the Force to throw back the soldiers that were in the lead, including Otieno, and out of the path of the stone and ‘crete.
But she had no time to protect herself and for a terrifying moment she was convinced the duracrete and stone would crush her, but the ‘crete above her head stopped in mid-air as the rest collapsed to the ground around her. Had she done that? She didn’t think—

“Sib, are you alright?” Master Gianlo called and ran around the corner ahead of her. He had one hand raised towards the ‘crete. Sib quickly got to safety and Master Gianlo let the debris fall to the ground in a cloud of dust.

“I’m fine,” Sib said to Master Gianlo. She touched her earpiece. “Primary team, are you alright?”

“Sib!” Otieno said. “Glad to hear you. We’re fine. A little bruised, but you saved our asses, over.”

Sib contained a happy smile from hearing the obvious relief in Otieno’s voice from learning that Sib was fine.

“Primary, secondary here, what happened?” the secondary team leader demanded from over the comm.

“Ceiling collapsed. Looks like it was rigged to do so,” Otieno said. There was a pause. “Primary can meet up with tertiary through a different path. Sib, are you in contact with secondary?”

“A part of secondary,” Sib said. “Want me to stick with them?”

“Roger,” Otieno said. “Secondary, I’m sending you a new path.”

“Understood,” secondary team leader

“Also, secondary, don’t bother to check down side-passages from here on out, lets focus on the objective,” Otieno said. “Quaternary, you still good? Over.”

“Quaternary’s good,” their team leader said. “Should we stop checking?”

“No, I want you to keep on that,” Otieno said. “Primary, secondary, and tertiary team members that are apart from your main group, I want you to return to your main group unless you believe there’s something valuable down your path. Don’t confirm, just do it. Keep track of the location of your other team members, try to congregate, over.”

Sib clicked a button along the side of her own datapad and it flicked to an overview of the location of individual soldiers as yellow dots, the path they’d taken white lines against a black background, and the team leaders and Otieno as blue dots. Primary team was retracing their steps. Three soldiers had stumbled across a path that connected the prime team’s route to the tert team’s route a few minute back. Secondary team was going to round the corner onto Master Gianlo and Sib at any moment.

Or they would have, if a trap door hadn’t opened underneath Sib and Master Gianlo’s feet.

Sib was too surprised to even yell as they fell. She immediately got her feet pointed down, hoping the trap door would remain open and she’d be able to spring back up, but the fall was more than the normal ceiling height and the trap door snapped closed as soon as they were through.

They both landed on their feet and with their lightsabers at the ready. The room they’d fallen into was five meters in diameter with dirt floors and stone walls. It appeared to be a natural tunnel that had been lightly worked over by someone’s hands.

“This is Sib and Master Gianlo,” Sib said over her comm. “Uh, we just fell into a trap door, over.” Sib received no reply, only faint static. “Master Gianlo, try yours.”
Master Gianlo nodded and touched his ear. “This is Master Gianlo and Sib, can anyone read us?”

Sib heard it in her own earpiece, but no one replied. Something above their heads was blocking the signal. She checked her data pad. Her map showed all the dots frozen in place, but still read the direction she was pointed in.

“Should we keep moving?” Sib asked.

Master Gianlo frowned and looked up. His flashlight showed no sort of lever or handle on the underside of the trap door. It looked like it slid into the stone. He reached up and Sib could sense him attempting to use the force on the trap door, but it didn’t budge.

“It’s a strange door,” Master Gianlo said. “It appears to not have any opening or closing mechanism.”

“But…it opened.”

“Precisely,” Master Gianlo said. “And it won’t open now. We should leave this place. I sense that these natural tunnels continue in the direction we need to go. Perhaps there will be stairs or an elevator.”

“After you then, Master,” Sib said. She hoped Otieno wouldn’t be too worried about her.

“Turn off your flashlight,” Master Gianlo commanded as he turned off his own. Sib did.

Jedi couldn’t see in the dark, per say, but rather they could sense the shape of what was around them. Everything breathed with its own life and a Jedi’s skill lay in the ability to be in tune with and interpret this breath.

Sib closed her eyes, what she saw would only give her false illusions, and took a moment to shift her perspective to the new, sightless one. It required only a short moment of introspection before she was knew her surroundings as if it was a sunny day.

Master Gianlo motioned her forward and they began their walk side-by-side. Sib tried to sense everyone who was above them, Otieno in particular, but was meant with only vagaries.

“Something’s wrong,” Sib said, her voice a bare whisper. “I can’t sense anyone above us.”

“I have the same concern,” Master Gianlo replied. “But perhaps there is an electrical field separating the artificial tunnels from the natural tunnels, or this planet contains some unknown connection to the Force.”

Sib didn’t need to directly articulate the connection between the rumored Sith influence the Hutt representative had spoken off and whatever was causing the disruption, Master Gianlo sensed her thoughts.

“I seriously doubt there are Sith and the Jedi Council agrees with me,” Master Gianlo said. At least he didn’t scoff at her like Sib was concerned he might.

“I trust you,” Sib said. “But there’s something sinister here. It feels like a trap.”

“I agree completely, but for now it is a mystery, I’m afraid. Keep your guard up and be wary.”

Sib agreed and kept close to Master Gianlo, her thumb and index finger itching at the mechanism on her lightsaber.
The tunnels they jogged through took a more direct route than the passages above them and Sib guessed they would reach Tantro’s location before Otieno and the soldiers. Sib wondered why these caverns hadn’t appeared on any of their maps or when they’d done the radar, but an electrical field or something like that would have also blocked the radars, and the tunnels layered on top of each other would have confused the signal. They also appeared barely used. It was possible only a handful of people knew about them. But nothing explained what blocked the Force from reaching beyond the ceiling.

Master Gianlo stopped suddenly and threw his arm across Sib’s chest. She froze in place and held her breath, waiting for Master Gianlo’s instruction.

“Do you sense that?” Master Gianlo whispered, his entire being still.

Sib forced her attention even broader, past the rock walls. She got the vague feeling of danger, like an insistent voice in the back of her head warning of something evil, but she’d had that feeling since setting foot in Laumi. She believed it to be her own instincts and not the Force, but it was sometimes hard to tell.

“Keep moving, have your lightsaber ready,” Master Gianlo said. He raised his, ready to be turned on at a moment’s notice. Sib did the same. They slowed to a walk and watched the ground in front of them for more trapdoors or trip-wires.

Their fears were confirmed by another explosion.

The explosives were embedded in the wall to their right and Sib and Master Gianlo reacted in the same instant to throw the weight of the Force against the rocks hurtling towards them.

Master Gianlo stood between Sib and the explosion and bore the worst of its impact. Sib watched with horror, unable to respond fast enough, as a rock slipped between their shields and smacked straight into Master Gianlo’s abdomen. He twisted and fell to the ground with a short cry.

The entire explosion and Master Gianlo’s injury occurred in the space of a second. The deafening noise echoed down the hall for a moment, then silence reigned again. Dust floated in the air and pebbles clattered to the ground, softly.

With the danger gone Sib dropped to her knees and carefully flipped Master Gianlo onto his back. To Sib’s relief he groaned at the movement. He pressed his hand to the spot where he’d been hit. She didn’t see any blood.

“Hold still Master Gianlo,” Sib instructed. She turned on her flashlight so she could properly see what she was doing. The image the Force supplied was enough to walk by but shimmered around the edges.

A course in field medicine wasn’t required for Jedi but it was common practice and Master Gianlo had insisted she learn it. As usual, he was right. “Can you breathe?” Master Gianlo nodded, his eyes squeezed shut, and gave a few gasping breaths to demonstrate. “I think the air got knocked out of you.” Master Gianlo nodded again and continued to force breath through his lungs.

Sib pulled open his robe so she could see the wound. There was an ugly bruise the size of her palm blossoming on his skin. The rock had hit just beneath his ribs in the soft part of his torso. She prodded at his stomach, but besides his ragged breathing she neither felt nor sensed anything out of place.

They both flinched as yet another explosion echoed through the tunnels. It was far off and in the
direction they were heading. Concern flashed through Sib at what might have happened.

“Let me put something on your bruise, Master,” Sib said. She unzipped her boot but Master Gianlo stilled her hand.

“No,” Master Gianlo wheezed. “Go to the Admiral. It will be several minutes before I’m in any shape to help. I’ll be fine.”

Sib hesitated. “Are you sure, Master?”

“Yes,” he said. “That’s an order, go. As soon as I can walk I’ll head in your direction.”

He was already pushing himself onto his elbows

“If you say so, Master,” Sib said. She called over their lightsabers from where they’d been thrown and laid Master Gianlo’s in his hand.

Sib jumped to her feet and took off at a run straight for where she’d heard the explosion. Another explosion shook the caves and Sib stumbled as the ground moved. Something had really gone sideways.

At a Force-assisted running speed Sib arrived at Tantro’s bunker in a few minutes. They’d wasted about ten minutes wandering through the tunnels. The bunker’s duracrete foundations extended beyond the upper tunnel system and Sib ended up against a ‘crete wall with no way around or up.

Sib cursed and forced herself to stand still and focus on the issue. She closed her eyes and let the pulse of the stone around her form an image in her mind. Above her was only solid rock until open air, but the foundation in front of her felt thin enough for her to cut through it. There was a big empty space on the other side. She hoped no one would be there to greet her.

Sib lit up her lightsaber and attacked the stone without hesitation. Duracrete was always tougher than other materials to cut through, but Sib was determined and eager for a fight. By the time she’d cut a big enough hole to fit through her lightsaber was unusually warm in her hands and hard started making the distinctive fizzling noise of an overheating engine. They were handy little machines, but hardly perfect. She shut it off to give it a moment to cool.

Sib used the Force to pull out the ‘crete and lower the block gently to the ground. The basement was empty except for a couple of crates and the only door was at the top of a ladder.

For a moment Sib crouched at the bottom of ladder and listened. Something must have been laid into the duracrete foundations of the place as her Force abilities were no longer restricted. She could sense about twenty-five sentients moving around above her.

Sib climbed up the ladder as quiet as a whisper and eased open the trap door. She nearly fell off when a blaster shot singed the ground in front of her face. The soldiers and Tantro’s people, who had wised up and put on gas masks, were engaged in a shoot-out from opposite sides of the arena she’d popped into. The entire room was roughly forty meters in diameter with a sandy pit floor and a few tiers of bench seating. The door Sib opened was at the bottom row of seats and gave her a clear view of the site. Both sides were hiding behind the lip of the arena and large rubble that must have been gouged from the ceiling in one of the explosions. Dirt and gas hung in the air and the flickering and wildly moving flashlights of both sides created a flickering mess of shapes.

Sib touched her comm. “This is Jedi Sib, I’m fine and in Tantro’s stronghold, please don’t shoot at me, over.”

“This is prime team leader, I see you now, go ahead and do your thing, over,” the team leader said
over Sib’s finally functioning comm.

The gas was probably inert by this point so Sib lent a hand by removing the criminal’s cover. With a short gesture she sent a few of the large stones tumbling into the pit. Uncovered, the criminals fell easily.

The mysterious source of sudden magical assistance sent the criminals into a panic and quick retreat towards a door at the top of the seats—even as it exposed them to the soldier’s fire.

Sib wasn’t about to see them get off so easily. She jumped out of her hole and into the stands, over the rows, and in the moment before she landed amongst the fleeing criminals she activated her lightsaber. Her feet hit the ground and her lightsaber made a dazzling arc of neon blue. It cut armor, flesh, and bone without hesitation and the criminals became more concerned about fleeing her than the soldiers.

It was short work from there.

When the dust cleared prime team leader greeted Sib with a friendly pat. “Jedi Sib, I’m glad to see you’re alright,” she said. Her armor was scuffed and askew but she looked in good health. “Where’s Master Gianlo?”

“He’s injured, but he’ll be fine,” Sib said. “There was a trap door and we fell into these tunnels beneath the place. Someone should go and help him.” Sib looked at the soldiers in the arena. Primary team and tertiary team were both present. A few were injured and being tended to. It took Sib a moment to realize who was missing.

“Where’s the Rear Admiral?” Sib asked.

The team leader hesitated for the barest second. “We don’t know,” she admitted. “There was an explosion and she got separated. Jedi Katdia also briefly disappeared, but she’s back now. She fell into the same tunnel system you fell into, it sounds like.”

“Well fuck,” Sib said. She shoved down the concern rising like bile in her throat. “But, okay, so, what’s the mission status? Where’s Tantro?”

The team leader pointed out secondary team leader on her datapad. “Sec’ team’s tracking her now with Master Jir’zo. She disappeared into this big mess of mazes you can see here. We’ve got her cornered. It won’t be long.”

“Oh, good,” Sib said. It felt hollow. “Do you have any update on the other cities?”

“All three cities have had successful missions, we’re the last,” the team leader said. “You should go help sec’ team.”

“Yessir,” Sib said. She gave the team leader quick instructions on how and where to find Master Gianlo and confirmed the path to tert’ team on her datapad, also finally functioning, before sprinting out of the arena with an unnameable fear steadily rising in her.

#

For several agonizing minutes Otieno lay paralyzed with her head a blur, ears ringing, and her heart
pounding against her chest like the thunder of her ship’s engines. In the explosion her gas mask had been knocked askew and it blocked half her vision. She couldn’t tell if she was the only one alive.

Tantro’s people had ambushed prime team shortly after Sib had disappeared. The criminals had worn gas masks for the first time and Otieno was forced to order a retreat. She and three other soldiers had found shelter in a storage room. They’d taken turns firing out the doorway until a soldier was killed by a headshot and another shot scraped Otieno’s arm. A soldier threw a concussion grenade towards their attackers and was thanked with a frag grenade at his feet. Otieno was far enough from the door and the grenade of a low enough velocity that she had avoided being killed, though her soldiers couldn’t have been so lucky, and was instead probably just concussed and in shock.

And it fucking hurt.

Otieno groaned and through sheer willpower forced herself up. She fixed her mask and her temples throbbed at the movement. Definitely concussed. She flipped open the med pouch on her body armor and found a concussion pill. It tasted awful but she forced it down. She needed to be back on her feet.

Otieno touched her earpiece. “This is the Rear Admiral. Primary team leader, report,” she said. She waited for a moment but there was no response. “Primary team comm operator, please report.” More silence. “Anyone from primary team?” There wasn’t even the hiss of static, just silence. “Is this thing even working?” Otieno yelled.

Cursing, Otieno stumbled to her feet. She pulled the comm from her ear and looked at it in a fit of frustrated optimism. She barely knew anything about tech. Her datapad screen was also cracked and the image frozen in place. She had no idea if it was still sending her signal.

Otieno put the comm back in her ear, just in case, and surveyed the damage. The hydraulic door had automatically closed after the explosion. Otieno tried to open it, but it was wedged shut somewhere. No chance that way. The only exit available to her was a passage on the opposite wall she knew nothing about.

Her soldier’s were bloody and shredded on the ground among stones and debris. She checked their vitals in a vain hope and got only bloody hands for her concern. For a long moment she knelt by the body of one of them, a woman named Hazi from Hosnian Prime that had been on Otieno’s ship for as long as Otieno had been its commander, and considered the unnatural twist of her neck and splay of her fingers. She let herself be sad, and then proud that she had survived, then proud again that she didn’t panic.

“Sorry I got you into this mess,” Otieno muttered. She took Hazi’s comm. Despite it’s necessity, her conscious protested the theft from the dead.

Otieno’s nerves suddenly shot painful warnings up her back, as if pointed fingers crawled up them, and her shoulders tensed without reason. Otieno snapped her head up to stare at the shadowed
entrance to her inevitable path. She could feel adrenaline shooting through her body, as if scouring the inside of her veins, as she stared into the dark.

Her comm suddenly crackled as if someone was trying to speak and she flinched, her heart leaping up her throat. Nothing, it was nothing, she was making enemies where there weren’t any.

“What was that? I didn’t catch it,” she said over the comm. There was another crackle of static and she picked out a few words, but nothing that made sense. Otieno couldn’t believe that both their comms wouldn’t work. Had they finally turned on some sort of scrambler?

The dark of the passage drew her attention again. She licked her lips and fingered her blaster’s trigger-guard. She tried the comms from the other soldiers, one eye on the passage. Neither worked. She cursed and kept the last one in her ear. Just in case.

Onwards and forwards, or whatever the phrase was. Otieno approached the passage, her feet heavy and sweat gathering under the band of her gasmask. She stopped at the entrance and stared into the darkness until her eyes began to make up shapes and images. Otieno wrinkled her nose and chided herself for foolishness, but she also wished Sib was there. For practical reasons, of course.

Otieno raised her blaster and pressed herself against the wall. She kept up a quick pace with a sharp eye out for traps or movement ahead of her. Occasionally her comm crackled with static but she could never get anything more than the occasional word. Twice she gave a quick report over the comm that she was alive and well and on the move; just in case the issue was only on her end. She didn’t want anyone to be distracted.

The only thing she had that still worked was her watch and she checked it regularly. The other missions would be complete any minute now. She’d ordered the capital to initiate contact with her only if something went horribly wrong and they needed guidance or if the city was liberated. No news was good news, for the most part.

Ten minutes passed without incident and Otieno’s heart rate began to calm. She wasn’t about to be scared of a little darkness. Even if it did feel like it was slowly crushing her and her flashlight beam didn’t seem to go as far as it should.

Otieno spun on her heel at the sound of stone crumbling behind her, her heart jumping out her chest. She stared until her vision blurred and she finally decided it was nothing. She turned back around.

For a moment Otieno just stared at the cloaked and hooded figure ahead of her, just at the edge of her flashlight beam, half-shadow and half-cloth, and the figure appeared to stare back at her. Her heart skipped a beat.

Otieno fired five rapid shots at the figure but every shot glanced off its body as if she were tossing pebbles at it. She fired five more times, just for good measure, and these bounced off it too.

The figure stepped towards her and Otieno took two stumbling step backwards, her blaster still up. Her mouth was dry and every instinct screamed for her to turn around and run as fast as she could. Fear nearly swallowed every though, irrational and logic-less, and the darkness grew around her.

“I order,” Otieno said and her voice broke and she tried to swallow. “I order you to surrender, on my authority as a Rear Admiral of the Republic navy,” she said, her voice stronger.

The figure continued to approach, its face hidden in the shadow of its hood, and Otieno continued to retreat. What the fuck was she going to do? This thing wasn’t something she was remotely capable of dealing with. Where the fuck was Sib?
“Why aren’t you running?” the figure asked, its voice a low, pointed hiss, and the hair on the back of Otieno’s neck stood straight up.

“Would it do any good?” Otieno said as she steadily moved backwards. Her voice shook but she got the words out.

The figure made a strange rumbling noise. Otieno realized it was laughing.

“No, it wouldn’t,” it said. “But don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you.”

“That so.”

“Yes, so I would appreciate it if you stopped moving so we could have a proper discussion,” it said.

Otieno stopped moving. It…wasn’t entirely against her will, but it also was, and the thought that this thing was forcing her to do anything made Otieno’s stomach heave. The figure kept moving towards her.

It stopped when there was only a meter separating them. Its face remained hidden in shadow.

A dark, human-like hand slipped from the folds of its cloak and gestured slightly, like Sib had done before, and the flashlight on Otieno’s mask dimmed until the thing in front of her was only a vague shadow.

“That’s better, isn’t it?” it said.

Otieno forced herself to stare it in the face. “What do you want.”

The thing was silent for a moment. It tilted its head slightly. “I wanted to give you a warning.”

“A…warning.”

“Mhm,” it hummed. “And I want you to take this warning back to your pathetic Republic and all its pathetic leaders and all its pathetic citizens. Tell them the galaxy will burn and I’d like to see them try and stop it. Tell them the Sith have returned and we will be glorious.”

Otieno said the first thing that came to her mind: “Go to hell.”

The Sith laughed, as unsettling and strange as before. It waved its hand and Otieno fell.

“Hey!”

Otieno started awake, her blaster immediately aimed at the noise, and she flailed for a moment until her feet made contact with the ground and she pushed herself upright.

“It’s me! It’s just me!” Sib called. She was just an approaching shadow, her flashlight off, but Otieno knew, instinctually, it really was her. Otieno dropped her blaster and adjusted her flashlight so the beam was on high again.

Sib was covered in dust and grit but looked fine. “You okay? What happened to you?” Sib asked and bent to help Otieno to her feet.

“I’m…yeah, I’m fine,” Otieno said. Her head throbbed and she gripped Sib’s arms to steady herself. “I was…there were three soldiers and me and we’d gone into a room to escape fire, but then there
was a grenade. The soldiers were all killed in the explosion but I was fine. Then I went down this passageway and—maker, Sib, there was this thing and it said it was a Sith and it gave me a warning about—"

“Hey, hold up, hold on,” Sib said. She held Otieno’s biceps and gently turned Otieno’s attention to her. “Somebody came to you and said they were a Sith?”

“Yes, and it gave me a warning,” Otieno said. “It said to tell the Republic ‘the galaxy will burn and I’d like to see them try and stop it. Tell them the Sith have returned and we will be glorious.’” The words were burned into her. Every part of the meeting was soldered into her memory.

Sib’s brow was furrowed and Otieno’s heart sank as she realized she didn’t believe her. “Look at my memories. You’ll see what I’m saying is true.”

“If you want me to,” Sib said. She moved her hands to the sides of Otieno’s head and closed her eyes.

It was a strange feeling, like a prickle at the back of her head, but it didn’t hurt and Otieno brought the memories of the Sith to the forefront of her mind. It was like someone else taking over her thoughts, like before with the Sith when she’d stopped against her will, but it wasn’t nearly so unpleasant. Sib didn’t coerce, she suggested and Otieno willingly went along with it.

The memory played out and Sib watched the entirety of it, from the explosion to being knocked out, without any change in expression.

Sib removed her hands from Otieno’s head and opened her eyes. “Well,” she said. “I believe you now.”

“Thanks,” Otieno said, relieved. She checked her watch. She’d been out for about ten minutes. There was no point in worrying about the Sith now, he would be long gone, and they had the more pressing issue of Tantro to deal with. Unless she had been dealt with.

Sib tapped her comm. “I’ve found the Rear Admiral, she’s fine, we’re coming your way, over,” she said. Otieno jumped when Sib’s voice echoed in her own ear. The Sith must have been blocking the signal. Could Sith even do that?

“Copy that,” prime team leader replied.

“What’s the situation?” Otieno asked and took Sib’s offered hand. They started walking back to where Sib had come from.

“The missions were all a success,” Sib said. “The groups holding the buildings are already starting to waver. Tantro’s cornered and it won’t be long until she’s captured.”

“That’s good, very good, what happened to you?” Otieno said.

“Oh, fell through a trap door with Master Gianlo, then Master Gianlo got hurt, he’s fine now, and we ran around in these tunnels underneath this place for a bit, then I found a way out and connected back up with prime team. Our comms didn’t work down there. Apparently Katdia disappeared for a little bit too, but she’s back now.”

“Good,” Otieno said. “So where is Tantro?”

Sib held out her datapad for Otieno. She pointed to a particularly labyrinthine section of tunnels where most of the soldiers were concentrated. “I’m taking us straight there.”
“Excellent,” Otieno said. She broke into a run and pulled Sib along. It would only be a few minutes at this pace.

The first soldiers they came across were members of secondary team and the secondary team leader at a junction of three tunnels. Tert’ team was entirely inside the labyrinth with quat’ team and secondary protecting the entrances and exits. By the completeness of the map it appeared they’d walked most of it, but still no Tantro.

“Are we sure she’s in there?” Otieno asked. “Are there any ways she could have escaped?”

Secondary team leader Mazi shook xir head. “We haven’t found a single way for her to escape and Master Jir’zo has been keeping track of her. She can confirm that Tantro is at least in this area, though she’s having difficulty pinpointing her location.”

“Yeah, this place is weird,” Sib said. “What’s the plan?”

“Sib—” Otieno was interrupted by the comm.

“This is Master Jir’zo, I’ve lost Tantro, she doesn’t seem to be in the tunnels anymore,” she said, her voice heavy.

Otieno grimaced and tapped her comm. “This is the Rear Admiral, where, approximately, did you last sense Tantro?” A small circle appeared on Sib’s datapad and Otieno grabbed her arm. “Roger that. Tertiary team, I want you to move towards that location and look for how she could have escaped, everyone else stay in position in case this is a trick. The moment you find anything tell me, over,” Otieno turned off her comm. “Sib, you said there were tunnels underneath these tunnels?”

“Yeah, she probably went down them, right?”

“Right,” Otieno said. “Can you cut through the stone floor Sib?”

“I don’t think so, the floors just too thick, I got a glimpse of it when I fell,” Sib said. “But, hold on, maybe there’s a trap door nearby.” She knelt and pressed her hands to the ground. Otieno wasn’t certain how a Jedi could sense a trap door in a stone floor, but she did her best to be patient.

A soldier tapped Otieno on the arm. “Rear Admiral, I’ve got an extra datapad, sir,” she said and offered it up.

“Oh, thank you,” Otieno said. She switched the sleeves out and fiddled with the settings while Sib did her thing.

“Good news!” Sib announced and ran down the tunnel without waiting for Otieno to acknowledge. Otieno signaled the soldiers to remain where they were before she chased after Sib.

Sib disappeared into a room. Otieno took a more cautious pace into the small space. Sib pulled a cot away from the wall to reveal a sheet metal trapdoor.

Otieno drew her blaster as Sib cut the simple lock on the trapdoor with her lightsaber. Sib had none of Otieno’s caution. She threw open the door, peered down for a second, then did a graceful leap into the darkness. Otieno lay on her stomach at the edge of the hole and stuck her head down. Sib stood directly below.

“Well?” Otieno asked. The stone floor was a meter thick and she couldn’t see anything besides what was directly beneath her.
“I can sense Tantro,” Sib said. “The tunnels down here are a lot more direct and connected than the ones above us. We should be able to head straight for her.”

“Fantastic,” Otieno said. “I’m going to call tert’ team over then join you. Somehow.”

“Jump, I’ll catch you,” Sib said. “But remember signals can’t go between the floors.”

“I remember,” Otieno said. She touched her comm on. “This is the Rear Admiral. We’ve located a way to the lower levels and Jedi Sib has confirmed Tantro is in the tunnels. I want tertiary team and the Jedi to come to my current location and follow the path I’ll lay out to Tantro. I’ll be out of contact when I’m down there; primary team leader is in charge of operations until I’m back in communication. Team leaders, confirm, over.”

Otieno marked her location on the map and waited for the team leaders to rattle off their confirmation before she joined Sib. There were five meters of open air between Otieno’s feet and the ground, but Otieno found she wasn’t worried. After hanging on the inside of mining shaft and facing a Sith a five meter drop was nothing.

Sib didn’t catch Otieno so much as use the Force to gently lower her the last couple of meters, but it worked out perfectly well.

Once Otieno was on her feet Sib took off at a dead sprint that Otieno immediately had trouble keeping up with. She was exhausted, bruised, still a bit shaken, and carrying about fifty pounds of equipment and armor. She considered telling Sib this, but time was of the essence. She could sleep for twelve hours afterwards.

Otieno focused on remaining upright and stared at Sib’s back, trusting her to warn for danger. It was the pace that did her in; she could walk for kilometers, but running was too much.

“How close?” Otieno asked and hoped it wasn’t obvious she was short of breath.

“Not far at all,” Sib said. “Your soldiers have entered the tunnels.”

Otieno checked her datapad and confirmed that a dozen dots were coming straight for them. “Good. Think we can take her on our own?”

“As long as there’s one of her,” Sib said. “Are we going to gas her?”

“Got gas canisters?”

Sib groped at her belt. “Uh…no.”

“Me neither,” Otieno said. “I’ll stun her. Can you knock her out?”

“Like the Sith did? No. That’s…dark side stuff.”

“Ah,” Otieno said. She wasn’t certain what distinguished dark side “stuff” from light side “stuff.” More research for later.

“Turn off your flashlight,” Sib whispered and reached back for Otieno. Otieno turned off the light, though it made her uneasy. She held on tight to Sib’s hand and raised her blaster.

A slow curve in the tunnels gradually revealed a light coming towards them, but not whoever carried it. Otieno double-checked her datapad that it wasn’t a soldier before releasing Sib’s hand and raising her blaster.
They pressed against the wall they rounded and slowed to a walk as the light approached. Sib unclipped her lightsaber from her belt and held it in front of her. Otieno aimed from behind Sib’s arm.

The moment Tantro’s core was revealed Otieno fired off five stun shots. Tantro didn’t even have a chance to yell or raise her blaster before she collapsed to the ground and lay still. Otieno waited a moment, to confirm she really was unconscious, and then edged closer until she could check Tantro was still breathing. She flipped her onto her back with her foot.

“What the hell?” Sib said, voicing Otieno’s thoughts, as they simultaneously realized the woman she’d just shot wasn’t Tantro.

“That doesn’t—” Otieno began but was cut off by Sib throwing herself between Otieno and a burst of blaster fire. Sib’s lightsaber deflected every shot into the walls.

The real Tantro stood with her blaster pointed straight at them. She wore a gas mask and light armor. Otieno fired at Tantro from over Sib’s shoulder.

But the pulses were absorbed into the air around Tantro and she remained upright, entirely unfazed, with her face was cast in eerie shadows by the stunned person’s flashlight.

Sib raised her free hand and turned her palm towards Tantro, but nothing happened. Tantro slowly approached them, each step like that of a droid; heavy, precise, unwavering.

Otieno flicked her blaster out of its stun setting and fired another five shots at Tantro, but even the plasma shots were absorbed by whatever was protecting her.

“What the fuck,” Sib repeated, with greater emphasis. “Who are you?”

“You sure?” Otieno replied. In tandem they began to creep towards the wall.

“Pretty sure,” Sib said.

“Come find out?” Tantro said, her voice harsh. She holstered her blaster and reached for something on the back of her belt.

Sib and Otieno froze where they stood as Tantro activated the lightsaber in her hands. It was green, but it didn’t comfort Otieno that it was a Jedi color. Tantro was no Jedi. Otieno recoiled at the thought of what Tantro might have done to get it.

“What the fuck,” Sib repeated, with greater emphasis. “Who are you?”

“Not who you think I am,” Tantro said.

Otieno stared at Tantro’s face, tried to understand her words, but Tantro’s face was unnaturally blank. Something was off about her eyes. Her pupils were pinpricks even in this dark and the whites of her eyes bloodshot and red-rimmed. They kept twitching. This wasn’t the Tantro they’d met before.

“Sib, how powerful are Sith?” Otieno said, an awful thought forming.

“Pretty damn, why?”
“Could a Sith take complete control over someone else’s body,” Otieno asked.

Sib didn’t shift her eyes from Tantro for even a moment, but her entire stance changed as she realized what Otieno meant.

“Well fuck,” Sib said. “Otieno, you definitely need to get out of here. Get Master Jir’zo here immediately. I can sense her, she isn’t far away.”

“No help for you, I’m afraid,” Tantro said. She raised a hand and not far behind them a set of massive doors, hidden in the stone, slammed shut. They’d been led into a trap.

Tantro raised her lightsaber hilt to cheek-level in a two-handed grip with the blade parallel to the floor. She shifted into a wide and solid stance.

“Stand back Otieno,” Sib ordered, her voice strained, and threw off her gas mask. Otieno did as she asked and pressed herself against the wall. Sib held her lightsaber one-handed as she echoed Tantro’s stance. “You can’t use the Force quite as well in Tantro’s body, can you? Otherwise you could easily overpower either of us. As you are now I can stop you from doing so, yeah?”

Tantro said nothing. Sib had struck on the truth.

Sib made the first move in a sudden lunge towards Tantro’s right and a cut towards her middle. Tantro blocked it without apparent effort and their lightsabers sang. For a moment they stood with their blades connected, hissing and crackling, their attention locked on the minutia of the other’s body.

Tantro threw off Sib’s lightsaber and began a series of lightning quick movements that Sib parried just as quick. She ducked or dodged most of Tantro’s blows like her feet didn’t even need to touch the ground. They went at each other like storms, circling each other in a terrifying parody of a dance, and the blows slid off like water.

Otieno had not thought a lightsaber battle would be so loud. The ‘sabers screeched as they touched every few seconds and hummed as they flew through the air, but the opponents were silent, their entire focus on the other. The battle moved too fast for Otieno to fully comprehend. The ‘sabers were arcs of brilliant light, Sib’s face obscured in the shifting shadows. Every time Tantro’s blade almost injured Sib Otieno’s heart stopped.

Tantro struck quick and fast, almost every move she made offensive, until her arms began to tremble and she jerked from attack to block to stance. Her body, untrained and unfamiliar to the Sith, simply couldn’t handle it. Only the sheer skill of the Sith kept Sib from landing a fatal blow.

Otieno edged along the wall until she felt a safe distance from the blades. She still had her blaster in hand but there was no opportunity for her to take a shot that didn’t have an equal chance of hitting Sib.

Tantro suddenly stumbled as she threw of a particularly vicious attack, as if her knee had given out, and in the space of the moment it took for her to regain her balance Sib whipped her lightsaber across Tantro’s chest. The wound was only superficial. Sib had been too far away and in the wrong position to do more.

As Tantro lurched away from Sib the fighting paused and Otieno had an unobstructed view of Tantro. Otieno’s instincts recognized the opportunity and took aim before her conscious thoughts could catch up. She fired three times and Tantro cried out and fell to the ground. Blood bloomed from three smoking craters perfectly placed in the center of her chest.
Sib stared at the body for a long moment, her shoulders noticeably rising and falling with each heavy breath, then deactivated her lightsaber to examine Tantro’s corpse.

“She’s definitely dead,” Sib said.

“Good,” Otieno declared and holstered her blaster. She went to Sib’s side and rested a hand on her elbow. “You okay?”

Sib picked up her gaze and looked at Otieno. Her face was flush and her forehead shone with sweat. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

“You’re not hurt?” Otieno asked.

“No, should I be?” Sib said. She checked her limbs for injury, as if she might have missed a wound.

“No, no, just, sit down, rest, I’ll get us out of here,” Otieno said and gave Sib a gentle nudge. Sib lowered herself slowly to the ground and leaned against the wall, her eyes closed.

Otieno relayed the news of Tantro’s death to the soldiers on the other side of the door. A few had gone down the tunnels to try and find a way to Sib and Otieno and root out anyone that might have disappeared into the tunnels. The others would try and open the door. They didn’t have any droids, but it might not matter. Otieno ordered a soldier to head back up and inform the comm operator the mission was complete and return with a report of the situation. She pulled her gas mask off, tired of the pressure on her face and obscured vision.

Then there was nothing more to do than to wait for some sort of rescue, it was best they stay in one place, and Otieno sat down next to Sib.

“I’ve never seen a lightsaber battle before,” Otieno said.

“I’ve never had a proper lightsaber battle before,” Sib said, her gaze distant.

Otieno frowned. “Really?”

“Yeah, I mean, who would I fight?” Sib said. “I’ve practiced a lot with Master Gianlo and other Jedi, but that’s just practice. And I’ve fought people with my ‘saber, but I’ve never fought for my life against someone else yielding one.” Sib raised her hand and Tantro’s lightsaber flew into her palm. She held it to the light and examined the hilt.

“You fought really well,” Otieno said. “As far as I can tell, anyway.”

“You’re the one who killed her,” Sib said.

“You had it in the bag.”

“Barely.”

“But that’s pretty good to go up against a Sith and win, right?”

“I wouldn’t have lasted a second against a Sith,” Sib said. She frowned and furrowed her brows at the lightsaber in her hands. “The Sith couldn’t use their full powers when using Tantro’s body. That’s all.”

For a long moment Otieno couldn’t believe what she was hearing from Sib. How could Sib brush off her skills like that? She’d fought incredibly well, as far as Otieno could tell such things, and been incredibly brave to even attempt a fight. Especially considering it was her first proper fight. She
wasn’t being fair to herself. Otieno wanted the exhilarated grin from before to return. Their fight was over and they’d come out the winner; they should celebrate that.

“Sib,” Otieno said. She struggled for a moment to find a way to articulate her thoughts. “You were brave. What you did was amazing, don’t dismiss it so easily.”

Sib scrunched up her nose, Otieno’s heart briefly seized up at how inappropriately adorable it was, and offered an unconvincing smile. “Thanks,” Sib said.

Otieno hesitated a second before resting her hand on Sib’s. Sib immediately laid her hand over Otieno’s wrist and gave it a gentle squeeze.

The shadows were dark and long and blood still leaked from Tantro’s corpse as it cooled, but for the first time since setting foot on the planet Otieno was at rest.

Chapter End Notes

Did you know if you add enough serious-sounding words to something you don't actually have to know what you’re talking about?

Edited on 8/16/16
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Investigations ensue.

The Jedi Grand Council’s waiting room could easily fit several dozen individuals on its rows of benches but besides Otieno only a Duros and a Wookiee waited for an audience. Both civilians. Her uniform felt particularly conspicuous in this place. The Duros stared intently at their datapad as Otieno and the Wookiee regarded Coruscant glittering in the evening through the floor-to-ceiling windows. They were likely the last appointments of the day.

Otieno and the Jedi had returned from Garos only two days before. A few hours after Tantro’s death the sieges ended peacefully and from there it had been a short week of arrests and clean up before The Tourbillon could return to Coruscant. The police had amassed enough evidence from raids and criminals that turned to lock up the biggest players and shut down several of the more prominent gangs.

Now, she waited for Sib and Master Gianlo to finish their report to the Council of what had occurred. Beyond the Sith, Otieno was uncertain what they sought from her. Particularly what required her physical presence. She could have easily sent over a written report.

Though she wasn’t about to pass up the opportunity to see inside the Jedi Temple. On the rare occasions the Jedi and military worked together it was usually the Jedi that went to the military’s offices, like Sib and the other Jedi had. Audiences with the illustrious Jedi Grand Council were even rarer for non-Jedi. There were worse ways to spend an afternoon, and she was already in a good mood.

That morning she’d been informed of her long due promotion to the final rank in Rear Admiral. If she wanted to go any higher she’d have to become a full Admiral: a significantly more difficult rank to receive. There was a long queue of older and more experienced Rear Admirals waiting for an Admiral to either die or retire. Promotions to Admiral were predicated on experience rather than promise and the good test scores that had fast-tracked her to Rear Admiral wouldn’t help now. Otieno was twenty-eight, one of the youngest Rear Admiral currently serving, and planned to try for full Admiral at thirty-five. Forty at the latest. Until then, the promotion came with a raise she’d use on a new apartment.

A Jedi stepped out from the secretary’s chamber and motioned for Otieno to follow him. He brought her to a lift opposite the doors. Otieno stepped inside the lift’s open doors. They snapped shut behind her and the lift rose in a seamless motion. Seconds later, it opened into the Council chambers.

Of the twelve members of the Council eight were in attendance; arrayed in a circle around the edge of the circular room. There were more floor-to-ceiling windows and natural, delicate architecture. From this slightly elevated vantage Otieno could see the five scars on the Temple where their towers had once stood. Like so much of Coruscant, they’d been ruined during the Great Galactic War, but unlike the rest of Coruscant the Temple hadn’t been able to return to its former glory. This location was technically not the official room of the Council either. They still held out hope the towers would be rebuilt.
Sib and Master Gianlo stood in the center of the room on a flower-like decoration in the marble floor. Otieno felt the weight of the entire room turn to her as she arrived. Only three of the members were human. Otieno was used to the mostly human or near-equal ratios of the military and if she hadn’t done some research on the Council beforehand it might have thrown her off. The ratios made sense, after short consideration. Force-sensitivity didn’t arise at a particularly higher rate in humans and that would remove some of the xenophobia that proved a barrier.

“Rear Admiral Otieno, please step forward,” one council member said. A Mirialan man, which would make him Master Kiws.

Grand Master Boha, an Ithorian of dark-red coloring, sat on Otieno’s right. He said nothing as his half-hooded eyes followed her. Otieno couldn’t tell anything from his expression, his physiology unfamiliar, and his slender hands rested casually on his armrests. There was nothing to distinguish him as Grand Master.

“Padawan Sib, Master Gianlo, you may leave,” Master Kiws said with a short wave.

Sib and Master Gianlo bowed to the Grand Master. Sib left with a last glance over of her shoulder at Otieno, her mouth twisted to the side as if concerned about something. Otieno tracked their departure out of the corner of her eye until the lift doors slid shut behind them.

“Rear Admiral Otieno, we appreciate you taking the time to come to us today,” Sien Keelhen said, a middle-aged human woman. “We’re aware your duties to the Republic keep you busy.”

“The Republic military has always deeply appreciated the cooperation of the Order. I consider it an important part of my duties to uphold this relationship, Master Jedi,” Otieno said with a slight inclination of her head.

Master Sien’s mouth quirked into a half-smile for just a moment. The lie was blatant, even without Force sensitivity. Everyone knew the military could barely stand the Jedi. Master Gianlo might have even mentioned her initial distaste for the Jedi, though that had changed by the end. A few of them were alright.

“Padawan Sib has expounded upon your reliability and intelligence at great length, Rear Admiral,” Huzai Kanato said, a minuscule dark-orange woman with a wizened face. “She has strongly encouraged us to believe everything you may say.”

“I’m glad to hear she thinks so highly of me, Master Jedi,” Otieno said.

“Would you speak similarly of her?” Master Johza asked, a Mirialan woman.

Otieno had not expected to discuss Sib’s conduct. “Well, yes, she acted bravely, intelligently, and conducted herself in a way befitting of the Jedi Order. She had an important role in ensuring that the situation on Garos ended in the best possible way.”

“We’re glad to hear it,” Huzai Kanato said.

“To the business of the events on Garos,” Master Sien said. Otieno turned to her, annoyed that she had to keep turning to face whoever spoke. Why couldn’t they conduct their business from behind desks, like proper officials? “We would like to hear what you believe occurred in Laumi.”

“In regards to the person who claimed themselves a Sith, specifically,” Master Ulow’rupad, a Twi’lek, clarified.

Otieno had prepared a response for this question. She’d already written up the report for Admiral
Vargin and the story for the Jedi was mostly the same. She’d deliberately skimmed over the Force-related aspects of the incident in the official report but had made it clear she believed there was still a threat to the Republic’s stability that deserved further research. She was yet to hear back on that part.

The gas masks were all equipped with cameras, standard issue, that recorded the entire operation, but either the Sith or the explosion had turned it off for the span of time between the frag grenade to Sib’s arrival. It was *supremely* frustrating to lack anything that would give her credence.

The encounter with the Sith turned her stomach to recall at all, another reason she wished there was a recording, but every detail was stitched into her memory. It’s word and tones, its strange movement, its dark hand as it appeared from between the folds of its cloak. Nothing restful came during the return journey—the lack of work had just forced her to think about it. The Sith’s words played on repeat in her mind, like a broken holo. She closed her eyes and the moment waited in the darkness.

The Jedi let her speak without interruption. A long silence followed the end of her report.

“Rear Admiral,” Master Sien spoke. “You’re confident you could see nothing of its face?”

“Yes, Master.”

“And it’s hand you described as possibly black, or a dark-blue?”

“Yes, and it’s possible it was wearing a glove.”

“I find it interesting that it lowered the light,” Master Huzai Kanato said. “Why do you think it did so, Rear Admiral?”

“To hide its face, I assume, possibly it’s of a species that is particularly sensitive to light, Master Jedi,” Otieno said.

“Which do you find more likely?” Master Huzai asked, a slight quirk in her lips.

Otieno frowned for a moment, surprised they’d want her opinion. “Considering it already could keep its face in shadow and that it commented on the lack of light being ‘better:’ my opinion is it’s of a species sensitive to light, Master Huzai.”

“Rear Admiral, I would like to examine your memory of the encounter,” Grand Master Boha said, speaking for the first time. The accent peculiar to the two-mouthed and four-throated species took a moment to decipher.

“You may, Grand Master,” Otieno said, turning to him.

Grand Master Boha raised his right hand and faced his palm towards Otieno. She forced herself to remain relaxed and kept the memory at the forefront of her mind. The examination, or what she assumed was the examination, took several minutes and she felt nothing the entire time, just like Sib had said. The other Jedi sat in mute attentiveness.

“You’re very observant, Rear Admiral,” Master Boha said after he finally lowered his hand. “There were many details in your memories that others would have missed.”

“Thank you, Grand Master.”

“We also understand that this is unpleasant for you and will not ask you to dwell on the memory more than is necessary,” Master Boha said. “You may leave us now, Rear Admiral, unless you should have any more questions.”
Otieno was momentarily caught off-guard by her quick dismissal. The meeting hadn’t been nearly long enough for the Jedi to get everything they needed, unless Master Boha was very confident in what he’d gained from her memories.

“I do have some questions,” Otieno said, her voice hard. “Was the thing I saw a Sith, like it claimed?”

“The Sith clans are scattered and weak, spread through the galaxy without contact, and there have been no lords of the Sith for over a millennia,” Master Johza said, her tone similarly firm. “Since the last Sith Empire fell, the Jedi have worked ceaselessly to ensure peace. Most likely you found a Force-sensitive from a Sith clan, or a cult, who developed illusions of grandeur. We have a Jedi Master hunting down this person as we speak.”

“And Tantro?”

Master Boha answered this question: “While your theory of possession is not unheard of, more likely Tantro was a Force-sensitive warped from prolonged exposure to a sight of dark side influence.”

“But what if this was a fallen Jedi? Would that change anything?” Otieno asked.

“Rear Admiral,” Master Sovur, a thick-bodied Zabrak, said, her voice distorted by an injury on her throat. “You needn’t fear that a Jedi would turn. We take care of our own.”

Otieno matched Master Sovur’s gaze without hesitation as she forced her expression to remain neutral. A moment passed and no one else made a comment. “If that’s the opinion of the Council,” Otieno said, shifting her attention to Grand Master Boha.

“It is the opinion of the Council,” Master Boha said after a long hesitation, his eyes narrowed to thin slits. The atmosphere of the room had become decidedly less pleasant. “Thank you for your time, Rear Admiral.”

“It’s been an honor, Grand Master,” Otieno said. Rather than a bow, the common politeness for Jedi, she gave a crisp salute to the Grand Master and turned on her heel to the waiting lift.

Inside the lift Otieno clenched her hands tight, tighter until they trembled from strain. The casual arrogance of the Council—dismissing her like she was some random, ignorant back-water idiot. Stars! The gall of them to talk to her like that!

When the doors opened into the secretary’s room she forced her fists to open. She wouldn’t let this get the better of her. She wouldn’t be the emotionally short-sighted fool they must think she was.

The secretary waited for her. “Grand Master Boha requested I give you this,” he said and handed Otieno a chip. “It has a direct line to the Council, should you need it.”

Otieno took the holochip with forced carefulness. “Thank you. Have a good day.” She exited the waiting room in quick, long strides and braced herself for the long walk through the massive complex. The Duros and Wookiee didn’t even give her a passing glance. It was a straightforward path from the council chambers to the public entrance, at least. She put her entire focus into counting breaths and keeping her hands loose. Anger would only lead to mistakes. She could not afford mistakes.

“Hey!”

Otieno turned at the call, already halfway down the first flight of carpeted steps outside the waiting room, and was surprised to see Sib learning against the wall by the door.
“Hey, I didn’t see you,” Otieno said as Sib caught up with her. Sib’s clothes were slightly different from her regular. She wore a proper Jedi robe for one and her light-brown tunic now extended past her knee, before it had only reached her fingertips. Master Gianlo was nowhere in sight.

“You seem angry,” Sib said in way of reply. “I’ll walk with you to the entrance.”

Otieno started again and Sib’s matching pace was more restrained than her usual. “Have you met with the Jedi Council before?” Otieno asked.

“Yeah. A lot of the time when we get missions the Jedi Council discusses them with us. I also saw them when I first arrived here.”

Otieno was silent for a moment, considering how to lead the conversation. “How did they react to what you told them?”

“They didn’t,” Sib said. “We just gave them the information and left. Why, did they tell you something?”

“I asked them what they thought the thing I saw was,” Otieno said. “They thought it was nothing and that they were taking care of it. Just a Sith descendant with an ego, they said.”

“You disagree, I take it.”

“It’s more than that, I’m certain,” Otieno muttered, her hands tightening into fists again. “It wielded real power and had been trained to use that power, and I’m certain Tantro was being controlled by it. I should have asked how she got that lightsaber.”

“Oh, the lightsaber was a few decades old,” Sib said. “It belonged to a Jedi that had disappeared. The Council probably believes she bought it off someone who had found it. It happens a lot, actually. There’s a big trade in lightsabers. They’re kind of like trophies, to some people, but only if you actually killed the person wielding them….”

Sib trailed off as Otieno continued to bristle. At another time Otieno would have found the discussion interesting, but now all she could think of was the Council’s disregard. It was a vile feeling.

“I’m sure they’re putting more concern into it than it looks like,” Sib said, softly. “It’s just how Jedi are, sometimes.”

“I know when I’m being brushed off,” Otieno snapped. “I’ve been dealing with it my entire career. They mean exactly what they said. Their Jedi will investigate for a week, find nothing because they don’t really care, then report back that all’s well, and five years from now we’re all going to be slaves to the Sith Empire and I’ll have the thin satisfaction of saying ‘I told you so.’”

Sib was quiet for a moment. “Wow.”

Otieno sighed and roughly rubbed her face. “That was dark, sorry, I shouldn’t have gotten mad at you like that.”

“I understand your frustration,” Sib said. “Really. I think there’s something more here too. Not ‘we’re all going to end up slaves in the new Sith Empire’ something, but more than what it seems, yeah? Like, we know for a fact it adjusted your flashlight, compelled you to stop, and then knocked you out, right? That’s three distinct uses of the Force and an untrained Force user just couldn’t do those things. And if we agree that Tantro was possessed; that’s a fourth distinct skill. Tantro fought like a trained Jedi. Those were forms I knew and had seen before in practice and theory. I’m with
you, Otieno. I can’t just let this rest. I’ve barely been able to sleep.” Sib’s jaw shut so fast her teeth clicked, as if the last was something she hadn’t wanted to admit.

Otieno gave Sib a light touch on the shoulder. “Me too.”

“So is the military going to investigate this?”

“I’m not sure what the military’s going to do, honestly.” Otieno said. “I don’t think they’re going to do an investigation. If I know Admiral Vargin at all he’s going to brush this aside. He’ll probably dismiss it as Jedi business, which, really, it is, and say it’s nothing more than a rogue Forceuser. He won’t believe what the Sith said.”

“What should we do then? We can’t just let it go.”

Otieno, dreading the outcome they’d received and gambling on Sib’s support, had already considered the question. “We do our own investigation. Between the two of us, we should be able to get what we need. We both have plenty of resources at our disposal. You have the Jedi archives, I have the military archives, and I know some people who could give us access to most of the Senate archives without any trouble. We can both keep an ear out for anything odd, ask around, maybe Jedi Katdia would be willing to help, or, you know, anyone you may know. When we have enough proper evidence I know some people I can take it to who would listen.”

Sib frowned, her gaze fixed on the broad, marble-pillared hallway that stretched out before them. “It would be going against the advice of the Jedi Council, you understand,” Sib said. “I’m not sure who would be willing to help on my side. But you’re right. I’ll help.”

With that decided, Otieno spent the next few minutes considering, in silence, what their next move should be. Sib said hello to Jedi they passed.

“How’re you doing?” Sib asked.

“Fine,” Otieno said, an automatic response. She scratched the back of her neck. “Well, a little less than fine, but altogether I’m holding up.”

Sib laughed, breathless and uneasy. “I’m about the same. The battle with Tantro keeps replaying in my head. I wish it had been recorded, so I could watch it all again.”

“There is a recording of it, actually,” Otieno said, surprised Sib didn’t know. “Both our masks had cameras. I’ll get you the recordings, if you like. I guess I forgot to mention it.”

“You did forget to mention it,” Sib said, her tone suddenly hesitant. She was frowning, her nose scrunched up, and she crossed her arms over her chest. “Can you…can you send me copies?”

“Of course,” Otieno said. “They’re flat images, not holo, but they provide plenty of information.”

“I’m sure they will.”

“I’ll send them to your datapad when I’m back in my office,” Otieno said. Sib’s discomfort was plain and Otieno would have tried to alleviate it, but the source was less obvious. “If we’re going to do this we need to find a place and time to meet. When are you available?”

“Um,” Sib hesitated. “Tomorrow, I think, I’ll be available in the evening.”

“We can meet at my apartment, it’s not that far from here,” Otieno said. “Is that okay?”
Sib nodded once, her arms still crossed tight over her chest. Otieno wanted to grab her hands and force her arms apart, but she refrained and tried, for a moment, to understand why Sib would suddenly be fearful. They were both going outside the bounds of their directives, but where Otieno’s job tolerated, and even sometimes encouraged, individuals doing independent work (where and when it didn’t interfere with official work), a Jedi that went outside their directives was fallen, in one way or another.

“Sib, look,” Otieno grabbed Sib’s shoulder and pulled her behind a column. “If you’re not one hundred percent certain, you don’t have to do this. I don’t know much about the Order, but I do know that you don’t go against the Grand Council lightly. I also know, because you’re a Padawan, they could throw you out of the Order without a second thought.” Otieno took a deep breath. “I won’t be mad, I promise, if you decide you don’t want to chance being a Jedi for something as risky as this. I wouldn’t expect that of you, or of anyone. This is something I can pursue on my own.”

This time Sib answered without hesitation, “I’m certain, Otieno.”

“And I won’t be mad or try to stop you if you decide you can’t do this anymore,” Otieno continued. “I swear.”

“It needs to be done and I’m prepared to do it,” Sib said. “Really.”

Otieno released Sib’s shoulder and smoothed down the creases she’d made. “Okay, then let’s do it. I’ll send you my address when I send the recordings. I’m working from home that day so I’ll be there.”

“Yeah,” Sib uncrossed her arms and planted her fists on her hips. “See you then, and congrats on your promotion, too.”

“Thank you,” Otieno said. “It’s not unexpected.”

Sib’s teasing grin returned. “Is there a ceremony I can attend?”

“In a week, but it’s not much,” Otieno said, surprised. “They take some holos and make a short press release out of it. Some senators looking for good PR may be there, some family members, but really, it’s not much.”

“Well, I’ve never been to one, so I want to go!” Sib said, her enthusiasm back as if it had never left. “After all, you probably wouldn’t have gotten it without me.”

“Hah, I guess not,” Otieno said with her own small smile.

“Great, listen, I do have to be somewhere, actually, right now,” Sib said. “I thought I’d have time to walk with you but actually I don’t. I’ll see you tomorrow, alright?”

“Bye,” Otieno said, but Sib was already running off.

The promotion ceremony was dull but mercifully short. Otieno only had to stand at attention for twenty minutes while Admiral Augi, an admiral Otieno feared might keel over at any moment, gave a short speech about patriotism and the light of democracy. She stared at the top of his bald, liver-spotted head as he pinned the final Rear Admiral bar to her chest. They shook hands and he gave a short congratulation with a quip about getting his job in a few months. Five other Rear Admirals were being promoted. Otieno was the highest ranked.
A handful of bored reporters took some holos and jotted down everyone’s names. As her one vanity in the face of the press, Otieno had gotten her hair done the day before. The style was the same as always, but the braids were all fresh and she’d put just a touch of product in to ensure there wasn’t any frizz.

The rest of the crowd in the small auditorium were relatives, spouses, and friends to the promoted including Sib, a marked stand-out in her Jedi robes, five officers of varying rank, three cadets to hold the flags of the Republic, Coruscant, and the Navy, and two senators with their entourages. Commander Bivu would have come, he always delighted in the bureaucratic achievements of his friends and co-workers, but he had his own business to attend to.

Otieno was surprised to recognize the senator from Naboo; Mala Naiher. Naboo was in a period of stunning growth and they were always on the news for some reason or another. Otieno couldn’t imagine why someone as high profile as the senator would show up to such a small event. The other senator Otieno didn’t recognize and he didn’t appear to be associated with Senator Naiher.

When the last holo was taken Otieno and the rest were put at-ease and filed off stage. One of the officers in the crowd trapped her into a conversation before she could find Sib. Instead Sib came to them, hanging back a short distance as Otieno and the officer, a low-ranking Admiral, chatted. He’d graduated from the same Academy seven years before her and their conversation was mostly strung along that. Mercifully, he didn’t try to include Sib.

They’d met twice in the past week, both times at Otieno’s apartment, and spent hours discussing what they knew and what they didn’t. It was slow going, but they had begun to piece something together. The work was mostly reading reports and combing through archives that hadn’t been accessed for years.

The Admiral finally wandered off and Otieno gratefully turned to Sib. “See? A boring ceremony,” Otieno said.

Sib gave a toothy smile. “I thought it was lots of fun. I liked the speech. Well, I’ll admit I zoned out for about half of it. But the part I did hear.”

“Hah, it’s always the same one,” Otieno said. “Admiral Augi often does these ceremonies. He was an exceptional Admiral when he was younger, but his health is failing and he doesn’t go into the field anymore. I think he actually enjoys doing them.”

“Do you enjoy them?” Sib asked.

Otieno shrugged. “They’re dull, but as long as they’re short I don’t mind.”

“Well they’re certainly easier than our knighting ceremony. We have to do a whole night of meditation. No speeches though, so that’s a plus,” Sib said, laughing.

Otieno cracked a smile. “I suppose I can’t complain.”

Senator Mala Naiher and her entourage descended on them like a high-speed crash. One second, nothing, then her powerful presence and extravagant clothes demanded their due. “Rear Admiral Otieno,” she said, her molasses voice as arresting as her appearance. It was the first time Otieno had heard her speak in person.

“Senator Naiher,” Otieno said with a short bow. Sib bowed too, a second after Otieno.

“A thorough congratulations on your promotion, Rear Admiral,” the senator said. She quirked her red-painted lips in a slight smile, but it had a wry edge that Otieno immediately disliked. “You’re
something of a prodigy, I reckon.”

“Thank you, ma’am, it’s an honor to serve the Republic,” Otieno replied by rote.

The senator’s smile broadened. “I say the same.” Senator Naiher examined them both for a long, silent moment, as if she was sizing up a bahmat to decide if it would go next to slaughter. Her dark eyes lingered on their features, the stripes on Otieno’s chest, the blaster on her belt, Sib’s lightsaber. Otieno resisted the temptation to squirm. Sib’s expression was placid, for once, and her own pale eyes matched the senator’s without hesitation.

“Is there anything I can help you with, ma’am?” Otieno said.

“Maybe,” the senator said. “I haven’t decided if you’re the right ones, yet.”

“Right ones for what, ma’am?”

The senator tilted her head to the side, the small gold medallions on her headpiece jangling. “Oh, something I’ve been working on. Tell me, on Garos, you experienced something very strange, did you not?”

“Respectfully, ma’am, if you have to ask that question then you don’t have the clearance necessary to know,” Otieno said, stiffly. “You’re more than welcome to make a request for the full mission report through the official channels.”

The senator smiled in full, her perfect teeth as white as new snow, and she acquiesced the point with a nod. “You’re an admirable woman, Rear Admiral, and you as well, Padawan Sib,” she said. “I think you’ll be hearing from me soon.”

Otieno tensed and lowered her voice; “Ma’am, respectfully, again, but if this is at all political neither of us wish to become involved,” she said. “The Jedi Order forbids it and I have no taste nor interest in it. If you have a concern that you believe requires the assistance of the Jedi Order or of the military I strongly urge you to make a formal request. I will assume this is just a misunderstanding. I’m sure I don’t have to remind you how poorly attempting to solicit the help of a Jedi and Rear Admiral would reflect on you and your planet.”

The senator’s smile disappeared and here eyes tightened. Her skin was disturbingly flawless. “A misunderstanding,” she muttered and pursed her lips. “Of course. You are absolutely right, Rear Admiral. A misunderstanding. But before I leave you, could I trouble you for a holo? Just a quick one.”

“A—yes, of course ma’am.”

The senator motioned one of her entourage forward. Sib stepped aside and Otieno stood stiffly next to the senator. The senator smiled, a fakeearnest smile this time, and rested her hand an inch off the middle of Otieno’s back. A friendly, warm gesture. Otieno pushed her shoulders back and stared at the camera, her hands clasped in front of her. No one expected her to smile and so she didn’t. People didn’t want their military smiling on the job; it suggested they didn’t take their work seriously.

The photographer took a short holo. The moment it was over the senator stepped away. Otieno remained where she was.

“I expect to see great things from you, Rear Admiral,” the senator said, and her smile turned into the same wry one from the beginning. “And you too Padawan Sib, who is quieter than I thought she’d be.”
Sib smiled in a perfect replication of the senator’s. The same sarcasm, the same cleverness, the same suggestion of secret knowledge. “Rear Admiral Otieno said everything perfectly.”

“She is awfully well-versed in the intricacies of polite politicking,” the senator purred. “In another life you’d have made an exceptional politician, Rear Admiral Otieno. Have a beautiful day, and congratulations again on your promotion.”

Senator Mala Naiher left with the same suddenness she’d arrived in, her entourage trailing like smoke after a fire.

Sib’s smile dropped only once the senator had descended on a different promoted officer. “That was odd,” she said.

Otieno frowned. There wasn’t a single bit of the senator she liked after that meeting. “Very odd.”

“I don’t think she was trying to do what you accused her of trying to do,” Sib said, quietly. “But neither was she doing something honest. I couldn’t get a clear sense of her mood—it was murky, like looking through fog. She wasn’t disappointed when you refused her, that I could tell for sure. I think her change in mood was just play-acting.”

“What was she actually feeling?” Otieno asked.

“I think…she felt gratified? Like your response was what she wanted, but, like I said, it was hard to read her.”

Otieno could get use to having a Jedi around. “She may still contact me. I’m curious to see what she does.”

“She probably has the same thought about us,” Sib said, her brow furrowed. “She might know something.”

“Then she should go through the official channels.” A refreshment table was set against the wall and Otieno went over, Sib close.

“Otieno, you were right to say what you did to her, but we’re not exactly going through official channels either,” Sib said, her voice low, as Otieno filled a glass with water. They were alone, but caution was paramount.

Otieno had already considered this. “We’re also not dragging anyone else into this,” she said. “The issue lies in involving someone who hasn’t agreed to it. If we make a mistake the only people who will suffer are ourselves. If Senator Naiher makes a mistake it’s everyone else who suffers and that I won’t abide.”

Sib was curled up in the windowsill with a datapad in her lap and her attention on the dull view of silver-grey buildings and heavy traffic out Otieno’s apartment window. Otieno sat at the dining table with her own datapad and a sheaf of flimsi. She glanced at Sib every few minutes, the Jedi’s pensiveness nagging at her, and tried to make sense of the information laid out. Otieno wore slacks and a t-shirt, her braids unleashed from the circlet of hair that kept them in a ponytail, while Sib had stripped her Jedi robes down to loose pants and an undershirt. Otieno was amused to see Sib’s athletic bra was hot pink.

They’d returned from Garos a month ago and progress was slow but steady. The confessions from Tantro’s people in hopes of plea deals confirmed that Tantro had been working with political factions
that were interested in destabilizing the Republic for a long time, but in the months leading up to the
attacks her behavior became increasingly erratic and she began something without telling even her
inner circle what it was. The new ally was responsible for the involvement with Garos’s brief attack,
they all agreed. Tantro would have never moved weapons for something so small and she’d always
avoided overt action that could be linked to her.

Much farther in Garos’s past, they found a brief moment of activity during the Exar Kun war, two
thousand years before, where Exar Kun himself stayed on Garos for a few days, never to return
again. They learned about it from a short report in the military archives.

Exar Kun’s brief visit would explain why a Sith might have interest in the planet: it was possible
he’d left something, or discovered something, related to the Sith. Otieno couldn’t decide if
manipulating Tantro and causing an incident was necessary to the Sith’s goals or merely a side
project. It would be in a Sith’s interests to cause a scene. Revealing its presence to Otieno suggested
it felt ready, in some way or another, to start an all-out war, or it had anticipated the reaction of the
Jedi and military and felt confident the Republic would remain unprepared.

And that was what they knew. A supposition based on a two-thousand year old document and
eyewitness accounts. They could tease nothing more from what facts they had. There were lists and
lists of former Sith enclaves and cities and planets but no way of knowing which one the Sith might
use or build up. Checking every single one would be impossible without the resources of the
Republic—and the Sith might not be even using any of the old places. There were no signs of large-
scale weapons movement, no building of ships or stations, no signs of anything more than the usual
fringe terrorist activity.

Sib swung her feet to the ground and casually threw the datapad on the foot table in front of the
couch. “I’m going to head back to the Temple, I’ve got an early start tomorrow.”

Otieno watched the process of Sib putting her robes back on with fascination. There were so many
parts. Otieno’s uniform seemed simple in comparison. “Yeah, sure, it’s getting kind of late anyway,”
Otieno said.

Sib snorted and twirled her lightsaber in her hand before clipping it on her belt. “Oh yeah, I’m real
scared of some rando trying to steal my credits.”

Otieno returned a slight smile. “Careful, you might get yourself into a real mess someday.”

“You are not the first person to tell me that,” Sib said, still with a grin.

“And I suppose I’m also not the first person you’re going to ignore.”

Sib laughed, a big hearty thing, and pulled on her gloves. “You got it.”

The doorbell buzzed, an exceptionally abrasive sound Otieno hated, and they both froze. Sib looked
at Otieno, one eyebrow raised.

“Were you expecting someone?” Sib asked.

“No.”

“Do you have any friends?”

Otieno gave her severest frown and checked the camera feed. For a long moment she couldn’t
recognize the dark-haired woman on the other side door. Then the woman looked towards the
camera and her steely gaze made Otieno’s stomach flip.
Otieno turned to Sib. “It’s Senator Naiher.”

Sib frowned and wrinkled her nose. “What the hell would she want? Is she alone?”

“She is,” Otieno said. “Clean up the table then I’ll let her in.”

Sib’s version of ‘cleaning up the table’ was using the Force to drop everything in a drawer. Otieno opened the door for the senator.

“Senator Naiher, what gives us the pleasure?” Otieno said as the senator stepped inside. Otieno glanced out the hall for any sign of guards or pursuers before closing the door.

The senator was dressed in plain clothes and her face clear of make-up—entirely unlike her normal public appearances. “You’ll recall our conversation at your promotion?” she asked, her tone straightforward.

“Of course, ma’am,” Otieno said.

Senator Naiher paced Otieno’s small living space, her white-gloved hands clasped behind her back. Otieno and Sib glanced at each other, Sib as uncertain as Otieno was, and waited for the senator to make the first move.

“What a dreadfully small place to live,” the senator declared, running her fingers on the edge of the small island in the kitchen. “My bedroom in Naboo alone is as large as this entire apartment. Surely you could afford better, with your salary? And the military gets a break on property tax. I’m one of the ones who got that bill through, you know. I passed the bill because in it was an earmark for military intelligence to specifically combat anti-Republic terrorism. Most people missed it, no surprise, and I never called attention to it.”

“Your point?” Sib said, her tone mostly friendly.

Senator Naiher brushed past Sib to the window. She regarded the view for a moment then dropped onto the couch. She crossed her legs in an elegant motion. “Do you have whiskey, Admiral?”

“I’m afraid not, ma’am.”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re one of those people who only drinks beer and wine?”

“I don’t drink at home, ma’am.”

The senator scoffed. “How dreadful. Never mind then. Do you drink, Jedi?”

Sib sat across from the senator on the foot table. “On occasion,” she said. “It’s not something the Order encourages.”

The senator’s lips curled into an offensive smile. “I imagine not.”

Not wanting to share the couch with the Senator or the table with Sib Otieno spun around a dining chair and took a seat. “I take it you do drink often, ma’am,” Otieno said.

“It’s hard work being a senator,” she said. “You know, Jedi, it sure is difficult to find out information about your history. All your records are locked and buried under twenty layers of bureaucracy. And most of you join the Order so young. You don’t even really have a history. But not you—you joined the Order when you were twelve, correct? Of your own volition?”

“Correct.”
“And upon your arrival you told the Order you were from Eriadu, but nothing else. You didn’t even have a record of your birth. You wouldn’t say who your parents are, beyond that your father hadn’t wanted you to become a Jedi, or how you arrived. You just wanted to be a Jedi ‘more than anything in the whole entire galaxy.’ Those were your exact words, correct?”

Sib made no acknowledgement, her face blank, and it threw off Otieno. Sib always had a response—appropriate or otherwise. Something about the senator drew out a droid-like response from Sib.

The senator waited a beat longer for Sib to respond. She sighed, then continued. “You’ll be pleased to know I couldn’t shake out anything more from your past. I’ve had to cross-reference military, senate, and civilian reports for your actions. You have an impressive success rate together but your reckless and inappropriate behavior is often mentioned. As well as your tenacity, creative thinking, wide skill-set, and strong regard for the lives of others. You’re an interesting mix of flaws and strengths. I don’t think the Jedi Council knows what to do with someone like you. Which is a shame because I do and your talents are wasted with those soft-footed monks.”

The senator flicked an invisible piece of lint from her knee. “Anyway. What have you to say for yourself, Jedi?”

Sib spread her hands, as if giving up a burden, and smiled at the senator. “I am who I am.”

The senator’s lips briefly twitched into a grin. “Aren’t we all,” she drawled. “That out of the way, on to my proper business. It will partly explain my behavior up to this point and why I have made every attempt to thoroughly vet the both of you. I’m afraid I have a bit of a flair for the dramatic,” she said. “Well, none of us are perfect. Though being a politician does call for it.”

“Perfection or flair?” Sib asked.

“Both.”

“Please get to your point,” Otieno snapped.

“Of course,” the senator said with a cultured flick of her hand. “I’m aware that you two are investigating the possibility of a resurgent Sith empire. You are doing this because of what you witnessed on Garos—particularly what you witnessed, Otieno.”

Sib and Otieno glanced at each other. It was a telling gesture that the senator would pick up immediately, but Otieno suspected denial would prove useless. “How did you know this?” Otieno prodded.

“I read your report. Since then I’ve had my people tracking what resources you’ve taken from the archives. Some of them are the same resources I’ve used.

“For the past several years I’ve been doing research with the same suspicions,” the senator said, her expression darkening. “This is more serious than either of you probably imagined, I’m afraid. In my own investigations I’ve confirmed that the Sith clans are being reformed, organized, and fortified in a systematic and cautious manner. I don’t know who or how or when they plan to make an attack, but the moment I learned of what you reported, Otieno, I knew I had to start taking serious action.”

“If you have evidence, why not take it to the Senate or the Jedi?” Otieno asked, her heart rate picking up.

“Because my evidence is too circumspect—much like yours is,” the senator sighed. “It’s all too easily dismissed. The Republic doesn’t want war and most believe ignoring a threat renders it nonexistent. Additionally, my position means my actions are heavily scrutinized. I don’t have the
autonomy to do the sort of hands-on research this would require. I can’t hire anyone or send out scouts without raising suspicion and potentially alerting whoever’s behind this. Or any allies in the Republic they may have.”

“And you want our help,” Sib said. It was the same conclusion Otieno had reached moments before. “We can do the research you can’t.”

“Correct,” the senator said. “You can do all sorts of things I can’t, but I fear you two are being watched. If I read your report, Otieno, you can be sure others did.”

“So then how can we help?” Otieno asked. “If we’re being targeted….”

“Watched, not targeted. You just stumbled on this and neither of you have clout—unlike myself. They don’t fear you.”

“But when you spoke with us at the ceremony?” Otieno said.

“I wanted to get a read of you, Rear Admiral. It was just good luck Sib was there. An event like that was a good cover. I’m well known for my support of the military, so it wasn’t out of place. I took holos with all of the promoted officers. I can assure you I know what I’m doing. I’ve held public office for twenty years and been a senator of Naboo for fifteen of those.”

“When’d you first suspect something was wrong?” Sib asked.

“Nine years ago. A small Naboo scouting ship went missing in the Unknown Regions. It was a minor incident, all told. Ships go missing in the Unknown Regions all the time, but one of the crew was a daughter of a cousin. I made a half-hearted promise to see what I could do. I got my hands on their last transmission and what was on it…made me suspect. From there, I started investigating other ship disappearances in that particular region. My research swept me along until I was uncovering something of a scale I hadn’t imagined.”

“Who else have you brought into this?” Otieno asked.

“Two of my staff. You might eventually meet them. Besides that, no one. It’s necessary, but it makes progress incredibly slow.”

“You want to protect your career that badly, huh?” Sib said.

Senator turned a glare on Sib. “And my family. I have a wife and two children. I won’t see them come to harm because of me, though I fear if the wrong people found out it would be too late for that.”

Sib nodded, looking contrite.

“If we agree to help, what will you have us do?” Otieno asked, wary of restrictions and red-tape.

“I want you to do things I can’t do,” the senator said. “And to continue your own investigation, but with my resources.”

“What sort of resources?” Sib asked.

“Money, ships, connections, classified documents,” the senator said. “My family is independently wealthy and I’ve spent my entire life making myself indispensable to all the right people. If you want it, I can get it.”
“Forgive me for saying, but this sounds too good to be true,” Otieno said. “How can we trust you?”

The senator shrugged. “At the end of the day, you can’t. But that’s true of all things. We do everything we can to mitigate risks, to predict and control, but for everyone there comes a day when we’re faced with a cliff and given the choice to jump or run,” the senator’s lips twitched into something like a smile. “I’m also sticking my neck out here.”

Otieno and Sib looked at each other. Otieno’s heart was racing, a tremble in her fingers. What the senator promised them was everything Otieno could have dreamed of. It was validation, access, information, a powerful ally, a chance to do something, but it was also the single greatest risk Otieno had ever taken. Either this was exactly what the senator said it was, or the senator was delusional, or it was a trap set by enemies of the Republic to misdirect, or kill, the two of them.

While, reasonably, the third option concerned Otieno, the prospect of being right was somehow even more terrifying. The prospect of a war, a galactic war, sent her stomach twisting. The Sith had proved themselves capable of unspeakable horrors many times over. Even something small-scale that ended in less than a year, were the Republic not prepared, would cost thousands and thousands of lives and cause devastating losses.

“I’m prepared to help you,” Sib said, her gaze on Otieno. Her shoulders were set, her expression of the same unrelenting conviction she’d shown in the battle with Tantro. She was expecting Otieno to agree as well. What a terrific coward Otieno would be if she refused. Otieno had already asked Sib to put her status on the line for this and Sib didn’t hesitate to do it again. And if Sib was confident in the senator, then Otieno was.

“I’ll do it,” Otieno said.

The senator smiled at them with a grim sort of satisfaction. “Thrilled.” From an interior pocket in her coat she pulled out a data card. “Everything I know and you need is on here. Summaries, reports, recordings. There’s…a lot. Also on it is a list of planets I need you to visit and investigate or confirm aspects of. It’s all explained.” She hesitated a moment then handed it over to Sib. “Don’t make me regret giving you this.”

“You won’t, ma’am,” Otieno said.

“How are we getting to these planets?” Sib asked, rolling the data card in her hand.

“I have a ship you can use,” the senator said. “My wife’s father purchased it when he was young, through less than legal means, and when he died it went to my wife. We’ve never made use of it and my wife asked me to sell it. I’ve told her I have. There’s even a bill of sale. Because of when and how my father-in-law bought the ship there’s no official record of it. It was not part of his official estate, either. It’s effectively a nonexistent ship and can’t be traced to me or my wife. I assume at least one of you is a capable pilot?”

Sib and Otieno both nodded. “You came prepared for us to accept,” Otieno said.

“I did, and I was right,” the senator said. “The fact is I’m very good at this game we’re playing.”

“I certainly hope so,” Sib said.

“It’ll take some time for us to arrange for time off,” Otieno said. “For myself, anyway.”

“I anticipated that,” the senator said. “But please, as soon as possible. If you’re clever, it shouldn’t take more than two weeks, including travel time. And you’re welcome to do whatever of your own research you think is necessary. There’s credits for supplies and fuel in the ship. The key;” she took
from another interior pocket a set of keys and handed these over to Sib. “And finally, if you need to contact me, which I recommend you do as little as possible, a secure comm that only the two of us can use.” She handed this over as well and settled back onto the couch. “Now that’s all settled, tell me about what happened on Garos and what you’ve achieved since then.”

And they told her.

#

Otieno’s credentials easily got them entrance to the Garos prison that housed their brief co-conspirator, Kami. Garos looked much the same as they’d left it. The sea was still dark and rough, the mountains capped with snow, and the cities all unruly sprawls. The prison was a half hour from a city far to the south of the capital, perched on a mountain ridge like a bird’s nest. Sib’s hollow prosthetic briefly caused some trouble but they got through with her leg still on.

As Kami had sold out a number of criminals she was in protective custody until her private trial where she’d be put in a prison far from Garos and released after a few years to go on her merry way. Everyone else who’d been captured didn’t have such an easy path. The leaders were getting the worst of it and most had already cracked in hopes of a shorter sentence. A few of the smarter grunts that knew the police lacked specific evidence had kept their mouths shut and gotten off already. It had been a thorough sweep, all told, and Garos was in an uneasy recovery.

Garos had been Otieno’s idea as a quick stop before they started on the senator’s mission. They both felt Garos was unresolved and there was more still to learn. The planets the senator wanted Sib and Otieno to investigate were all in the outer rim, but accessible by hyper-space routes, and had all, at one time or another, been known Sith colonies or bases. The longest stretch of their trip would be the journey back to the core.

A prison guard directed them to an un-monitored room, something Otieno had been able to arrange, where Kami awaited them. She looked tired but had a grin ready for them, despite being shackled to the steel table in the middle of the room. She wore a light grey prison jumpsuit with a number stamped on the front. Two more seats had been provided for Otieno and Sib.

“I’ll be honest, I didn’t quite expect to see you two ever again,” Kami said as they entered.

Sib didn’t have an abundance of fondness for Kami, but she’d helped the Republic and had an affable personality. Sib could ignore being shot at if those conditions continued. “And we didn’t expect to see you again,” Sib replied. “How you faring?”

Kami shrugged. “Oh, you know, well enough. Food here sucks.”

“Right,” Otieno declared, forcing Sib and Kami’s attention to her. “We didn’t come here just to make small chat.”

Kami huffed a laugh. “Sure hope not. Long way to go for just that.”

Sib found the joke funny but Otieno ignored it and doggedly carried on. “There are some questions we need answered about Garos itself, about its history that we can’t find written down.”

“I’m not much of a history aficionado, I’m afraid,” Kami said. “I’ll see what I can do.”
“Do you know about the Exar Kun War?”

“Sure. The Sith and whatnot?”

“Right. At a point in the war Exar Kun came to Garos for a few days. We suspect he left something or found something here on the planet. It would be something associated with the dark side or the Sith. Are there any places on Garos like that?”

Sib chimed in: “People might consider it haunted. A place where a lot of bad things have happened or people disappeared. It would be avoided or the only people who used it would be those who had nowhere else. You get me?”

Kami nodded, slowly, her brow furrowed. “I get you. Haunted places, huh? Interesting line of inquiry. I think you’re going to like my answer. Or not.” Kami shifted in her seat and leaned forward, as if they were telling ghost-stories around a campfire. Sib also leaned forward, Otieno did not. “So, supposedly, and I do stress the ‘supposedly’ here, Tantro’s base in Laumi was on haunted ground. Lots of nasty shit happened there over the centuries. Tantro moved there within the past few years. All those tunnels had been abandoned for a couple of decades. The story’s that, a long time ago, a Sith made his way here and wandered the tunnels underneath the city until he died. His soul remained and seeks it revenge, so on and so forth. Never believed it myself. But I do remember a story about the place, something this old guy named Muli told me once, and it starts the same, that a Sith showed up there a long time ago and went to Laumi, but rather than dying and haunting the place he left a holocron, I believe it was? A Sith holocron.”

The Force sparked in the back of Sib’s head at “holocron,” like a tap on the shoulder for her attention, and Sib nudged Otieno’s knee. Sith holocrons could be immensely dangerous artifacts and were exactly the sort of thing a returning Sith would have an interest in. Exar Kun was closely associated with holocrons as well; a holocron he discovered had caused his descent to the dark side. It was logical he would create his own.

“The holocron, have you ever heard about it beyond this one time?” Otieno asked.

Kami shook her head. “Afraid not, but Muli’s very reliable for this sort of story. He’s a historian. Was a historian, actually, he died a few years back. Otherwise I would send you his way.”

Sib knew in her gut that the tunnels in Laumi were what they wanted and the holocron was what the Sith had sought out, but Otieno kept asking questions about other locations that might have something dark side and doing a proper investigation. Sib’s attention wandered when several minutes went by without her involvement.

She suspected the Sith had taken the holocron already and found the information contained within useful. It would explain the confidence when it confronted Otieno. Still, there was the chance the holocron would be waiting for them, or there was a second holocron that the Sith had missed, and if that was so Sib had no illusions about the challenge she would personally face. She’d never had to face the dark side in any deeply challenging way.

Despite that, Sib didn’t have any real misgivings. She wasn’t a perfect Jedi, but her faults didn’t lay in a weakness to the dark side. Sib was stubborn and strong in her beliefs. She understood the strength that lay in the light side of the Force. It would take more than a holocron and whatever remnants there were of a long-dead Sith to sway her.

Laumi was a half-day’s trip north of the prison. Otieno, the designated pilot for this portion of their
journey, deftly skimmed them over mountain ranges, forests, and massive acreages of crops. The ship was a nineteen meter passenger carrier, single-pilot, no weapons, weak shields, but a stunningly well-maintained engine and high-end hyperdrive. Sib had piloted for a few minutes, just so she understood the controls, and the steering was as nimble and easy as silk.

Sib braced herself against the cockpit doorframe and watch the hills undulate beneath them like waves in an ocean. They both wore civvies; Otieno looked like a teacher and Sib had just dressed down from her usual robes. Her lightsaber was clipped horizontally on the back of her belt, hidden underneath her jacket, and Otieno carried a blaster in her shoulder holster.

Otieno landed on a public dock on the north end of Laumi, a modest city with aging buildings Sib hadn’t got a good look at before, and registered with the port authority as Sib tried to get her bearings. The raid had only given her a rough idea of the city layout. They’d landed much closer before.

Sib found and memorized a map before taking point. Otieno was quiet, her gaze unfocused on the street ahead, hands tucked into her jacket pockets. It was unnecessary to ask what bothered her.

If the senator had been chasing this for the past ten years whatever they found would not be in its infancy. They might lack large-scale artillery, ships, and fortifications, but there was groups of allies and connections. The senator’s data suggested several corporations and banking clans were at least marginally involved with the Sith, almost certainly more. It was astonishing the Sith could arrange something so large with so little trail.

But there was a trail—there always was. No being could move through the galaxy without a trace. Just like the Force bound all matter, records and data and being-to-being connections bounded a conspiracy. And if there was data and records, if there were beings, there would be a weak link. Sib had a few ideas on how to dig out that link, but they required connections she wasn’t yet sure she wanted to return to. For the moment, she’d hope it didn’t come to that.

The entrance prime team had entered via was the easiest to access. Otieno’s soldiers had done a cursory search of the tunnels Sib had stumbled into, but regular flooding rendered them impractical and the tunnels were written off. Sib and Otieno would head back down for the same reason they’d been dismissed. What better place for a Sith to store something valuable?

Otieno had smartly gotten a building key-code from the police. She’d also done most of the organization and thought to bring things like flashlights, rope, carabiners, maps, piton, and similarly important tunnel exploring equipment. Their map was collated from the soldier’s and police’s investigation and left the lower tunnels lacking, but Sib was confident she’d be able to find their way through the lower tunnels.

Sib had found the only entrance to the lower tunnels and they made a straight line for it, side-by-side. Their flashlights glimpsed into empty rooms with broken doors, the silence eerie after Sib’s previous experience. Blaster and grenade marks scorched the walls and furniture had been left overturned where it remained. Sib shivered and pulled her coat closed. The place was freezing without warm bodies and whatever heating system they’d installed running.

Otieno looked away as Sib used the Force to manipulate the lock the police had put on the trapdoor to the lower tunnels. Sib jumped down first and lowered Otieno with the Force, like they’d done before.

“Now which way?” Otieno asked, slowly turning to examine the tunnels that split off in all directions. Neither the police nor her soldiers had found any indication of a closed chamber or something secret. There were the occasional flood doors, but they were all open; some permanently.
The police had also used droids to find and deactivate a handful of the explosive traps that had injured Master Gianlo, who’d recovered quickly from his bruise. Otieno had brought a hand-held version of the bomb-detection equipment along.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Sib said. “I need to meditate for a minute. If there’s dark side energy here I’ll be able to find it.”

“Sounds good.” Otieno settled down against a wall with the datapad balanced on her knees. She apparently expected this to take a while.

Sib sat cross-legged and rested her wrists on her knees. She used the Force to raise herself a few centimeters off the ground so the stone floor wouldn’t kill her ass after a few minutes of sitting on it and to give her an initial focus point for the meditation. Sib closed her eyes and counted her breaths until she could feel her own heartbeat. From there it was easy to drop the barriers that distinguished the Self from the Other.

Otieno was a beacon in Sib’s peripheral, her energy a steady outward pulse, and Sib took a moment to acclimatize to the rhythm before tracing what sparse threads of the Force there were. Once again, her senses were halted by the ceiling above her head. She could almost imagine it was just the two of them, alone in the world.

Sib followed the tunnels, found the shape of traps and doors, water running through, the echoes of rivers millennia gone, the scrape of tools against stone, the ghosts of ghosts of the long dead, trapped, her physically body lost behind her, shed like a paper skin….

The Force shuddered and she almost lost the thread. She grabbed, desperate, and forced herself to stand firm against the writhing, sucking void of the dark side that faced her. Anger and hate thundered against her defenses, the sheer weight of the hopelessness contained in it driving her back. She slipped from its reaching hands and back into her own body.

Sib’s eyes still shut, she took a deep breath in, as if preparing for a plunge into deep water. She’d be able to find it solely on what she had, but a desire for understanding drove her back. She needed to know what they were walking into. Otieno hadn’t moved, the rhythm of her presence as steady and deep as the engines of a ship, and for a moment Sib rested against it, memorized the tempo, matched her heartbeat to it.

This time she faced the dark side prepared, her mind strong, her Self firmly planted. Jedi adages flickered through her mind: like the turning of the stars, the wind that grinds stone to dust, the water that tears down a cliff, a tree that has stretched its roots to the core of a planet. Like Otieno, who saw a necessity and faced it. The twelve year old child that demanded the council accept her into the Jedi Order had never left.

The dark side bowed. Reluctantly, like she was bending steel, but it did, and Sib stepped towards its core without hesitation. Echoes of the past reached her; a man clad in dark robes and his hand encased in gold. The agony of a millennia funneled into this single place, trapped in…water, in a vault. The water was dark, the vault sealed tight, letters on its entrance that hadn’t been read in centuries, in a language no one dared speak. Inside was…nothing, everything. Something in the darkness turned, like a hunter catching a taste of its prey, and from light years away something looked back.

Sib gasped, her eyes snapping open, and she gracelessly dropped to the floor. Her heart slammed against her chest as the darkness returned to its origin.

“Hey, Sib,” Otieno said. She’d moved to Sib’s side and had a hand on her shoulder. Sib hadn’t
noticed the transition. “Are you alright?”

Sib bent forward and got her breathing under control. Otieno’s hand moved to the center of her back, which Sib appreciated. “I’m fine,” Sib said. “And I found the place.”

Sib’s path took them through increasingly deeper and narrower passages until they had to crawl on hands and knees the last fifty meters into the chamber of a small subterranean lake, just like Sib had sensed. Otieno kept a close eye on her datapad as it scanned for toxins in the air. The lake chamber had a small rock beach at their end and the water was as pristinely still and clear as glass. The ceiling was easily two stories above their heads, the opposite wall forty or so meters away, their flashlight beams struggling to illuminate it. The acoustics of the water and chamber magnified every sound.

Otieno swung her light across the unnaturally smooth ceiling and walls as Sib inspected the water. The dark side was strong here. It made the roots of her teeth ache. The image of souls trapped beneath the water surface stuck in her mind, disturbingly vivid.

“Don’t touch the water,” Sib said.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Otieno said, looking at her datapad again. “I’ve got a headache but the readouts say the atmo’s normal.”

“Yeah, the dark side will do that to you,” Sib said. “This place is really powerful in it.”

“Oh?” Otieno didn’t sound very convinced, but that was normal.

Sib knelt at the water’s edge. She hadn’t told Otieno the particulars of what she’d found in meditation, no reason to frighten her, but she deserved an explanation of what Sib suspected. “Exar Kun did come here,” Sib said. “He created a vault, underwater, and performed a ritual on this lake. I think the lake collects the suffering of the world above and the vault uses that sort of…energy to function. I suspect that’s why the Sith had those three places attacked. It needed a certain kind of suffering to occur all at once for the vault to open. That’s my theory, anyway. It seems like something a Sith would do.”

“That doesn’t clarify my understanding of the Force, but alright. So whatever holocron Exar Kun left in that vault must be very powerful,” Otieno guessed. “To go to that much effort, I mean.”

“Definitely.”

“Do you think the Sith was able to retrieve it?”

“It sounded pretty pleased with itself when it found you, so I’d say yes.”

Otieno sighed. “Well, we’ve got our answers, I guess. Let’s head back. There’s nothing more here.”

“Just a moment,” Sib said. She laid on her stomach and pointed the flashlight into the water. The side they stood on was the top of a slope terminating in a sharp acute angle against the opposite wall. There was something in the water, half-hidden in an illusion and shadow, and only when Sib laid like this could she spot it. On the far wall, underneath the surface, was a small, dark door with faint writing on the frame. The water was so placid there was hardly any distortion. She was certain it was the same as in her meditation. “There’s a door at the bottom of the lake.”

Otieno turned her flashlight on the water. “I don’t see anything?”
“It’s hidden. You can see it from down here.” Sib jumped to her feet. “I guess it…opens?”


Sib shook her head. “Let’s head out.” The evil in the place gnawed at her. She could feel her hands begin to shake: not a good sign. Otieno took the lead and grumbled as she got to her knees to crawl out. Sib crouched to follow her, but….

She turned back towards the lake, the same as it had been when they’d arrived, but something different. The dark side had abated, was all she could think of to describe it, and the familiar softness, the inexorable pull, of the Force at peace called on her to return.

“Hold up,” Sib said and stood. Otieno stopped, asked something, but Sib’s attention was on the lake. There was no visible change. She took a step closer to the surface. If there was any chance something dangerous remained she had to get rid of it. She needed to confirm that the holocron was gone, that there wasn’t another threat. She could remove it and bring it to the Jedi and they’d be able to destroy it. And she’d be able to handle whatever the place threw at her—she had a strong mind; everyone always said that. The dark side held no appeal to her. She would be safe.

Sib took the first step into the lake. A ripple spread, the surface marred, and disappeared into the darkness. Sib took another step. She was suddenly up to her knees. The water was as cold as void and shot right to the bone. The floor was uneven but she kept her footing as she went farther. The water reached her upper thighs and she paused.

The gate was visible. The water was deep but with a long breath she’d be able to reach the doors. An instinct told her the door would be open to her, left open by the Sith or easily unlocked, and passage would be quick. She was up to her waist, her legs numb, and she touched a palm to the surface of the water. Besides the temperature, it felt like normal water. Nothing toxic, nothing dangerous, no agony collected in its molecules.

Otieno spoke and her words were a dim mumble in Sib’s head. She didn’t think about it. She knew what she was doing. The water reached her chest and Sib took a few more steps, her heart and lungs protested the frigid temperature, until the water was at her clavicle.

Sib paused and for the first time she wondered if she should be afraid. Was she really going to do this? There was no telling what was behind that door and whatever kept the dark side back could leave or break at any moment. She was in the heart of it. Sib took a step back and saw the stupidity of what she was doing. Her resolve crumbled without a fight. It was entirely unnecessary to risk herself like this! They had what they needed!

“What are you doing! Come back here!” Otienoyelled and Sib turned. Otieno hovered at the water’s edge and sharply gestured for Sib to return. Her expression was desperate, her voice cracked. “Come back!”

Sib blinked at her, her entire body grown numb, and she forced herself to start walking back towards shore. But the water resisted her movement like weights were tied around her ankles. The place was no longer friendly. It had never been friendly.

Panic nearly seized her as she realized the trap she’d fallen into. The dark side had enticed her; just like she’d promised herself it wouldn’t. It had tried to drown her. She forced her breathing to remain steady, she was already close to hyperventilating, and she called on what little of the Force she could touch to take the steps back to Otieno. She’d fallen to her knees and reached an encouraging hand towards Sib, careful not to touch the water.
The water dropped to the bottom of Sib’s ribs, each step towards shore weighted like she was in the gravity well of a gas giant, and her body refused to function in the freezing temperatures. It was so cold.

Sib slipped—was tripped—and she dropped into the water, her entire body submerged. She’d been able to take a half-breath before the plunge, but the violence of complete submersion nearly punched it out of her.

The water was not clear anymore. Her vision was a swirling dark mass and senseless, screeching voices attacked her from all sides. She dropped the flashlight as she tried to swim out of it. Boney hands grasped at her clothes and hair, the stone floor dropped out from underneath her feet, and something whispered into her ear: *power, strength, freedom, control, don’t you want it? Don’t you want it? It’s so simple, it’s so right, it’s so easy, all you need to do—*

Strong arms brought her above water, hauled her up. Otieno’s hands on her arms, then around her chest, and Sib spluttered as she tried to get her breath. Otieno pulled Sib onto shore until she was clear of the water. Sib’s lungs convulsed as her body fought back shock.

“Sib, can you hear me? Are you okay?” Otieno said, cradling Sib’s head in her hands. “You’re out of the water, you’re safe now.”

“Shit,” Sib mumbled and she blindly grasped at Otieno’s arm. The cloth was soaked. They were both sopping wet. “How long was I under?”

“Just a few seconds. I got to you fast,” Otieno said. “Are you hurt? What happened?”

“I—” what had happened? Now free of the water, whatever connection the dark side had made with her was severed. Her mind was her own. The dark side had tricked her and then tried to drown her. Or turn her away from the light. Both were horrifying. “The dark side,” Sib said, finally. “The dark side happened.”

Sib pushed herself up and rested against Otieno, unable to move any further. Otieno wrapped her in a tight hug and Sib dropped her head onto Otieno’s shoulder. She felt like she’d run halfway around the planet. “I was scared,” Otieno said. “I thought you were going to drown.”

“I almost did,” Sib said. She raised her head and looked at Otieno, questions starting to occur. “Did—how did you manage to get me? Without also getting caught in it, I mean?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it just wasn’t interested in me? I’m not Force-sensitive,” Otieno said. “It was hard though. The water had turned dark around your body. I couldn’t see you and it was like lead against my feet.”

Sib lowered her head back onto Otieno’s shoulder. She shuddered at what would have become of her without Otieno there. “Thank you.”

“You’d have done the same,” Otieno said. Sib put her arms around Otieno’s torso and pressed her face into the crook of her neck. Otieno hugged her tighter and gently curled her fingers in Sib’s hair.

Sib had underestimated the dark side. It worked in ways she’d never been taught and in a fashion more subtle than she could have imagined it capable of. The Jedi Masters always warned against the insidious nature of it; how hatred could arise from diverse places, how a momentary lapse in discipline could lead to a downfall, how a Jedi could strike down even those they cared most about in a moment of untamed for passion.
To experience this duplicity was something else entirely. It had wound its way into her thoughts and
hidden behind her own logic. It had taken control of her. It had nearly been too late. Otieno had
saved her and Sib chewed that fact over until it was in shards. On her own, Sib would have died.
Someone else had to rescue her.

She’d gotten so far on her own—she didn’t need other people. They were nice, yeah, friends were
good, mentors made life easier. But need and want were sharply different things. Without Otieno she
would have died.

Otieno, after changing into dry clothes, speedily piloted them out of Garos’s atmosphere. Sib also
changed and sat with a towel around her shoulders in the common space. She was strapped in with
her bare feet tucked underneath her, too exhausted to watch the shift into hyperspace. Their
destination was one of the senator’s planets, about a day’s journey away. Enough time for a long rest
and for their laundry to be done.

The ship announced their movement into hyperspace. Sib’s stomach flipped as the shift occurred. A
minute later Otieno appeared from the cockpit and sat across from Sib at the small table.

“How are you?” Otieno asked.

“Well enough,” Sib said. “I’m tired.”

“I’ll bet,” Otieno said. Her voice was soft and enchanting. Force, Sib wanted to melt into it (and
there that crush was, back in full force. It was hard not to be a little bit in love with someone who’d
just saved your life.) “You should probably get some rest.”

Sib nodded slowly, her thoughts simultaneously hyper-focused on Otieno and lightyears away, and
remained. How could she ever expect to face a Sith? It had sensed her from the other side of galaxy
—it had probably even arranged for her to be drowned. Sib would die at their first meeting.

No one Jedi could have stood against a power like that. All that suffering, the blinding hatred. In the
lake, it was like every awful emotion had been distilled and sifted of all good and compassion
until only the pure, raw emotion had been left. The ugly, corrupt core of all the evil in the galaxy. Sib
knew about strong emotion, she experienced them regularly, but this was something else.

And without Otieno she would have died.

There was someone else they had to visit.

Sib took a shuddering breath. “We need to go to Eriadu.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Family Reunions.

The pale brown planet revealed itself in slivers as their ship passed 'round its shaded half. Sib braced against the cockpit door as Otieno brought them to their destination on Eriadu: one of the many unremarkable cities that serviced the miners and criminals that made the place home. Empty plateaus riddled with pit mines and their debris stretched out in all directions and terminated on one side in cragged, grey mountains where machinery bored towards the planet’s core. The city skyline echoed the mountains—jagged and tapering out to piles of junk at the edges of its hundred-square kilometers.

Otieno found a dock near Junag’s location and bartered with the dock attendant as Sib got their bearings. She’d never used the public docks in this city. Junag’s compound had a private dock and a shipyard on the city’s outskirts.

Eriadu was the last planet they intended to visit on their two week journey. Before their arrival, Sib had poked around for information on the state of Junag’s operation and found it as successful as ever. A few more planets had folded into his territory and his connections stretched across the galaxy, even into the fringes of the Core. She’d found people who recognized his name in the north rim of the galaxy.

The terraced city streets twisted around worn, grimy buildings like fungus clung to trees. Daylight only illuminated how aged the city was and the worn, grey clothing of its inhabitants. Otieno kept close to Sib’s side and tensed every time someone got too close, but no one paid them any mind. People kept to themselves. Sib kept her lightsaber in her prosthetic, in case she was searched at the door.

Junag’s public entrance was on the fifth level of an unmarked building in a quiet neighborhood. Two Rodian guards stood by the door, blasters in hand, and clarified the sort of business this place did. It was exactly how Sib remembered it; as if time had frozen, just for her.

She had Otieno wait in a noodle store a block away in case Junag’s reaction was not a positive one. She didn’t need to get in any crossfire.

The guard’s black eyes turned on her when she approached. Sib squared her shoulders and tried to project confidence. “I need to speak with Junag,” she said. “Is he in?”

One Rodian laughed, or rather made the sucking noise that passed for Rodian laughter. “Yeah? You got an appointment?” he said, in Basic.

“No, but he’s going to want to see me,” she said. “At the least let me in to speak with whoever’s in charge of the door. This is important.”

“Whatever you selling we don’t want,” the other said. “Get outta here!”

Sib put her hands on her hips. “Look, just let me talk to whoever’s here. It’ll only take a minute. Tell
them my name’s Sib and I want to speak with Tyno or Ina or Anaxes. You know them? ‘Cause I do.’

At the mention of Tyno, Ina, and Anaxes the Rodians antennae twitched and they glanced at each other. Plenty knew Tyno, but not so many Ina or Anaxes. Sib had been able to confirm all three were still around. They’d be her magic word. ‘Eh…hold on,’ the first one said. He entered the door code and ducked inside. Sib and the Rodian waited in an uneasy silence. The Rodian’s fingers twitched on his blaster’s grip, as if he might need it. Sib just hoped she wouldn’t have to use the Force.

A minute later the Rodian reappeared and had her follow. The only change to the interior of the public entryway was a new paint job, an additional locker, and a brand new weapons scanner, which her prosthetic didn’t appear on. The leg had shielding to confuse exactly that sort of thing—top of the line, courtesy the Jedi Order. If they didn’t immediately try and kill her she might mention it.

The second room they entered was a sitting room. A massive, pale-skinned Iridonian Zabrak occupied a couch and a Quarren in the corner rapidly poked at a datapad. The Iridonian looked up from the dismantled blaster laid out in front of him and glared as if she’d ruined his entire day. She might have.

“Hell, this is a Jedi! Gesso, you’re frag-brained moron, I want you to know that,” he said, tone neutral despite the content. Sib contained the twitch towards her lightsaber “Get the hell out of here while I deal with this.”

Gesso scurried out. Sib moved to the center of the room, hands loose at her sides, and considered her options. The Quarren’s narrow eyes flicked between them, the datapad abandoned. “Your name’s Sib,” the Iridonian said.

“Yes,” she said. “Yours?”

“Zore Da,” he said. “What does a Jedi want with Junag?”

“I need his help.”

“That’s a new one. What on?”

“I’d rather only tell him.”

“Well then prepare to be disappointed, because there’s no way in hell I’m letting you anywhere close to the boss.” Zore Da stood. “Get out before I put security on you.”

“At least call Ina or Tyro or Anaxes for me. Tell them Sib’s come back and wants to see them,” Sib said. She’d leave without a struggle, but she wanted this to work.

The struggle of decision played out on Zore Da’s face and he finally settled on a reluctant twist of the lips. “Fine,” he grunted. “I’ll call Ina. If you’re lying to me, Jedi, you’re dead.”

“Deal,” Sib said and crossed her fingers that Ina wouldn’t have her immediately thrown to the Kath. Zore Da opened a channel on the in-wall comm unit. “Ina? You there?”

“Aatr’s tits, this can’t wait Zore Da? I’m busy.”

“Yeah, sorry, look, there’s this Jedi here who wants to speak with the boss. She says her name’s Sib and that she knows you.”
"A Jedi? What idiot let a Jedi—shit, did you say her name was Sib? What does she look like?"

"Uh, brown hair, I think she’s pretty young? I don’t know how humans work, Ina, do you want me to send a holo or something?"

"No—shit, I’m coming down, don’t let her go anywhere," Ina said and the comm shut off. Zore Da frowned at the panel for a moment then looked over at Sib with a new curiosity. Not just a bluff, it turned out.

"Take a seat, I guess." Zore Da jerked his head towards one of the empty couches. The Quarren gurgled. "Yeah, yeah, whatever," he mumbled and hunched back over his blaster.

Sib leaned against the armrest of a chair, hands on her knees, and waited. She didn’t trust Zore Da but wouldn’t risk detection by trying to read his or the Quarren’s mind in any detail. The rest of the building, a confusing mix of corridors, rooms, and thick walls, she sensed was at low occupancy.

Her earliest memory of the Force was when she laid in bed at night as a young child, her mind calm and drifting towards sleep, and the ebb and pull of everyone who lived and worked in this building burrowed through her quiet bones and muscles. To feel it again was like seeing a ghost.

A door to her left hissed opened and Sib went to her feet. Zore Da also stood, arms akimbo. Ina, a middle-aged Twi’lek, immediately fixed on Sib. Her lekku were a bit longer and the faintest of wrinkles had gathered around her eyes, otherwise she’d hardly aged at all from Sib’s memory.

Sib froze up as Ina barreled forward and crushed Sib in a wordless hug. Sib returned the gesture after a moment. This wasn’t quite to expectations, good or bad.

“Oh, Sib, you absolute bastard,” Ina sobbed. “You awful, cruel bastard. I’m so glad you’re alright.” Ina held Sib at arms length and gave her a look over. Tears freely streaked down her face.

“Abandoning us like that—what an awful thing to do! You did the right thing, you don’t have to apologize, it’s okay, I forgive you. I hope you can forgive us too.” Ina laughed as she tried to wipe her eyes. “Tyro’s going to absolutely die of happiness when he sees you. You’re going to have a murder on your hands. Shit, Sib, what are you doing here? Why’ve you come back? Is something wrong? Why do you need to see Junag? Do you need help?”

“I’m glad to see you too,” Sib said. With the first obstacle cleared it was easy to focus on the reunion. She’d come to use Junag’s connections, but with Ina right there in front of her she was close to real tears. She wasn’t that good of a Jedi, after all. “I need help getting some information, is all. Nothing life-threatening.”

“That’s a relief to hear,” Ina said. “I’m glad you’re not in danger. You have to see Junag! He’s going to be so overjoyed to see you.”

“Ehr, really? You’re sure? He’s not going to be, well, you know, pissed?”

Ina laughed. “He’s going to be happy. He was heartbroken when you left, but he made peace with it. He let you go without animosity and he’ll see you again without it. I promise.”

Sib trusted Ina now, like always. Even when others hid things from her or told her the lies adults tell children, Ina never did. “Let’s say hello then.”

Ina lead at a quick walk. They got a few curious glances but passed no one who recognized her. Everyone had known her as a child. As the boss’s daughter, she demanded nearly as much respect as the man himself, and a few had seemed to genuinely like her (Ina or Tyro or Anaxes, for a few.) Now she was just another stranger.
The place was intimately familiar and vastly foreign. Everything a second out of sync. As she
stepped through the halls and Ina peppered her with questions and stories a deep uneasiness rose in
her. Of course time hadn’t frozen when she’d left, but the change had come without her permission,
despite her absence, and now demanded acceptance. Time had progressed and left her behind. She’d
never been so keenly aware of the passage before.

Outside Junag’s office a panel signaled he wasn’t to be disturbed, but Ina entered anyway. She went
in alone to explain the situation and Sib listened to their exchange as invisible hands mashed her
insides to pulp. It sounded like Junag didn’t believe Ina, couldn’t comprehend what she said, and Ina
kept trying to extract a promise that he wouldn’t do anything stupid even as he demanded answers.

Sib would bolt if they took a second longer. She took the initiative and went in.

Ina and Junag stood in front of his desk and for a brief moment neither noticed her, too caught up in
their argument. The room was nearly unchanged from when Sib had last seen it a decade ago.
Junag’s office still had the quality of a museum: the horns of obscure species, holos of notable
moments, technological and archaeological artifacts, paintings of landscapes and people, weapons
from exotic warrior races. Sib spied a few new things, a few articles removed, but the eccentric-
collector quality of the room was the same, if a bit faded at the edges.

Unlike Ina, Junag displayed the twelve years. His red-brown hair, like hers, had gone grey and he’d
grown a short beard to hide the sag of his jaw and the hollowness of his cheeks. He’d be sixty-three.

Sib’s confidence gave out halfway to them and she froze in the middle of the room. The moment of
truth, as it were.

“Ah,” Sib said. “Hi.”

Junag gawked at her and the comm he held slid from his fingers to the floor. Then his open-mouthed
gaping faded into a smile, like a crack forming in the hull of a ship, and tears gathered on his lashes.
“This is something I never expected,” he said. His voice trembled. “I’m not sure what to say.”

“Neither am I.” Sib said. “Well, except sorry. For everything I put you through. I can’t imagine how
awful it would a lot find out your kid had ran off.” She stared at the toes of her boots, prepared for
the worst.

“I knew where you’d gone,” Junag said. “I understand why you left. It hurt me, of course, but I
understood.” Junag took the last few steps and touched her shoulder. “You have nothing to
apologize for. It was…what was right.”

At the new information, Sib looked up. She’d left a note to say that she hadn’t been kidnapped but
hadn’t mentioned where or why. She’d assumed he’d try and get her if he knew, so had thought he
didn’t. Then again, Junag was an expert at finding people. It came with the job.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Sib said, the sudden truth of it like a punch to the sternum. Junag had cared
enough to track her down, and then cared enough to let her go. An act of understanding—not
abandonment.

“What are you doing back here?” Junag asked. “You’re still a Jedi, right?”

“I came to ask a favor,” Sib said. She forced herself to maintain eye contact. “I’m still a Jedi, but this
isn’t official business. I’m investigating it on my own. It’s very important and I think you can help
me.”

“Anything you need,” Junag said, no sign of disappointment that it was so impersonal. “I’m just glad
“Thank you,” Sib mumbled, then hugged him, just to hide her face. Junag clutched her as if he’d waited the entirety of decade for the moment. He might have.

Sib broke them apart and Junag gripped her shoulders instead, his smile now broad and confident.

“Gods beyond, Sib, I can’t express how much it means to have you here. We have a lot of catching up to do! I want to hear all about your life as a Jedi, it must be thrilling.”

“Of course, I’ll tell you all about it, but I actually have a friend who’s waiting outside—”

“They can come in too, of course, I’ll send someone for them,” Junag said. His entire face suddenly lit up. Sib could read the satisfaction of a good idea off him like it was written on his forehead. Some thoughts were easier to pick up on others. “And then we can have a proper party! Every homecoming deserves a celebration, wouldn’t you say?”

Sib introduced Otieno as “Oti,” made up a story about her being a pilot, and the excitement of Sib’s arrival ensured no one paid any attention to Otieno. No one paid attention to Otieno with Sib around. They also gave Junag a shortened version of why they were there, edited only for Otieno’s role, which he accepted without question. The excitement of her arrival once again doing the rest.

The lounge were Junag always held his celebrations had been renovated at some point in the past five years and now sported an expanded bar and more seating. Employees still had to pay for their drinks, but it was cheap and private. A sort of members-only club.

As word spread, people gathered, mostly new, with a few familiar faces, and listened to the story and filled Sib in on what she’d missed. A particularly good bit of information was that the tale of the daughter who’d run off to join the Jedi was a popular one. Not surprising, it had all the makings of a good, dramatic story. A run-off daughter, Jedi, criminals, heartbreak, and now a satisfactory ending. She wondered how far the new conclusion would spread. Junag told her all about who was still around, who’d retired, who’d switched allegiances, and who’d died. Lots of the last one, and the knowledge gnawed open her unease. Ignorance had provided more comfort than she’d realized. She’d become a stranger to this place and it was a stranger to her.

But she didn’t have much opportunity for thinking as familiar faces and the curious crushed her on all sides and kept her distracted. They were happy to see her, or at least pretended to be, and alcohol made everyone good-humored. The Jedi, mysterious and powerful, were a favorite topic. She pulled her lightsaber out after multiple requests, but that just started a round of questions about her leg and the prosthesis that had been so problematic. Sib caught the momentary horror in Junag’s expression, but he didn’t say anything fatherly or accuse the Jedi of neglect, to Sib’s relief. She was fine, it worked well, she usually forgot it was there. After the prosthesis was discussed to everyone’s satisfaction, the lightsaber held their fascination and they didn’t quiet down until she demonstrated its use on some fruit.

Eventually, the drunks collapsed and were hauled off by friends. The rest returned to their work or talked with people they knew. Otieno had hunkered down in a corner booth and once attention was off her Sib snuck away to join her. Otieno gave a lazy wave when Sib slid in across from her.

Over the last few weeks, Otieno had dropped her serious-slash-intimidating work face by minuscule degrees. Sib took every opportunity to burrow out the personality underneath it all: equal parts determination and humor and a fragile sort of sensitivity that had somehow survived Otieno’s academy training. Sib wasn’t used to this public-private shift. They were one and the same in Jedi.
“Having a good time?” Sib teased.

“Fantastic,” Otieno said. “No one’s paid me any mind.”

“Good. Hopefully it’ll stay that way.”

“Yes,” Otieno said. “This is quite a place. It explains a lot about you that these are the people you grew up with.”

“Ha, I guess so. It’s a unique crowd, lots of new faces, though.”

“High turnover rate in this field, huh?” Otieno leaned her chin on her left fist, her entire (sober) attention rested on Sib. The muted lighting gave Otieno’s skin a soft glow that Sib hadn’t seen on her before.

“It’s a dangerous life.”

“Clearly that wasn’t what drove you off.” Otieno thoughtfully traced the rim of her water glass with the finger of her right hand. The delicate action warmed Sib from her head to toes.

“Why did you leave?” Otieno asked.

Sib shrugged, to deflect for a moment as she tried to figure how to explain it. She kept her past hidden, even from Master Gianlo. She’d never had to explain herself before. “I had these powers,” she said. “I wanted to know how to use them. The Jedi were the best way to do so.”

Otieno frowned. “Surely there are other Force users in the galaxy? Even with all the connections your father apparently has?”

“Yeah, but none you really want to get training from,” Sib said. “All the Jedi that left the Order or were cast out don’t really take pupils, and the rest are unsavory and don’t know how to properly wield their power. I met a few of them when I was younger—Junag understood the danger of an untrained Force user—but I didn’t like them and neither did Junag. And, you know, who do you think of when you think of the Force? You think of the Jedi. You have to remember I was twelve when I did this. I used to watch Tales from the Temple religiously. It was heroic and full of adventure and important, right? I wouldn’t have gotten that if I stayed here. It wasn’t bad here, mind, but it was…restrictive, by its nature.”

“The Jedi aren’t?” Otieno said, the question un-barbed.

“Okay, they are, but it’s restrictive with a purpose—they’re in place to make us better people, to help ensure the galaxy is kept in balance. I’m part of something bigger. I go across the galaxy helping people and seeing places and planets I never could have had I stayed. I never could have gotten a lightsaber or learned to do, basically, any of the things you’ve seen me do.”

“And Junag was going to have you inherit everything after him, right? The whole operation?”

“Yes,” Sib sighed. “It wasn’t what I wanted. It was too much responsibility. Not that there isn’t responsibility in being a Jedi, but the responsibility now is a responsibility I can manage.”

Otieno covered her mouth with her left hand as she laughed. “I did the opposite. I left a planet that had nothing to a job that put me in charge of several hundred souls.”

“Utter madness,” Sib tsk-ed.
“Hey, I’m making the galaxy a safer place, just like you,” Otieno said. “And getting paid to do so.”

“I’ll admit, that’s a bit of a bummer.”

“I bet this operation makes quite a bit,” Otieno said, looking around at the lounge. The renovation had been a good one. Fresh paint, tasteful decoration, nice furniture, and a cohesive aesthetic. In short: not cheap. “Was it a big change?”

“It definitely required some adjustment. We had enough for a vacation home in Alderaan’s countryside, for an idea of our wealth. Junag could buy out just about any Outer Rim leader, and quite a few of the Mid Rim.”

“And you went from that to becoming a monk,” Otieno muttered. “I think there’s quite a few people who couldn’t have done that.”

Sib suspected Otieno was one of those, which intensified Sib’s curiosity into Otieno’s past. She’d caught bits and pieces during their time together, but most of their conversations revolved around their careers. “I don’t doubt that,” Sib said. “But also…it wasn’t like I was part of the social elite, yeah? I had nice things and I never went hungry, but I didn’t go to private schools or fancy parties or art stuff or political events. He taught me at home with tutors, and all my peers were the children of the people who worked for him. I loved them all to death, but they weren’t exactly high-class material.”

“I suppose all the little Jedi-to-be come from a pretty diverse array,” Otieno said. She leaned forward, folding her arms on the table, the water glass now untouched. “The Force doesn’t discriminate, or so I’m told.”

Sib touched the base of Otieno’s cup with the tip of her pointer finger. It was still chill, despite however long it had sat out in the heated room, and thick droplets of water condensed on the bottom of the glass where Otieno hadn’t touched the glass. Sib drew a line up to the lip-stained rim and then flicked the bit of water she’d collected at the table. “It certainly doesn’t,” Sib said.

“We grew up very differently.”

“You’ll have to tell me about your childhood sometime.”

They both went quiet as they remembered this place wasn’t as private as they would like. Otieno suddenly sighed. “Do you remember when I said what I said about this place? The first time,” Otieno said, her words rushed. “Why did you forgive me for what I said?”

“You apologized and you seemed genuine about it,” Sib said. “Not like I wanted to hold a grudge against you.”

“But aren’t you concerned I still believe that?”

“Do you?”

“No.”

“Then I’m not concerned.” Sib flipped her wrist, as if to throw it aside. “It’s not like you were wrong. It smarted, but you weren’t wrong. I mean, Junag, a crime lord, basically runs the place. It’s lawless and whatever,” Sib said. “Wouldn’t you forgive me?”

Emotions flickered across Otieno’s face in rapid succession. She settled on a frown. “I…I wouldn’t have. I couldn’t have. Insults always…I can’t let them stand. Even if you’d apologized I couldn’t
“Well, I’m not like that,” Sib declared. “I forgive easy. I don’t hold grudges that well.”

Otieno’s hands tightened around her shoulders and stared at her water glass like a youngling trying to use the Force. “I need to be more like you,” she said, the words nearly a whisper. “I keep trying to change, but it’s difficult.”

“Why do you need to change?” Sib asked. “There are a lot of worse things to be than unforgiving.”

“There’s a lot of irony in a Jedi saying that, you know,” Otieno said.

“Well, I’ve seen all the worse things people can be. And unforgiving is pretty low on that list.”

Otieno glanced up at Sib, then back to her glass. “I guess so. It’s just that…,” Otieno sighed and dropped her hands to her lap. “It’s hard to change. It just is.”

“Mm.” Sib wanted to ask more, to dig deeper into this, but Junag was headed over and this was a conversation for another time.

Junag swooped down on them with a drink in one hand and a comm in the other. It was still surreal to speak with her father. “How’s my favorite gal and her…girlfriend?” Junag said, ecstasy at Sib’s appearance still radiating off him.

“No,” Otieno said, matter-of-factly.

“We’re doing swell,” Sib replied and resolutely ignored the flutter in her stomach. “How’re you?”

“I’m afraid I’ve got some business to deal with,” Junag said. Sib ventured a closer brush against his mind and found him genuinely apologetic. “I’ll have someone show you some rooms you can use. Separate rooms, I take it?”

“Yes,” Otieno said.

“But near each other,” Sib added.

“I’m sure I’ve got exactly that somewhere around here. They’ll need to be unlocked and aired out… I’ll get the droids on it. Give it an hour. I’m sure you’re both exhausted. Travel always takes it out of me.”

“Thank you,” Otieno said. “Particularly for your hospitality towards me.”

“Any friend of my daughter is a friend of mine,” Junag said and gave Otieno’s shoulder a friendly squeeze. “We’ll talk about what you need and what I can get you tomorrow, I’ll be at your leisure. Until then, sleep well, the both of you.” He bowed his head to them, his smile unfailing, and took his leave.

Otieno spoke only when he’d left the room entirely. “Your father’s certainly pleased to see you.”

“I wasn’t expecting it, honestly. I thought he might threaten to throw us out.”

“He still might,” Otieno said, nothing accusatory or suspicious in her tone, just resignation that things didn’t always go how they wanted. It sounded too much like a prediction for Sib to bear.
Sib’s arrival inflamed a few simmering tensions in the crew. Each one played out to Junag’s benefit within the first twelve hours and within a day nearly all of Junag’s employees treated her like one of their own. Nearly all. Sib caught the angry looks Zore Da and his associates pointed her way. Zore Da despised Sib and resented Junag, beat only by his hatred of Otieno, and it didn’t take the Force to know that much. Zore Da was in charge of the operations on Eriadu (laundering and enforcement, primarily) and gunning for something a bit more glamorous. Junag trusted Zore Da not even as far as he could throw him and Sib couldn’t figure why Junag kept him on.

Otieno either stayed in her rooms or at Sib’s side. Sib took her on an excursion around the city. Otieno made an effort to get on the good side of everyone they met, which helped, and they took Sib at her word that Otieno wasn’t a threat, but the danger of someone figuring out her identity hung over them. Junag’s hand would be forced in an unpleasant direction if it did come out.

Junag worked on an arrangement with Jobbo the Hutt, still the only other individual they were certain knew something, and on stirring up information about Garos and the Sith. He expected results, but it took time, and in the meanwhile he gave them tours of the building and his operation. The tours included rooms only he and three other people in the entire galaxy had access too. Sib was glad Junag accepted her so readily, and neither women would ever betray the trust he placed in them, but she questioned what he thought anyone would gain from it.

Sib considered another visit anyway. Junag didn’t mind her appearance, but hadn’t made any mention of a repeat. Sib liked the thought. Only a few weeks ago she believed she’d never see this place again.

Junag and Tyro (a massive man in charge of product transportation, as rough and functional as a mining ship, and a child of two different species. No one knew which two) took the women on a tour of the garage on their third full day. The garage was large enough for two light freighters and two gunships to sit comfortably. A second garage for swoop bikes was tacked on the side. The work was innocuous, the mechanics making simple installs and adjustments, and Tyro gladly listed off specifications. Most of the details didn’t mean much to Sib and Otieno: Sib only knew enough for simple repairs and diagnoses, and while Otieno had taken a series of mandatory engineering classes at the academy she’d forgotten most of it after graduation. She didn’t build ships, she captained them.

Sib sensed Zore Da’s approach first and she touched Junag’s elbow as Tyro explained the usefulness of a ploten converter in stealth ships. Junag’s eye twitched at the sight of the Zabrak.

“Boss,” Zore Da said.

Junag crossed his arms over his chest. “What is it.”

“It’s about that deal you asked me to push through.” Zore Da said. He gave a meaningful nod towards Sib. “We should probably discuss it in private.”

Otieno took the first step to leave but Junag held up a hand. “It can be discussed in front of them,” Junag said. “I trust them.” The dare to pursue this line of questioning was implicit.

Zore Da grimaced as he recognized the moment for what it was. “They’re outsiders, boss. It’s not appropriate.”

“They’re family,” Junag corrected.

“One of them’s family.”

“And if my daughter trusts her, I trust her,” Junag said. “She’s as-good-as. What is it you want to tell
Zore Da shook his head. “She’s basically a stranger, boss, and a Jedi,” he insisted. “This is—you can’t just blindly accept whoever comes walking through the door like this. It’s bad practice.”

“Are you suggesting I don’t know how to run my own business?” Junag said with an affected disbelief. “I will not have you question my daughter’s integrity like this. I taught her to respect me and respect this business. I raised her for twelve years. I know her, no matter how many years have passed. If she says she can be trusted, she can be trusted.”

Work had stopped to watch the argument. Zore Da’s confident demeanor suddenly shifted as he looked around and realized quite how many people watched. To argue with the boss in such a public place would be suicide. Junag had counted on that, of course, just like he’d taught Sib when she was young.

“If you’re so concerned about privacy, write it up and send it to me,” Junag said once Zore Da had time to fully read the situation. “Get out of my face until you’ve gained some respect.”

Zore Da mumbled a “yessir” and departed, his shoulders hunched. The argument was hardly won, Zore Da’s grievances still stood, but Junag had established his position and shown to an audience Zore Da’s cowardice. It was the work of a man who’d been in charge his entire life.

“Real piece of work,” Tyro muttered, six-fingered hands on his hips. “What are you gonna do about Zore, boss?”

Junag flipped his hand and shrugged. “Let him simmer. In about a week I’ll take one of his big assignments away and he’ll snap. We’ll have it out and he’ll either run off with his tale between his legs or I’ll win his loyalty and he’ll stick around. He’s got promise, but a helluva an ego.”

Sib caught Otieno’s eye and Otieno raised a brow, a thoughtful tilt to her head. This was a familiar Otieno look.

“Yeah, of course you got the situation under control,” Tyro said, laughing. “You just make sure you call me if you need me, alright? We don’t want a repeat of the Busner incident.”

The mention sparked a distant look in Junag’s eye and he smiled. “Of course, Tyro.”

Sib did a quick calculation of their options. She didn’t want her presence to hurt any of Junag’s plans, despite their illegality. He’d gone out of his way to help them and asked for nothing in return. She wouldn’t hurt him, no matter what. “Dad, listen,” Sib said. “If we’re going to cause an incident just by staying here, we can move to a hotel or our ship.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Junag said with a firm shake of his head. “You’re my daughter, you’re staying with me. I can trust you, can’t I?”

“You can trust us, absolutely, but—”

“Then I trust you and you’ll stay. I won’t have it any other way,” Junag said. He ruffled her hair and smiled the most earnest and doting smile Sib had ever seen. “I mean what I said. I always do.”

The sheer sincerity of it triggered a new wave of guilt for everything she’d done and heat crept up her cheeks. It was all justified, she earnestly believed that, but that didn’t keep her from second-guessing every step. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” Junag said. He looked over at Tyro. “Unfortunately, I just remembered Tyro and I
have some business to attend to with regards to one of Zore Da’s jobs. We’re having issues with a nearby mayor and it won’t sort out itself. As usual, you two can do whatever you want.”

“Thanks, good luck,” Sib said, then felt guilty for wishing him luck with extortion.

Junag and Tyro left, in a different direction than Zore Da, and Otieno moved in. She grinned like there was a joke Sib wasn’t in on. Sib tilted her head in question.

“I see where you get it from,” Otieno said. “I hadn’t expected it would be from your father. It had seemed more like a Jedi thing.”

“Gotten what?” Sib said, still at a loss.

“Your willingness to trust someone,” Otieno said. “He trusted you that you wouldn’t break his confidence. You trusted me that I was genuine in my apology. What an interesting place for it to come from.”

Sib saw, then smiled herself. So it was.

Junag had a success for them the next day—a private meeting with Jobbo the Hutt himself. Junag had always strived for a strong relationship with the Hutts as he abutted their territory, and they owed him a few favors.

Jobbo required the meeting to be in-person and a list of conditions as long as Sib’s arm followed (no weapons, no one besides Sib and Otieno, no recording devices, no helmets, they agreed to be searched, any use of the Force would result in immediate termination, so on and so forth.) Sib and Otieno agreed to it all. Jobbo’s cooperation might give them the breakthrough they needed to get to the core of this conspiracy. As Jobbo’s representative on Garos had said: there was no love lost between the Sith and the Hutts. The Jedi and Hutts had more of a symbiotic relationship, except both creatures thoroughly resented the situation, and so they tolerated each other.

Sib and Otieno were sent the coordinates of Tatooine were the ship he made home, nearly the size of a small space station, orbited. Jobbo spent his time on his ship rather than on one of the many Hutt-controlled planets. Sib had heard the the planet mentioned once in connection to Darth Revan. She couldn’t recall what about it, but they weren’t stepping foot on the planet, so it didn’t matter.

Sib piloted for their landing on Jobbo’s ship with Otieno in Sib’s usual spot. From space, Tatooine was a desert wasteland, patched together from sand and slightly darker sand, and Jobbo’s ship looked right at home: the Hutt’s ship was a mismatch of cannibalized parts that inexplicably created something functional. The smaller ships of Jobbo’s cronies and pawns hung off like the little sucker fish that attached to the bigger fish. Sib had seen them in an aquarium once, but she couldn’t remember their deal either. Sib nested her ship in between two other shuttles and readied the airlock.

“It looks like a piece of junk,” Otieno said, her first words since they’d exited hyperspace.

“Don’t let looks deceive you,” Sib said. Junag had told her all about Jobbo’s proton torpedoes. This wasn’t a Hutt you wanted to cross.

A skeletal Twi’lek man greeted them with a disparaging look-over on the other side of the airlock. The inside of the ship matched, but grime and rust caked the metal panels and corners. The Twi’lek waved a security wand over them before he brought them further. Both women had left their weapons in their own ship. The thugs and bounty hunters that wandered the halls cast suspicious glances their way as they wound deeper into the ship’s bowels. Sib and Otieno were a bit clean cut
for this place and Jobbo would normally meet his high-profile clients elsewhere.

The Twi'lek left them at the entrance to Jobbo’s inner sanctum. “Mind your tongues,” he said and his thin lips twitched into a leery smile as the steel door swung open. “His Excellency likes to collect them.”

Sib looked to Otieno—a last validation. Otieno gave a grim nod. Here we go.

Jobbo, like every other Hutt, preferred his living environment similar to his native planet: the swampy Nal Hutta. His public chambers would be at a reasonable temperature and humidity, but Sib and Otieno had the privilege of a private audience. Within a few steps sweat sprung on Sib’s brow. Otieno discreetly loosened her collar.

The door swung shut behind them and the women stopped to let their eyes adjust to the dim light. Thirty meters in, the Hutt himself stretched out on a platform, lit only by dim flood-lights strategically positioned on the floor. His corpulence and length were impressive, even by Hutt standards, and his mottled color darker than most. A protocol droid and elaborate hookah stood at his ready. Sib identified a few people hidden behind the panels and curtains that divided the large room into sections.

“His Excellency Jobbo the Hutt welcomes the Jedi-daughter-of-Junag and her companion to his ship,” the protocol droid said. Someone had given it a Coruscanti accent. Jobbo examined them with half-hooded, wet eyes. “His Excellency recalls when the young human first disappeared and is pleased to see her returned, despite her new Jedi mantle.”

Sib bowed her head. “I’m honored by your regard, Your Excellency,” she said. “You have my deepest gratitude for agreeing to this meeting.”

“His Excellency considers Junag an important ally and does not mind the favor,” the droid said. “His Excellency is rather curious what the Jedi-human has to ask of him.”

“It involves the Sith, Your Excellency,” Sib said, diving right into it. “And the possibility of a new Sith empire.”

Jobbo laughed, a whispery thing, and his tongue flicked out. Beyond him, Sib sensed the room empty. He waved his hand at the droid. It went behind a curtain and clattered away.

“How can you speak Huttese, humans?” Jobbo asked, in Huttese. He had a silk-thin voice.

“I can,” Sib said, also in Huttese. She was out of practice, but Junag had raised her on it. She could get by. It wasn’t so difficult. “But my companion can not.”

“Then your companion will have to not comprehend,” Jobbo said. “I cannot stand Basic.”

“As you wish,” Sib said. She relayed this to Otieno, who nodded once and maintained her stoney expression. Sib could tell her everything afterwards.

Jobbo folded his arms and curled his tail. “So, Jedi, what is it you wish to know about the Sith?” he said. “And why do you believe I have something to tell you?”

“Are you aware of what occurred on Garos? It’s a Mid-Rim planet, to the north. You have a small operation there.”

“Had an operation there,” Jobbo said. “Your Republic recently shut it down.”
“Along with most of the other operations there, if it makes you feel better,” Sib said. “Do you recall a woman named Tantro? She had a territory of a few nearby planets and was based off of Garos.”

Jobbo took a long draw from his hookah pipe and examined the ceiling. He was probably working out a cost-benefit analysis in his head. Hutt’s didn’t do altruism. After a few moments he blew a smoke ring and set the pipe down. “I know of that human,” Jobbo said. “I attempted to cut a deal with her, many months ago. She was interested, at first, but suddenly turned me down without explanation. I heard she died. Good riddance!”

“I understand you suspected she had involvement with the Sith. What do you know about that?”

Jobbo stilled and tilted his head forward, eyes narrowing to slits. There was no way this was widely known—he would suspect Sib had gotten it in a way that did not benefit him. He was too surprised to even hide his reaction. “Hrm,” he smacked his lips and scratched at his underside. “You know much, Jedi. It would be offensive to ask how. Here’s the deal, Jedi: I do not like the Sith nor the Empires they have built. War is always good for me, not not war in the way the Sith conduct it. Hutts need…resources. The Sith’s tactics do not leave resources. They leave wastelands. Once in our histories we worked together, but our respective goals are incompatible. The Sith also like to betray their companions, as more than a few unfortunate Hutts have learned. The Sith do not share power.”

“I follow,” Sib said.

“So here’s what I’ll tell you: nearly a year ago someone stole a very valuable Sith holocron from us. We could not find the culprit. Not long after, in the midst of our negotiations with Tantro, we caught a whisper that she dealt with dark forces. It was easy to put the two together. So we kept a closer eye on Tantro and were able to confirm she was in deep with a remnant of the Sith. This was when she cut off contact with us: either she or her true employer had got suspicious. We kept an eye on her and her movements from there on. Four months back we were able to track her to a planet in the Unknown Regions, in the north west. I sent a small crew to scout out this planet. They never returned, but a final transmission did slip through. A moment, I’ll show it to you.” Jobbo reached around to a small console just behind him and deftly flicked through a number of screens and files. A hologram flickered to life in the empty space between the women and Jobbo.

The hologram featured a planet brought down to Sib’s height, rendered blue and featureless from the poor quality, and around it several fleets worth of large warships; as armed and armored as any the Republic possessed. The hologram looped for a few seconds before it flickered back to its starting position. Jobbo helpfully rotated the holo. Eighteen fully equipped heavy cruisers floated around this planet in the Unknown Regions. A planet that Jobbo had linked to the Sith.

Otieno’s expression wavered. “Sib?” she whispered.

“It’s—I—” What Jobbo showed her, were it true and accurate, was…Sib couldn’t comprehend what it was. If the Sith, on this one planet alone (and imagine what other planets they might have,) had eighteen cruisers ready for war the galaxy was in more immediate danger than Sib, Otieno, or anyone thought.

“This is how we came to believe the Sith have returned in more than a small way,” Jobbo said once the hologram had made its full impact. “Someone is uniting the Sith clan remnants, creating an armada, killing those who investigate, daring to steal from the Hutts, and then avoiding the Hutts, suspecting we might not cooperate. Certainly true by now.”

“What more can you tell us about the Sith?” Sib said. She kept getting caught in a loop of impossibility. It was the same mental block she came up against again and again: if she accepted this one horrible thing as true, she had to accept a dozen even more horrible things as true. And one of
those even more horrible things was the possibility they were too late. Until this point she could at least pretend there was an easy resolution, but eighteen warships didn’t make for an easy resolution. Otieno looked between Sib, the hologram, and Jobbo, her brow drawn tight. Sib wanted to tell her everything right then. Otieno would have a next step.

“I can give you the exact coordinates of the planet Tantro visited and a copy of this hologram,” Jobbo said and reached for his console again. “What you do with it? Your business. This new Sith are no joke. They probably manufactured the entire situation on Garos and had Tantro under their thumb from the beginning. How do you feel about that, Jedi? Are you scared? I might be. Recall how the Sith devastated the Jedi once, so long ago.” Jobbo chuckled as he entered in commands. “The Jedi reduced to crumbs…now there’s something I might not mind. Now what else? Oh, of course, a number of corporations are under this Sith’s thumb, as always. Corporations love Sith. They share many ideals…absolute order, for one. CEOs are sycophants of the highest order. No power struggles there. Among notable persons, I suspect Naboo’s queen is in on it. We tried to bribe her not long past and she stone-walled us. She’s a ruthless, embarrassingly pliable woman, but loyal when you get her, and who could treat her better than the Hutts? I’m certain she’s not the only one. Can’t trust anyone these days, eh?”

Sib hid the bolt of shock at the mention of the Naboo queen. The connection between the queen and their senator was too obvious. It didn’t have to mean anything, but the possibility…no, Sib couldn’t worry about it just then. That was for her and Otieno to discuss. And the warships? Way more important.

A small chip popped out of Jobbo’s console and he tossed it to Sib. She trusted it would be good and pocketed it. The Hutts wouldn’t want to risk their relationship with Junag or the Jedi. The hologram shut off a moment later and Sib stared at empty air. “There’s my favor to you, Jedi,” the Hutt said. “Now do a favor for me and get rid of this nuisance, eh? And maybe get yourself killed in the process.” Jobbo did his species approximation of a smile at the thought. “Jedi so love martyrdom, after all. Get out of here, Jedi. I have other business to attend you.” He turned to his console, this time with the subtext they’d worn out their welcome.

Sib clasped Otieno’s elbow and jerked her head towards the exit. Time to regroup. She half-jogged the entire way back and pulled Otieno along. She wanted out of this disgusting, evil place. They had so much to do and their was no time to waste on it!

Otieno pulled Sib to a stop just outside the airlock with an almost unintelligible grumble about “mysterious Jedi.” She turned Sib around until they stood eye-to-eye. “What did Jobbo say, Sib? You need to tell me,” Otieno said. “What was the hologram?”

Sib passed her hands over her face and bunched her hair in her hands. “Jobbo confirmed that Tantro was working with the Sith,” she said. “And he had her tracked to the planet we saw in the hologram. It’s in the Unknown Regions, in the north west. He sent a party to check out the planet, he claimed none of them returned, but they were able to send the hologram before they were destroyed. The chip he gave me had the coordinates and a copy of the holo. The planet is almost certainly Sith controlled, if what he’s saying is true.”

“So those cruisers—.”

“Would be Sith, yes.”

It was as if a curtain had passed over Otieno’s face. Her countenance reverted back to unshakeable stone. Authority and business radiated from every pore. “They weren’t cruiser designs I recognized,” Otieno said, her accent fading to nothing more than a faint inflection on the vowels. “The Sith manufactured them, or got someone else to. That planet must have a shipyard.”
“A shipyard?” Sib guffawed, then clapped her hand over her mouth, mindful that they weren’t in private. “This is way beyond us! We need to take this to the Jedi or the Republic or somebody. You saw all those cruisers! They’d reduce us to quarks!”

Sib caught the twitch of an eyelid that suggested a barely concealed eye-roll. “What else did Jobbo tell you? There was more than that, I’m sure.”

“Uh—that someone stole a Sith holocron from the Sith, that the Hutts didn’t want the Sith to return, but they feared. Also, shit, he said that the he suspected the queen of Naboo was working for them. Or working for someone. Apparently she’d been happily dealing with the Hutts until recently.”

Otieno did not react to this news. Not a positive. “Let’s discuss that later,” she said, after a few seconds. “We need to focus on this planet.”

“And get some sort of Republic ship to check it out, right?” Sib said. “Get confirmation.”

“They would never spare the resources on the word of a Hutt.” Otieno pressed her lips together in a minuscule sign of displeasure. “We’ll have to confirm it ourselves. Then we’ll have the proof we need to take this to the Republic and the Jedi.”

“Are you insane? This is way beyond our abilities!”

“We’re not going to attack the bloody place,” Otieno said. “We just need to take a holo and do a quick scan of the surface. Get some readings. We’ll jump out of hyperspace a safe distance away and jump back in as soon as we have what we need. They don’t even need to know we were there. It’s an old trick.”

Panic loomed, and that Otieno would offer such a lunatic suggestion—! But it was all they had. There were no other options. No one more to call. Even the senator was under suspicion. It was down to the two of them. Not an unfamiliar place, but it hadn’t been quite such a desperate place before. Ships meant imminent attack, which meant worse scenario, which meant any necessary action.

Sib closed her eyes and turned her attention inward. Viscid fear crawled up her veins, into her lungs. Was she a coward, or was she a Jedi?


“That’s all I ask.” For a bare second she touched Sib’s cheek with tips of her fingers and a thin smile appeared. “I’m not a Rear Admiral at my age for nothing. I do know a few things about tactics, and I’ve been brushing up on my field skills.”

“I shouldn’t underestimate you, huh?” Sib said. She smiled too, despite the circumstances. “Just follow whatever ridiculous plan you come up with.”

“Haven’t been much more ridiculous than yours, so far.”

“Your idea to investigate the Sith on our own takes the prize for ridiculous ideas,” Sib said. “Hands down.”

“And you agreed to it.”

“Just like I’m doing now,” Sib sighed. She could picture Master Gianlo’s and the Council’s disapproval. “Yeah, we’re a good team.”
For the day and a half return to Eriadu, Sib and Otieno planned and catalogued. Their current hyperdrive could easily handle the quick succession of jumps and the precise coordination it would require, but their scanning tech was low-grade and had a limited radius. Junag might lend them some better equipment, and if not they’d accept the expense. The evidence had to be irrefutable or else the Republic would drag its feet until it was too late.

Junag and Ina greeted them in Junag’s private garage. He brought Sib in for a long hug first thing. The hugs still surprised her, but she did like them. Otieno got a firm handshake. They talked on the way to Junag’s main office.

“How’d the meeting go?” Ina asked. “Good to see you’re both alive.”

“It went well, Jobbo was helpful,” Sib said. “He gave us the coordinates to a planet that the Sith are probably using as a shipyard. It’s in the Unknown Regions, off of Kalee.”

“Kalee? Isn’t that clear on the other side of the galaxy?” Junag asked and his expression twisted in fresh concern. “You’re planning to go to it?”

“We don’t have much choice,” Otieno said. “Some story and a holo from a Hutt crime lord isn’t going to be enough to convince the Republic to do anything.”

“You have a holo of the planet? May I see it?” Junag said.

“When we’re in your office,” Sib agreed. “The crew he sent to check it out got destroyed, but they were able to relay the image back. There’s several fleets worth of cruisers floating around it. Whatever army they’ve got is a serious threat.”

“We’ll need to leave tomorrow,” Otieno said. Her expression was grim, but it had been like that since the meeting.

“I’m sorry to ask anything more of you, but do you have any long-range scanners and stealth shields we can borrow?” Sib said, her embarrassment genuine. “We plan to exit hyperspace as far away as we can, get the readings, then jump out.”

“Of course! Anything you need,” Junag said and touched Sib’s shoulder again. He did that a lot. “It’s for a good cause, after all. I’ll get my people working on it right away.”

Otieno bowed her head in Junag’s direction. “Thank you. We’ll return it in top condition.”

“Return yourselves in top condition as well,” Junag said. “So you’ll leave tomorrow?”

“That would be best. It’s a long journey.”

“We both have our lives to return to,” Junag sighed. “Well, then let’s have a celebration about it! Tonight, everyone who’s here can say their farewells.”

Sib could barely manage in her new-normal state of near-panic, but it did have a superficial appeal. She’d earned one more night of no worries. It might be her last.

Sib and Junag stayed in the lounge until only the cleaning droids remained. The cause of the party had made it a slower affair and Sib hadn’t been hounded like before. There’d been more interest in
Otieno, but nothing suspicious, and old-timers once again regaled both women with tales of daring exploits and bravado.

The stories had provided some perspective. What they were doing was dangerous, yes, but not really more dangerous than about a dozen other things she and all these other people had done. And as she sat with Junag in filial silence, a pitcher of water, and plate of crisps (an attempt to mitigate their hangovers. Probably unsuccessful) it was easy to imagine a future. Some sort of future.

Junag stirred from his staring contest with his glass. “So this ship you and Oti are traveling in, where’d you get it exactly? Is it her’s?” he said.

“We were given it, actually, by someone else who’s investigating this,” Sib said. “Someone a lot wealthier than us. She’d also been investigating it for years before we stumbled on it. She contacted us and wanted to join forces.”

“So who is this someone, exactly?” Junag asked. She recognized his tone: it was what he used when he wanted to see how deep someone would dig their own grave. If she weren’t lying about those others things, she’d be offended that he thought she was lying about this.

“Do you know her, you mean,” Sib said. There was no real point in hiding it. He didn’t work for the Sith, clearly, and he wouldn’t be able to lay a finger on the senator. “It’s Senator Mala Naiher, from Naboo.”

Junag sat up straighter at just the mention. “Naboo?” he said. “That’s not a rock to sniff at.”

“She provided us resources too. Credits, equipment, information. She’s been doing this a long time. She knew way more than us.”

“You’re confident you can trust her?”

“Initially, yes,” Sib said. “But now…we’re not sure. There was something Jobbo mentioned about the Naboo queen. That she might be in league with the Sith, and until fairly recently she’d been in the Hutts’s pocket.”

Junag leaned back and clucked his tongue as if he couldn’t believe it. “Doesn’t surprise me the Hutts had her bought out. I’ve never dealt with Naboo. I can’t imagine what sort of offer the Sith had to make to get her on side. I probably couldn’t even afford to buy out the junior undersecretary of the interior, they’re so snobbish. A place like Naboo just doesn’t agree with my sensibilities. And their politics! Beyond me, for certain.”

Sib laughed. She’d missed her father’s lighthearted humor. It wasn’t even something he adopted to protect her when she was little. That was just what he found funny. “Yeah. I’m grateful for what she’s done, but she has an ego as big as the planet.

“I’ll keep an ear against the wire for you,” Junag said. “Let you know if I hear anything one way or another about the senator or the queen.”

“Thanks, it means a lot.”

Junag furrowed his brow slightly, his expression going a little odd, and Sib tilted her head in askance. “Do you think we’ll be seeing each other again?” her father said, his voice gone gruffer. Sib wondered how long he’d wanted to ask just that. It was what she’d wanted to ask.

“Well I’ll have to return the parts from the ship,” Sib said. She leaned back and clasped her hands on her lap. “Beyond that, I don’t know. I wantto, but the Jedi really are strict about contacting your
family, and it’s not like I’m going to have any time to myself. I was barely able to get this time off, and only because my master knew Oti was with me. They’ve met one time and she made a good impression,” Sib clarified. “So he trusted we’d keep each other safe. He actually doesn’t even know the real reason we’re out here. I told him it was related to what happened on Garos, but that’s all.”

“Could we write each other, at least?”

“Yes, definitely, we can do that,” Sib said, glad he suggested it. “If we’re ever in the same place, maybe we can work something out.”

“Do the Jedi know about all of…this?” Junag asked and gestured around.

Sib looked away, the part she dreaded finally arrived. Admitting she’d been too ashamed and afraid to tell anyone about her past. “No,” she said. “They know I’m from Eriadu and that I ran away, but that’s it. I think Master Gianlo’s teased out a little more, but nothing I said. Oti’s the first person I’ve told the whole story to.”

Junag nodded. “I can see why you’d make that decision. It was the intelligent thing to do. A criminal father wouldn’t go over too well with the Jedi and I wouldn’t want anyone using me against you.”

“And I wouldn’t want anyone to use me against you,” Sib said. And that was the heart of it. With all their different lives and duties, anything resembling a familial relationship was nearly impossible. So where did that leave them?

Junag’s comm buzzed in his pocket. “What is it,” he spoke, the implication to keep it short.

“There’s an incident in corridor five and we need you up here. It involves your daughter’s friend.”

Junag looked at Sib, his expression as baffled as hers. A quick reach with the Force and she found an area of particular tension not far off. Sib tried to pick out Otieno from the crowd but everything was lost in the whirlpool of high emotion. To sort through that sort of mess required skill she didn’t have. Her heart flipped at the thought of Otieno in danger, but surely no one would be so stupid. Otieno wouldn’t have started anything.

“I’ll be right there,” Junag responded, already to his feet.

Sib’s lightsaber was clipped to her belt, like always, and Junag had a brand new blaster ready on his hip. The message’s tone had suggested violence.

Violence was what they got. About thirty of Junag’s employees had split into two opposing camps and faced each other in a corridor, a few with weapons drawn. Without a single word they parted for Junag. A thin neutral space existed between the two opposing parties and within it was Zore Da, Otieno, and a purple-skinned woman that was one of Junag’s lieutenants.

Otieno was on the ground, but conscious. Blasters in hand, the woman and Zore Da were deep in an argument. The woman had her back to Junag and Sib, which meant they’d arrived on Junag’s side. Zore Da and the woman spun to face Junag when he broke from the crowd. Sib hung back and crossed her arms over her chest so no one would get nervous she’d reach for her lightsaber. Otieno pressed a hand to her forehead and a thin streak of blood dirtied her brow. She avoided Sib’s eye, as if she’d been caught doing something wrong.

“So what’s going on here?” Junag demanded.

“This human here is a spy, that’s what,” Zore Da said and jabbed his blaster at Otieno. “This is Rear
Admiral Aurnath Otieno of the Republic Navy. She works for the government and has spent her career destroying businesses like ours. Your precious daughter lied in order to get the admiral here inside so they can take us apart.”

“We don’t know that, Zore!” the purple woman said and dug her finger into the center of Zore Da’s chest. “At least give her the opportunity to explain herself!”

“I won’t listen to a word of this Republic scum—.”

“Jessie’s right, Zore Da,” Junag retorted. “Let them explain themselves.”

Attention turned to Sib. She stammered out the beginning of an explanation before Otieno interrupted with a weary groan. She shoved herself to sitting. “I’m not a spy,” Otieno said, her words a bit slurred. Whatever blow she’d gotten still effected her. “I don’t even work in this sector. I’m not going to tell the Republic anything about anything here. Sib lied because she was afraid something exactly like this would happen if everyone knew. We didn’t want to force Junag to keep something like this a secret from all of you.”

“I never lied about my intentions,” Sib added, to Junag. “I never had any secret intentions. I just never wanted to put you in this position.” Junag had never looked so tired and Sib wanted to cry. That she had caused this!

Junag went to Jessie’s side. “Did Zore Da attack her?” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “Entirely unprovoked. I saw it happen. The rear admiral tried to talk him out of it and didn’t raise a finger to defend herself. Regardless of her intentions, she did nothing to earn this sort of treatment.” She threw a scowl at Zore Da over her shoulder.

“Well.” Junag hooked his thumbs into his belt loops and bowed his head for the moment, apparently thinking, back still to Sib. “How are you?” he said, towards Otieno.

Otieno nodded a few times. “I’m fine,” she said. “Can I stand now?”

“Yes. It’s probably best you leave.”

Otieno wavered as she stood, reaching for the wall. She wiped the blood off her forehead before she began towards Sib. She wobbled slightly at each step. Sib stayed where she was though she wanted to help.

Junag finally looked at Sib. He seemed a thousand years older. “I’m sorry it ended up like this, Sib.”

“So am I,” she said, her voice rough. “I never wanted it to.”

“Neither did I.” Junag sighed. “Take your things and leave immediately, please. The additions to your ship are likely done. You may keep them. Consider it our contribution to the war effort.”

“That’s it? You’re just going to let them leave? Zore Da said. “Just like that?”

“What would you have me do, Zore,” Junag snapped back. “Kill them?”

“It would certainly keep us safer!”

Junag choked out a short laugh. “Kill a Jedi and a Republic officer? That would be suicide.”

“I’m pretty damn sure no one knows they’re even here. It would certainly solve the issue.”
“He’s not going to kill his daughter, you slag-brained kiszh,” Jessie said, the insult directed firmly at Zore Da. “Just let it be, alright? They’re leaving.”

Zore Da and Jessie started another argument and as they duked it out Otieno finally arrived at Sib’s side. She sagged against her immediately, like a droid out of power.

“It’s more than your head, isn’t it?” Sib whispered.

“Just some bruises, I’ll be fine,” Otieno said. “Let’s get out of here.” Sib whole-heartedly agreed.

“Where do you two think you’re going?” Zore Da said. He took a step towards them. “You Jedi scum, Republic cur. Come one! At least defend yourselves.”

The women kept on, backs to him, and he cursed them again. “Come on! Is this what the Republic has to offer!”

A hard object struck Sib square in the back with enough force that she stumbled. “Have some pride! Face me!”

Black anger grew in her chest, flooded up her throat, sick of this thoughtless bastard who would hurt Otieno. Sib put no skill or care into her reaction: the Force responded, as it always did.

Zore Da was scooped off his feet and flung backwards, blaster flung from his grip, and the bystanders dived out of his path. He hit the ground hard and lay in stunned silence.

Junag and Jessie had both drawn weapons when Junag struck Sib, now pointed harmlessly at the ceiling, and they stared at her. Jessie and the other’s expressions revealed an uncomprehending shock. Sib had shown them party tricks, not the strength to throw a fully-grown Zabrak across the room.

Her father looked at her as if she was nine and had accidentally sent a plate across the room. As if she was just a kid who didn’t know how to control her abilities. It was all her worst memories and fears neatly summarized in one man’s face.

Sib tightened her grip on Otieno and turned away. The crowd, as silent as deep space, pressed to the wall as she passed. Sib moved forward. She did not look back.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Drama!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From Eriadu to the Sith planet was a week’s journey. Otieno saw no reason to stop at Coruscant on their way past it and instead remained on the hyperspace routes. They could refuel at Ord Mantell. Sib had informed her Jedi Master that they’d be even longer. She hadn’t mentioned how he’d taken it. Otieno had told the same to the navy, she had the vacation time, and while they grumbled they had to allow it.

Otieno also wanted to do a trial run of their equipment once they were closer. Sib, gone mute after their enforced departure from Eriadu, worked on a program that would run everything with a single button.

The seclusion of Hyperspace was pleasant onboard a cruiser and space travel was normal for Otieno, she spent more time off-planet than on, but never in such cramped quarters with a companion who refused to speak The conversations she and Sib’d had as they traveled, discussing their work and the places they’d been and the occasional references to their childhoods, and even if Otieno had nothing to add Sib would tell stories about the Jedi for hours, following every random thread that sprung to her mind, had made the travel at least bearable. Now Sib was like a ghost and Otieno saw no way to help her forward.

Sib hadn’t discussed her expectations of the visit. She must have had some, and after her father had given such a warm welcome she might have hoped to see him again. Otieno’s relationship with her own family wasn’t perfect, but she was at least on speaking terms with all of them. She hadn’t thrown someone across a room.

Otieno had no advice or comfort to offer, partly since it was her fault it had ended like it had. She couldn’t read Sib well enough to know if she blamed Otieno at all. She hoped not—the thought of Sib’s resentment created a ball of dread inside her that kept up a stream of commentary on how awful Otieno was for causing the estrangement. Sib would never have lost her temper like that if not for Otieno. It had been in Otieno’s defense.

She tried a few different times to get something out of Sib as Sib tinkered with her lightsaber or the ship or laid around as if exhausted. Sib kept up her isolation. Otieno had no what Sib wanted or if there was anything she could do. If Sib even wanted anything from her.

By the time they dropped out of hyperspace at Ord Mantell Otieno was bursting to leave the recycled air.

Ord Mantell was a place for passing spacers, smugglers, bounty hunters, and freighters to refuel and spend some time on-planet. It was a bit like Eriadu, except that Eriadu had some industry. Ord Mantell’s location and history were what gave it significance: not anything the planet had produced in the past thousand years. It also had no Junag equivalent and a bit more neutrality in galactic
politics. There was a governor and a senator, but they were small players.

Otieno arranged for refueling before taking a walk around the space port to get some proper food. Sib remained onboard. Otieno didn’t even try to bring Sib along.

An hour turned into two as Otieno found a diner that served massive bowls of gi dumpling soup and a high-speed holonet connection. She had a pile of mail and briefings to get caught up on and was glad for the time off ship. They’d have a few more days on-ship, at least.

“Can I join you?”

Otieno nearly spilled her tea on the floor at Sib’s unexpected arrival. Sib’s hair was a bit tangled but her Jedi robes and were pressed and neat. Her lightsaber hung off her belt, in plain view.

“Take a seat,” Otieno said. She’d settled down at a two-person table in the back of the restaurant. Sib didn’t seem interested in ordering anything as she sat down, which was for the best. There was barely enough table space for Otieno’s own meal.

“Sorry I’ve been acting like I have,” Sib said. She pulled one leg to her chest and wrapped her arms around her shin. “It’s been childish. You didn’t do anything to deserve it.”

“You went through a lot,” Otieno said.

“Still ridiculous of me though.” Sib leaned her cheek against her knee. Her movements were all delicate, oddly careful, as if she was remembering how to move. “I know it’s made you anxious. You’re wondering if I’m blaming you for it. I don’t. It was inevitable, really. I’d deluded myself into believing it would work. Junag had too, but I’m the one who should have known better. It never would have. Your presence made no difference.”

“I’m already that predictable, is it?” Otieno said. “You knew I’d blame myself.”

“Hm, yeah.” Sib smiled. “Yeah.”

Otieno wove her fingers around her bowl of soup. The fleshy, brain-like dumplings benignly floated in the broth. The million things Otieno wanted to say bubbled and roiled in the back of her throat. “I was going to talk to you about expectations, but I don’t have to tell you anything, do I?”

“No,” Sib said. “The Force did not will it. Reality did not will it.”

“You’ll need to move on.”

“I know. I will.” Sib sighed and her gaze roamed the restaurant for a moment, catching on faces and the flat-holos that were stapled to the walls. The pictures were of notable patrons, a few cut from wanted posters of criminals, and the rest images of the Mandalorian family that ran the shop. Tourist holos of natural landmarks and famous buildings. Friends of the owners with arms slung over shoulders.

“Do you ever feel like we’re missing something?” Sib said, a genuine curiosity in her voice. She turned back to Otieno and leaned her elbows on the table. “As if there’s a part of us that we were supposed to get but never did. About being happy, specifically. Do you ever look around and think ‘I’m not happy, but all the people doing the exact same thing as me are.’ You’re not unhappy, but you just get the feeling you could do much better. Do you ever wonder why you’re not as happy as you could be?”

It was as if Sib had plucked the thought right from Otieno’s mind and phrased it into something
coherent. It ate away at her insides, it demanded all her energy and attention, it pushed her forward and forward.

“All the damn time,” Otieno said.

Sib smiled, and the moment of camaraderie sent a cascade of warmth through Otieno. It was always like something was missing. She was starting to figure out what that was.

The test of their equipment went smoothly, their timing down to a second, and Otieno was the one to announce they were ready for the real thing. Sib had mostly returned to her old self and allowed Otieno the command of this self-prescribed mission.

Otieno could handle it as long as she kept her focus on their mission. Any anxiety was unfounded, of course. There was minimal danger involved and it was vital it be done. This was the proof they needed and there was no time to waste in going to the Republic or the Jedi. Once they had the scans and the holos the Republic would have to act. They might not believe it was the Sith, but a fleet of that size was for one thing only.

Sib stood behind the pilot’s seat with her hand on a switch that would start the program she’d compiled the moment they dropped out of hyperspace. Otieno was in charge of flying. The hyperspace computer was prepped with all the coordinates.

They’d chosen a distance far enough from the planet that even the fastest weapons wouldn’t have time to hit and was beyond the range of a cruiser’s tractor beam or scanners. Otieno had obsessed over their plan: it would work.

The ship computer hit the twenty-five second before exit mark. “Ready?” Otieno asked.

“Something’s wrong,” Sib said.

Otieno whipped her head around, caught between fear and anger, as Sib stared out the window with a distant, uncertain look. “Something in the Force,” Sib continued. “The Force is…there’s someone on the other side.”

“Well, we’ll have to make do,” Otieno declared, gripping the controls in the seconds they had left.

Otieno fought the moment of disorientation that followed an exit from hyperspace until her eyes naturally landed on their goal, dead ahead of them. The planet was a pale blue, white clouds curling across its surface, and two small moons bright in its orbit. Otieno could have raised a hand and blocked the planet from sight. Even from their distance, a career of working in space had her trained to pick out ships in low orbit. Just from their angle, she could spot five cruisers on the edge of its atmosphere. A readout screen noted that the scanners were on and recording.

A series of proximity warning lights went off all at once with sirens and whistles accompanying. Something had come out of hyperspace from the left and behind. Otieno jerked the ship to the right, Sib nearly toppled over as Otieno drove them down, away from the ship, without waiting for a visual confirmation. She started the sequence for the jump. So that was what Sib had been so worried about.

A shot crossed their bow and Otieno pulled the ship into a corkscrew as more shots followed. They only needed a few seconds more. Sib fell against the chair with a shout.

“Hold on!” Otieno said. She pulled up, hard, as the gun chased their tail, until the cockpit finally
faced their pursuer.

The ship design was unfamiliar to Otieno. Republic ships were oblong and blockish and some had a “T” shape for the bridge. This ship was more like the point of a spear. It was at least two thousand meters long (larger than *The Tourbillon*, which was only twelve hundred meters) and jutting with weaponry from all angles.

“Glad to see I was right,” Sib muttered.

Otieno reached for the hyperdrive ignition, having seen enough, but as she grasped the lever a single shot grazed their side, throwing them off their trajectory, and before Otieno could grab the lever again and get them away their entire forward motion was arrested. The ship’s tractor beam had caught them.

Otieno cursed the moon and back as she ripped open her harness. Behind her, Sib was already headed towards to smuggler’s hatch the Senator Naiher had so thoughtfully provided in the shuttle.

They’d made a plan in case of capture like this and it was simple: one of them had to get out. Sib, with her Jedi powers, had the best chance and Otieno, as a high-enough ranking officer in the Republic navy, would not be immediately put to death. Not until they’d gotten what they could out of her, anyway. The stealth shields would keep Sib from detection. For all the Sith knew, Otieno was the only onboard. Sib would be able to escape and once back in Republic space she’d arrange for Otieno’s rescue.

Otieno made a holodisk copy of their scans as Sib clattered around in the back. Sib gathered her things into a bag and threw it into the hatch.

“This is going to work,” Otieno said. She offered up the holodisk.

Sib put the disk in an interior pocket, next to her chest. “If the Force wills it.”

The compartment was just large enough for Sib with a bit of folding and help from Otieno. She stepped back into the cockpit to check their progress. They were nearly in the hangar and in less than a minute they’d be boarded. What sort of soldiers could the Sith even have?

Sib was situated inside the compartment and ready to close the hatch when Otieno returned. A pack of her things and emergency supplies rested on her stomach. Otieno knelt down to help her get situated.

“Otieno,” Sib said. She cupped the back of Otieno’s head in her hand and pulled her forward. Sib stared hard, piercing Otieno through. “Promise me you’ll stay alive. Nothing will stop me from taking you back, but you have to be alive for me to do that. Promise me I’ll be able to.”

Otieno couldn’t think of a response other than, “I promise.” She held Sib’s wrist and wondered when they’d next see each other.

The ship wobbled as they passed into the airlock and a siren announced they were back in an oxygenated environment. Sib’s hand dropped away and she shut the hatch. Otieno came back to her senses and faced the door. She left her blaster laying on the cot. Capture was inevitable. There was no point in a battle that might kill her.

Otieno was nearly knocked off her feet as they came down hard on the landing platform. When they’d settled, she ascertained all her braids were kept in their bun and clasped her hands in front of her, back straight, chin up.
Otieno hadn’t hard-locked the door to save the ship from any damage so Sib had the best chance to escape on it, and it would only be another delay of the inevitable. In a few moments the door bolts thudded open and there was a brief hiss as pressure equalized.

A half-dozen Sith faced her. They wore unmarked goldcolored armor and close-faced helmets. She spread her hands to make clear she had no weapons and made the short jump onto the ground.

“I am Rear Admiral Aurnath Otieno, fifth bar, officer of the three hundred forty-seventh division, of the navy of the Republic,” she said. “Take me to your commanding officer immediately.”

“That would be me.”

From a cautious distance off a stocky human woman in a grey uniform, of a cut Otieno didn’t recognize, raised a finger. “Lieutenant Moi-Kal. What are you doing in our space, Rear Admiral Otieno?” She had a Core accent and the bearing of some sort of aristocrat. Had the Sith infiltrated so deeply as to steal away Core nobles?

“I demand to be taken to the captain of this ship immediately,” Otieno said. “This is an illegal seizure.”

The officer approached, hands kept behind her back, until she was just behind the line of Sith troopers. “Taken to the captain, is it? In due time. For now, answer my question. What are you doing in our space?”

Otieno narrowed her eyes and kept silent. If she said nothing, nothing could be used against her. It’s what she’d been trained to do. She wanted to see the Sith that lead them before she made any further decisions.

The officer frowned. “So be it,” she said. “Stun her, put her in a cell.”

Otieno braced as one of the troopers set their weapon to “stun.” They wouldn’t kill her, like she’d predicted, probably wouldn’t harm her, and certainly not until someone higher up the food chain had spoken with her. She just had to—

“Put her in binders, the general will see her now.”

Otieno woke to a prick on her neck. She instinctually went to slap it away even as someone grabbed her hands and forced them behind her back. Binders tightened around her wrists and two pairs of hands pulled her up. After a moment’s stumble, woozy from the stun and drug to wake her up, she kept to her feet.

The same officer as from the hangar waited at her cell door, looking rather unimpressed. “Hurry on, the general doesn’t wait.”

The Sith shoved her through the warship’s corridors at double pace. Trespassers in their space were probably uncommon. The general would be curious.

From long practice Otieno kept her bearings in relation to the empty cellblocks she’d been in as they cleaved through the corridor and blast doors slammed open at their approach. If the general wanted to see her they probably headed towards the bridge and therefore the stern. The hangar they’d been drawn into had been midship, on the keel. The cellblocks wouldn’t be kept close to the bridge and engines which would put them somewhere in the fore.
No matter how well they searched her, taking a newly acquired prisoner to the bridge was not what Otieno would have done. The bridge had restricted access for a reason. She would have kept any communication between herself and a prisoner to holos unless they were important somehow.

By her estimation, a ship of the Sith’s size could easily hold upwards of twenty thousand bodies (her ship, at maximum capacity, which in her entire time as its commander had never occurred, could hold around eight thousand. Her ship always had a full staff and crew, of course, and the remaining space could be given to soldiers, pilots and their ships, and refugees, should the need arise.) They passed nearly no one on their walk which suggested to her the ship was well below capacity and possibly even stretched thin for required crew. The bigger the ship the more people required to run it and every Republic ship had busy halls. There weren’t even many droids.

Otieno rolled her shoulders, the binders starting to ache, as they waited for permission to enter the bridge. The walk had been very long and included a maglev ride. She’d been right that the cellblocks were towards the fore.

The bridge was fully staffed. It had a personnel trench towards the front, like Otieno’s ship but scaled larger, bisected by the commander’s walk. Otieno also noted they’d moved into a distant orbit of the planet. She guessed nearly an hour had passed. Sib would have had plenty of time to make her escape.

“General Kodin,” the Lieutenant Moi-Kal said. “The prisoner we just picked up, as you requested.”

The name stirred a faint memory. She tried to recall it as General Kodin, a white-haired Arkanian, gestured the group forward.

Half the man’s face was cybernetics and a hand and a leg were visibly mechanical beneath his uniform. Otieno scraped at her brain for where she knew General Kodin from. The cybernetics threw her off even though he looked broadly familiar. They would be hard to forget.

“Aurnath Otieno,” the man said, like he knew her. “It’s been so long. What’s your current rank?”

“Rear Admiral Aurnath Otieno, fifth bar, officer of the three-hundred forty seventh division,” she said. She wouldn’t reveal she didn’t remember him.

“Ah, that’s quite a promotion you’ve had,” General Kodin said. “Congratulations, I suppose. I’ve been promoted as well. I’m a general now, as I’m sure you’ve figured out.”

The mocking tone finally sparked recognition. It was the same insufferable drawl of an admiral who’d once tried to get her as his apprentice, knowing her from a field course he’d instructed, after she’d graduated from the academy. She’d refused because of his ego. He’d died in a tragic accident five years ago.

His survival was curious, but Otieno had no desire to engage in whatever debate he’d try and start if she shared this.

“Keeping quiet, huh?” General Kodin said. “Someone sit her down, it’s a long walk from the cellblocks.”

The soldiers shoved her into the chair of an unused navigational console. Her arms were trapped between the seat and her back.

“Apologies for the binders, but that’s the way of it, hm?” General Kodin spun around the adjacent seat and settled in. “So why are you out here, Rear Admiral? Do you even know what this is? Were you just on vacation, hm?”
Otieno glared at Kodin. Even the smallest comment could compromise the mission and Otieno suspected at least of those cybernetics would help him recognize a liar. Sib had to get through.

“Silent treatment, is it?” General Kodin said. He tsk-ed and rested an arm on the console. “Ah, just following training. I forgive you. You always were a smart one, I recall.”

General Kodinsighed. “Well, I’m clearly getting noting out of you for the moment. I would hate to bark at a stone wall. We’ll see how you feel after some time in a cell and a pleasant concoction of drugs. But first, I think this:”

General Kodin stood and drew his blaster, a sleeker model than the troopers had, and checked the safety was on. In a split-second action, he whipped the barrel across Otieno’s cheek.

Otieno grunted at the impact, head snapping to the side and stars dancing across her vision, and her thoughts scattered like snowflakes in a storm. Shock kept her unresponsive. As the numbness faded, sharp pain flared across her entire cheek. She ran her tongue along the inside of her mouth. She tasted blood, but not loose or cracked teeth. He hadn’t hit her that hard.

“I want you to understand my seriousness in this, hm?” General Kodin said. “I want you to understand I have no qualms about my duties.”

General Kodin’s nostrils suddenly flared as she continued to say nothing and he continued to stare. Only an idiot expected mercy from a Sith, and an idiot she was not. “Well, you have quite the resolve,” he said. “Take her back to the cell. She can be properly interrogated once Darth Ruin’s arrived. He’ll be quite interested in her.”

It took a moment to remember the significance of “Darth.” The Sith Lord. It had to be the same as the one who’d attacked her on Garos. It was the first time she’d heard a name. Otieno couldn’t hide the shudder of fear at the thought of facing that thing again.

General Kodin noticed, and smiled. “You know what that means, I take it? Good.”

“General, an unauthorized transmission was just sent through all channels. It’s a data package, with…coordinates, holos, and schematics of Kuris and our ship.”

Kodin forgot Otieno as he clunked over to the transmissions officer. A data package meant Sib was up to something that she might not get off the ship after. For a brief, heart-wrenching moment Otieno wondered if Sib was going to rescue her. It would be an incredibly stupid thing to do and not at all their plan, but appealing in a way Otieno didn’t want to consider too deeply.

General Kodin returned to Otieno after a short conversation with the half of his face still mobile twisted up. “So you brought a friend, is that it?” he said. “Who are they? How did they escape detection? What are they doing, hm?”

Otieno maintained her silence.

“More of that, huh?” Kodin said. “Fine. I already know how to deal with vermin on my ship. Lieutenant Decker, announcement on all channels, with an image, on me and rear Admiral Otieno.”

Lieutenant Decker, the transmissions officer, did as requested as General Kodin primed his blaster. Otieno braced herself for whatever came next.

“Ready when you are, sir.”

“Start.” Kodin stepped within a meter of Otieno and faced the small camera droid that had popped
from the wall to record them. The blaster muzzle he held within centimeters of Otieno’s temple.

“This is General Kodin speaking. Attention all crew. I regret to say we have a stowaway. The intruder should be captured if possible but dead is sufficient. Security is upgraded to level two until the intruder is caught.” Kodin turned to Otieno. “State your name and rank.”

As he had a blaster pointed to her head and it was information he already knew, she did.

“Right. Admiral Otieno is working with this intruder, in some capacity. So intruder, I want you to watch this next part very carefully.”

General Kodin dropped his blaster’s aim and fired.

The blaster bolt ripped into Otieno’s right thigh. She jerked forward and used every force will she possessed to not scream her throat raw. Pain overwhelmed to the point she couldn’t even breathe. Her world narrowed to the burning of her leg.

Otieno didn’t catch the last words of Kodin’s announcement. She had no idea how long passed before she became aware of him again. He’d leaned down until they were eye-to-eye. Otieno wanted nothing more than to punch the teeth out of his shit-eating grin.

“You best believe there’s more where that came from, and you have three more limbs, by my count,” he said. “For your sake, I hope your companion gets the message.”

#

Chance allowed Sib to catch General Kodin’s announcement. A comm center just a meter from her position had given her a surprise when the announcement began. She’d just spent the better part of an hour stuck in their ship’s hatch using every bit of her skill to keep a droid and several curious soldiers from finding her. She’d gotten to work as soon as the coast was clear.

When Kodin shot Otieno Sib slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the sharp gasp punched out of her. Option was alive, fortunately, but Sib hadn’t anticipated they’d be so willing to hurt her when she’d sent the data package out. Was Otieno’s rescue worth it if it just got her wounded? The transmission put Otieno on the bridge which made rescue doubly hard. It would be the best defended part of the ship on a normal day, and they’d just increased security.

Sib had to follow through. She’d put everything into motion and whatever they could do to Otieno now paled in comparison to what they would put her through later. Everything they’d recorded was on its way to Republic space and would hit the first beacons in two days.

The Sith knew the Republic would know, so that put a twist in things, but they’d have seen her escape no matter what and put the two together. There was no way to prevent that. What mattered was that the Sith had lost their chance at a true surprise attack. The Sith’s warning to Otieno hadn’t amounted to much, and now the Republic would have some knowledge of their resources.

Sib ascertained her hood was snug and the backpack with a few important items from their ship wouldn’t bang around before she continued on towards the engine. Her plan had four major steps: get their ship unlocked, disengage the tractor beams, rescue Otieno, and open he hangar doors. She’d already removed the lock from their ship engines, the easiest part, and she felt confident in the broad steps, even if there were some fuzzy bits in-between them. “Rescuing Otieno” might come hot off
the heels of “disengaging the tractor beams” if she couldn’t stealth the tractor beams off. Their escape would be a wild one, no matter what.

Initially Sib had planned to do exactly what Otieno had said, even though it made her sick to even consider abandoning Otieno, but the long wait in the compartment had given her a lot of time to consider their options and what she owed to Otieno. Sib couldn’t risk that they’d seen each other for the last time. There was too much they could accomplish for it all to be abandoned so callously.

The engine was spread over the entire stern of the ship. Its various subsystems and auxiliary systems had their own rooms. She’d found a promising door on a ship map and headed straight for it. It was a single door, at the end of a narrow corridor, guarded by three soldiers, and required a keycard. The keycard she could bypass with brute strength and the guards she’d knock unconscious with the Force. She wanted to avoid a fight.

Only a moment after she’d arrived at the hall adjacent to the engine door the blast doors ahead of her slid open and a group of Sith soldiers clattered through.

For a moment both sides were too surprised to react. Then one jerked his blaster up and the others snapped out of their shock.

“Drop your weapon! Get on the ground!” one yelled, which caught the attention of the soldiers down the corridor. Sib risked a short hop backwards as the guards poured out of the corridor. Ten different blasters were now trained on her.

Sib put her hands up and said nothing. So she’d have to fight after all. One of the engine room guards unhooked binders from their belt and cautiously approached. Sib shifted her weight.

When the soldier came within a half-meter of her she pulled him towards her with the Force and called her lightsaber from her belt to her hand with the same thought.

She spun the soldier around and held her lightsaber close enough to the soldier’s face that they could both feel the heat of the blade. She felt a little bad about using a human shield, but not that bad. As long as they kept very, very still.

“Let me go,” Sib said.

The soldiers looked to their commander. Sib had just outed herself as a Jedi and that would give them a moment of pause. Sib’s shield kept just as still as she’d wanted them to. It was well known just how sharp lightsabers were.

Sib took a step backwards and pulled her captive along. The soldier tensed up but no one yet looked like they were going to shoot. Good to know the Sith had a little sense of camaraderie.

“Shoot!” the commander said, whatever internal struggle they’d gone through resolved as quick as that.

They let loose on her as loyalty won over compassion.

The human shield was a bit of a bluff. Sib threw the soldier away and used her lightsaber to deflect the on-target plasma. A Force surge threw the soldiers off their feet and their weapons spinning away. She dashed for the engine room. She’d have a better chance to lose them among the machinery.

She tore the door open with the Force. Plasma hit the doorframe as she swung into cover. Soldiers pursued and found themselves bottle-necked in the narrow corridor.
Sib was in the auxiliary cooling system, just a few rooms away from the tractor beam power. The tractor beams had a dedicated power system, separated from the main engines, and their own auxiliary power system a few rooms farther. The auxiliary cooling systems were a tangle of pipes that ran through massive metal blocks. In the rear of the room a series of large pumps worked in huge, shuddering beats. The room was three stories tall with a mesh walkway above her that allowed access to the pump machinery.

There was a door on the upper level that would lead to her destination. A quick climb up a pipe would get her there and the soldiers off her tail. She’d be out and away before they could even find the ladder.

#

“What the hell do you mean she’s a Jedi?” General Kodin’s entire wrath was directed at a miserable ensign who’d brought him the news of Sib’s altercation. Otieno tried to not look like she hung on every word.

“She had Jedi powers, sir.”

“I know that!” General Kodin turned to the communications officer; “Get me Victorialus on the comm. I need to tell Darth Ruin about this.”

General Kodin sat down across from Otieno as the comms officer established an uplink. “Care to explain, Rear Admiral? Or would you rather wait for Darth Ruin? He won’t be as friendly as I’ve been.”

Otieno kept quiet.

“You continue to impress me, Rear Admiral Otieno,” General Kodin said. “I’d offer you a job, but I know you’d never take it and I wouldn’t trust you if you did.”

“Connection established, General.”

Kodin went to the private room just off the bridge for the call. Otieno let her shoulders drop once attention was off her. The bridge crew were focused on their jobs and the soldiers set to guard her not concerned she’d do anything. She was tied up, her leg throbbing, and the drugs in the bacta patch they’d slapped on the wound made her thoughts fuzzy around the edges. She wasn’t going anywhere.

She would have liked to warn Sib about Darth Ruin. Her encounter with him still drew an awful, visceral reaction. She never wanted to see him again, not in holo or anywhere. Sib wouldn’t have a chance if Darth Ruin boarded the ship. If Kodin did another message with her she might risk saying something. The only way to ensure Darth Ruin didn’t find Sib was for Sib to get off the ship as soon as possible.

General Kodin returned with a sour look on his face. “Darth Ruin wants to speak with you,” he said to Otieno and motioned the guards to bring her into the private room.

From a combination of drug, injury induced nausea, and the thought of seeing Darth Ruin Otieno nearly hurled her guts out then and there (the last meal she’d eaten was an energy bar six hours ago.) The back of her throat stung with stomach acid.
Kodin’s private room was dark except for the glow of Darth Ruin’s holo. He looked exactly the same as she’d seen him before: cloak, eyes in shadow, gloved hands clasped over his stomach. His image was sharp and tinged with color. He was somewhere nearby or they’d developed a quality communications system in the Unknown Regions. Otieno hoped it was the latter.

Otieno had no chance of standing on her own so the soldiers carried Otieno in front of Darth Ruin. He smiled when she finally stood in front of the camera. Kodin stood just to the side.

“Rear Admiral Otieno,” he said, his voice as awful as Otieno remembered. “Good to see you again. Seems you’ve been busy since we last met.”

Otieno didn’t want to be taken as afraid, so she answered. “I can’t say the same.”

“I suppose not,” he said. “I have a good guess of the Jedi’s identity if you’re here.” Otieno’s heart stuttered. Of course, the Sith had seen her and Sib together when he’d possessed Tantro. “General, your intruders just a Jedi Padawan, her name Sib. Do what you can. If you haven’t captured her by the time I’m done here, I’ll deal with her myself. For your sake, I hope that isn’t required. I’d rather have them both alive, but if you really have to decide Rear Admiral Otieno is the more disposable of the two.”

The holo faded on that ominous note and the ambient light rose. A nervous look had appeared in Kodin’s eye and his lips tightened into a thin line. Darth Ruin had given quite the ultimatum. Otieno’s safety was also not so assured as it had initially been.

General Kodin gave Otieno another look over; a new appraisal of how she could be best leveraged. On the holo table’s control panel he opened up a ship-wide channel, audio only.

“Attention Jedi Padawan Sib,” General Kodin said. “Your ‘friend’ Rear Admiral Otieno has given you up to save herself. Darth Ruin will arrive shortly to deal with you. You have no friends and no way of getting off my ship as we’ve now destroyed the shuttle you arrived on. If you surrender yourself now I can promise a degree of mercy Darth Ruin would never give. You have ten minutes to turn yourself over to the first soldiers you can find.” Kodin smirked at Otieno as he signed off.

Otieno would rather die than betray Sib to Sith. The implication of his lie was too awful for Otieno to believe. Even Sib couldn’t forgive something of this magnitude. Losing Sib would wreck her more effectively than anything the Sith could.

“I think it’s only a matter of time from here, hm?” General Kodin said. “I look forward to giving your Jedi companion into Darth Ruin’s hands. I hear he’s something of a researcher. All sorts of stories about the Force and science experiments gone wrong. I, for one, look forward to seeing what use he can make of your friend.”

He nodded to one of the guards. “Keep her in here. She’ll be out of the way and quite safe. Not a finger on her. I want her in, well, no worse condition for Darth Ruin.”

Ten minutes passed without Sib’s surrender. Otieno was both relieved and terrified. If Sib had any good sense she’d be out of the system in the next half hour. Otieno wasn’t certain Sib had any good sense. Otieno wasn’t certain she wanted Sib to have any good sense.

Stories about the awful experiments the Sith performed on the Force abounded. The Sith Wars had produced horror stories that children still told each other late at night. Sib could never be subjected to that. She was much too good and talented and promising to have it all torn from her. Otieno would
do anything to prevent it.

Not that there was anything she could do. There was no bargains she could make: nothing she had was more valuable than a living Jedi.

Otieno watched the wall clock and every moment passed like creeping vines grew around her lungs. Utter helplessness wasn’t a feeling she was used to. It was the worst thing she’d experience since Darth Ruin had first appeared to her on Garos.

Twenty-seven minutes with no change. Otieno had no trouble spinning out a thousand worst-case scenarios.

The ship suddenly shuddered as if a ground quake had hit them, but that made no sense—some sort of missile? Who would be shooting at them?

Or someone on board, maybe. Otieno smiled despite the situation. Wherever she was, Sib was causing some sort of chaos.

The guard bolted to his feet with weapon ready. There wasn’t much cause for the excitement as Sib would be a long ways from the bridge. She would have rigged something up in the engines, that’s what Otieno would have done, and the bridge wasn’t close enough to the engines to be concerned about an explosion in them. There were tons of blast-proof durasteel and shielding between the two.

Otieno got a rude contradiction when blaster fire started up on the bridge and two much closer explosions followed. Surely Sib wouldn’t have sieged the bridge. It would be an insane thing to do.

The blast doors opened and a smoke grenade twirled to the soldier’s feet. White smoke already obscured the bridge and quickly filled the room. Otieno kept still as blaster fire cut around her and the guard fired blindly into it. These soldiers were completely undisciplined! What kind of idiot deliberately subjected their comrades to friendly fire?

Hands emerged from the smoke and grasped Otieno’s arms as she got worked up about the shoddy management. A neon blue lightsaber snapped to life for just a second and rid Otieno of her restraints Sib appeared by Otieno’s side, hair singed and face ruddy, eyes reddened by the smoke. Otieno nearly kissed her then and there. “Can you walk?” Sib asked.

“Probably not,” Otieno said and gratefully took Sib’s offered hands. She was able to wobble forward with Sib’s support and Sib half-carried her towards the bridge doors. She gave Otieno a blaster, Otieno’s own blaster, and kept her lightsaber in her free hand. Otieno avoided the fallen bodies as best she could as pain shot up her leg at every step. The smoke was still a thick wall and Otieno trusted that Sib knew the way. The blaster fire had stopped as the officers regained control of the situation.

They left the smokesuddenly and found the corridor outside the bridge similarly littered with the bodies and technical debris of Sib’s attack. Sib broke into a sprint the moment they had a clear path and swung Otieno up into a bridal carry. Otieno held on with what remained of her strength.

“Where are you going?” Otieno asked as Sib careened around a corner. The blast doors slammed open ahead of them.

“Well, our ship’s lost—I got all the important stuff from it—so I was going to steal a fighter.”

“And you’ve dealt with the tractor beam?”
“Yeah, blew up the engine too. They’re not going anywhere anytime soon.” Sib gave a wheezing laugh and nearly collided with a cleaning droid. “So how are you?”

“Been shot and threatened,” Otieno said. “I’ve been better.”

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Sib said, each word between a breath. She was carrying Otieno’s weight and still in a dead run. It was superhuman that she was upright.

“Hardly your fault,” Otieno said. “General Kodin’s an asshole.” There were more questions Otieno wanted to ask but Sib’s face was turning an awful shade of red and her own wound was only getting worse.

The blast doors ahead of them opened and a dozen Sith poured through, firing on sight.

Sib took a sharp turn into a convenient door. Otieno nearly flew right out of her arms and tucked her legs in as plasma cut a little too close.

They lost the soldiers quickly as Sib outpaced them and slammed all the doors on their faces. She took another sudden turn into a small break room without any other exit. She closed and locked the door behind them before she dropped Otieno onto a chair and collapsed on the floor herself, nearly dry-heaving.

Otieno took stock of the room as Sib recovered her breath. There were lockers, a table and chairs, and a small workbench. The lockers might have medpacs, some water at least. Otieno hobbled over, each step agonizing. Sib looked completely beat. She must have been running all over for the past hour. If she grit her teeth and bore it she could walk the short distance to the lockers.

Otieno found a less-than-pristine medpac and water bottle in a drawer. It was just enough to get them to a fighter and yet another sign of underfunding. They’d both need a dip in a bacta tank back in Republic space. If they made it there.

Otieno sat on the chair knowing if she got on the floor she’d never get back up. Sib sat up enough to drink the water bottle as Otieno replaced the bandages on her leg.

The wound from General Kodin was an ugly red gash at least an inch deep. It had gone just right of her bone. The blaster had left a dark burn around the entry wound that had already started to welt. The interior was only half-cauterized. She tore open her pant leg and saw to cleaning and bandaging it. The bacta would keep her conscious and the wound numb, but she wouldn’t be able to walk on that leg for the immediate future.

They just needed to hold it together they were away. Not that long, hopefully.

“Sib, you injured?” Otieno said.

Sib rolled onto her back, her breathing not so awful. The now empty water canteen was in her hand. “No. How’s your wound?”

“Fixed up for now, but my right leg’s basically useless. I’m ready to go when you are.”

“Sorry about that, again.”

“No, don’t do that, don’t blame yourself.”

“If I’d just done what you said we wouldn’t be in this mess, probably.”
“And I’d still be stuck in their captivity,” Otieno said. “I know what I said, but I’m glad you came after me. Even after what General Kodin said. Which was a lie! I never said anything about you. Darth Ruin—the Sith Lord—”

“Guessed because he saw us together on Garos? Yeah. I knew you hadn’t given me up.”

“Really?”

Sib nodded. “Of course not. You’re much too stubborn for that. Give me a little credit. I think I know you pretty well by this point.”

Otieno smiled. It was the best news she’d heard all day. “I was so worried. I didn’t want you to think that of me.”

“Yeah, well,” Sib said and shrugged. “Ready to go? We’re nearly there.”

“Let’s get off this piece of junk.”

Sib got to her feet with a bit of help from Otieno and they leaned on each other for support. They were both exhausted. Sib gave each door a careful check before moving forward. Otieno assumed the Sith had increased security on the hangars, but they’d never be able to guess which one of the many hangars they’d go to, and the Sith lacked the bodies to be everywhere at once.

Sib had a whole plan for the theft part. She explained it to Otieno in great detail even though Otieno’s injury kept her from helping.

Sib brought them to a hangar control room first. Two guards stood at the door and Sib said there were three people inside. She propped Otieno into a comstation alcove before she got to work. Otieno kept her blaster ready and listened as Sib efficiently cleared the way.

In only a minute Sib was done and she brought Otieno into the control room. Sib had dragged all the bodies inside. The armor of the two soldiers burnt and scored and the three comptrollers were cut through the chest and smelled faintly of burning flesh. Otieno dropped into a seat as Sib began the process of unlocking one of the starfighters and opening the airlock.

Otieno peered down into the hangar. There were a dozen Sith soldiers standing around and six two-seat, long-range starfighters. Their design was a touch smaller than the Republic starfighters. It would be enough to get the two of them to Republic space and yet another piece of evidence against the Sith they could use.

Otieno jumped when the airlock breach sirens started up. Angry red lights flashed in time with the harsh klaxon. For a split second the soldiers froze; then they dashed to the exits and cleared the path for Sib and Otieno.

When the hangar was clear Sib brought out her lightsaber, stepped on top of the controls, and shattered the window with two quick swings. She pulled Otieno up beside her and together they took measurement of the leap. It was a ten meter drop to the hangar floor from control room.

“Ready?” Sib asked.

“Sure,” Otieno said. She put her arms around Sib’s neck as Sib wrapped an arm around her waist. Otieno let Sib take the actual leap. Sib hit the ground as if it hadn’t even been a meter, but Otieno’s stomach still flip-flopped at their descent. She could never be a Jedi.

They fast-walked to the frontmost of the six fighters. Sib jumped up and opened the hatch and then
dropped onto her stomach and reached down for Otieno. She had grabbed onto Sib’s hands when the blast doors opened and the Sith, either just having realized there was no airlock breach or found the bodies in the control room, burst in with blasters firing.

Otieno yelped as some plasma got a little too close to her feet. Sib pulled her up quickly and dropped her into the gunner seat. Sib would pilot as she was in relatively better shape. Otieno buckled in and started the gun systems as Sib did the final preflight checks.

The soldiers blasters left only carbon scoring on the fighter’s armors as they closed in. Otieno jerked the hull gun towards the Sith. A few, realizing their mistake, attempted to find cover, but the gun chewed them up in seconds.

“Ready!” Sib said and the fighter lurched up. Sib opened the throttle all the way before they’d even passed the airlock. Otieno opened up the more powerful wing guns once they were clear of the hangar in case any fighters tried to pursue.

But there were no pursuers, and neither did any of the cruiser’s guns or torpedoes turn on them. From the outside, Otieno couldn’t see any of the damage Sib had caused. There were two other cruisers in the immediate vicinity and in the moments before they made the jump she caught a glimpse of torpedo guns turning towards them, but then everything became a long smear, turning into just another point of light, and they entered the shapeless, luminescent nothing of hyperspace.

Otieno released her death grip on the gun controls and fell back against the seat. Behind her, Sib laughed, breathless.

“Hell’s bells,” Sib said. “We did it! We’re out, Otieno.”

“We did, we did,” Otieno said. She closed her eyes and rested her head back. She couldn’t believe their luck.

Sib twisted around in her seat and looped her arm around so she had Otieno in a sort of one-armed hug. Otieno laughed too as the reality of their escape settled in. She placed her hand over Sib’s.

Otieno held on and Sib kept her arm around her. It was all the contact possible in their cramped quarters. Otieno had never been so happy just to hold someones hand. She’d never been so happy to see someone else alive and well. She’d never been so happy as she was with Sib.

Otieno tightened her grip on Sib’s hand and held it against her chest. She’d been so terrified of losing Sib, of thinking Sib had lost her. Now they were safe, and…what? She’d been prepared to surrender anything to keep Sib safe. What did that make Sib to her? She’d been prepared to betray the Republic for Sib. That was new. How she felt about Sib was new. It was a bit like love.

“We’re heading to Ansion,” Sib said. “I was thinking we could stop there, refuel, get some food and some clothes and medicine for you, then straight on to Coruscant. It’ll be a day to Ansion, then a day and a half to Coruscant.”

“Okay,” Otieno said. “That sounds good. If there’s any military on Ansion we should get in contact with them. I know the Admiral who’s in charge of the sector.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to spend too long in this fighter. It’s too small.”

“It is,” Otieno said. She pressed her cheek to Sib’s arm, briefly, then let her go. However Sib had twisted herself around was probably uncomfortable. Otieno watched Sib sit back in the faint reflection of the window. She looked completely wrung out. “You should sleep. I’ll take over the controls.”
“You sure?”

“I’m sure. My legs fine now that we’re sitting.”

“If you say so,” Sib said. She switched steering over to Otieno’s side and curled up, resting her head against the window and her fist. She fidgeted for a moment before going still. She was asleep in a few minutes.

Otieno watched with the nauseating sense she was getting in over her head. Sib was a Jedi. She’d known, deep down, from the moment they’d met they’d never have a relationship. It was simply impossible. Every single time she’d started getting feelings for someone she’d been very effective in shutting it down. It had always been better that way. She’d always had something more and something bigger to focus on. Somewhere along the way she’d forgotten that.

She wanted to reach back and hold Sib’s hand again, so badly her bones ached with it, but Sib’s hands were nowhere she could touch and Otieno didn’t want to wake her. She settled in for the long trip ahead.

Chapter End Notes

Shout out to @me for finishing and publishing this chapter in almost a month??
Wouldn't it be amazing if I could keep that up??
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

A separation occurs.

Chapter Notes

School sure did kick my ass! This is combined 7a/7b. If you want to occasionally remind me to write and that I do, in fact, enjoy writing and this story you can hmu at categoriesixkaiju.tumblr.com.

Sib was used to the stability of the Jedi. For all their faults, they were reliable. They’d followed the same tenets, worn the same clothes, wielded the same weapons, and lived in the same temple for the several thousand years they’d been around. The Jedi hated change and Sib had learned to as well. At some point her life had changed into constant flux. She’d never so badly wanted the boring consistency of the Jedi.

Otieno fared a little better. Sib sensed Otieno was anxious, but not as badly as Sib might have guessed. There was something…buoying her. The Sith ship would have upset her, naturally, but she adjusted to new situations so easily it made Sib jealous. Though it still didn’t explain the happiness.

Otieno’s physical state was another matter. The moment they’d touched down on Iridonia’s military base, after a short detour to Ansion, she’d been strapped to a gurney and whisked away to the infirmary, given a hospital smock, and stuck with needles.

Sib worked the holodisk as Otieno explained the situation to Admiral Teck: their point of contact and Otieno’s old mentor. Despite her state, Otieno was as vigorous as ever. Otieno had contacted Admiral Brina Teck, the admiral in charge of the sector, on Ansion and told to come straight to Iridonia. They’d beaten Sib’s transmission from the Sith ship but it would soon reach the first beacons and hit the various channels not long after.

Admiral Teck had cleared the infirmary room of even the medical droids for Otieno’s presentation of the facts she and Sib had gathered. Admiral Teck’s expression grew troubled as Otieno laid out everything they knew. Otieno promised they could trust Admiral Teck. So far Sib agreed.

Sib had never heard of Admiral Teck beyond what Otieno had mentioned. Apparently, she was a decorated admiral for her work in the outer rim and colonies. The remoteness of her work kept Admiral Teck from the discussions of Coruscant. Admiral Teck was human, or near-human, and nearly albino, except for her silver eyes. Sib ventured she was Echani, but she also might have just happened to share their traits. Echani made formidable generals and fearsome Jedi. An Echani was the weapon’s master at the Jedi Temple.

At Otieno’s conclusion, Admiral Teck took a long moment of silence. Otieno drank water as Sib put away the holodisk in a safe pocket. Sib sat at the foot of Otieno’s bed, Admiral Teck was in the only chair, and bounced her leg as she waited. She and Otieno exchanged a brief glance.
“Well, you’re clearly not lying,” Admiral Teck said. “There is undeniably a fleet that poses a threat to the safety of the Republic. I believe you when you say it’s Sith, but I’m not certain I can convince the Military Assembly of that particular fact.”

“They don’t need to believe it’s the Sith,” Otieno said.

“I suppose not.” Admiral Teck crossed her arms and leaned back. “Well, you have my full support, Aurnath. I’ll get in contact with the Assembly and present your evidence. I’ll send out my own patrol ships to sweep the area. If they’re aware you escaped they’ve probably gone, but we can trace their paths. We’ll see what we find and go from there. At the least I’m certain I can convince the Assembly to scramble and conduct a full investigation. I’ll issue an advisory for sectors adjacent to Wild Space to prepare for the worst.”

“Thank you, Brina,” Otieno said. “Sib will get in contact with the Jedi.”

“Do you think they’ll join? I understand the current High Council is rather isolationist.”

“If there’s Sith, they have to,” Sib said. “The problem is convincing them that they’re legitimately controlled by a Dark Jedi. The Council has already denied it once.”

“I was going to contact Senator Naheir as well,” Otieno said. “Though the Senate won’t do much until the military report is out.”

“Then we’ll get that done as soon as possible.” Admiral Teck stood. “I’m going to arrange things. You two rest up.” She left them quickly. Admiral Teck walked like Otieno did: very brisk, straight back, and with that funny heel-toe stride a lot of military had. Sib heard her order the medical droid to remain outside.

Otieno laid back and closed her eyes. “With Admiral Teck on our side this will be much easier,” Otieno said. “She has a lot of weight in the Assembly.”

“You’re confident they’ll do what’s necessary?”

“They don’t have a choice anymore,” Otieno said. “We’ve forced their hand.”

“It’s what we wanted to do.”

Otieno sighed and slit her eyes open. “There was no good conclusion to this.”

“I guess we made the best of it.” Sib stretched her back and shoulders. The freedom of movement was a relief after the straighter. Sib hadn’t been able to get even a moment of restful sleep while they traveled. All her exhaustion had compounded until she could hardly focus her eyes.

“Sib, you ought to get some rest,” Otieno said. “Use the other bed.”

It was a two-bed room, very plain, with a small refresher in the back corner and a curtain to divide the space. There was no window or exit besides the one door.

“Yeah, okay, that’s a good idea,” Sib said. “Wake me when Admiral Teck shows up.”

“Of course.” Otieno closed her eyes and Sib assumed she was about to sleep herself. Neither of them would be waking then. The bacta was working hard on fixing up her leg but she still looked rough. The medical droid said she’d be fixed up in a day. The military base had access to care not usual in the outer rim.
“Thank you for coming to get me,” Otieno said as Sib stood to go to the ‘fresher. She needed a shower. “I really do appreciate it. I’m not sure I can ever repay you for that.”

Sib shrugged. She was still figuring out why she’d done it herself. “Considering all the shit I’ve put you through I’d say we’re even. On Garos and Eriadu…that was me being stupid and you getting in danger for it. You’ve done more than enough.”

She didn’t wait for a reply. The ‘fresher was very small, but there was a shower, and she rattled around the pre-stocked drawers until she found a toothbrush and shampoo. Sib had replied without any deep consideration, but it did raise a point she was left a bit baffled by. Why did they keep doing these things for each other?

In the moment, rescuing Otieno had felt like the right thing to do. Otieno was her friend and she wouldn’t abandon her, except the literal fate of the galaxy had relied on Sib’s escape and Otieno was no benefit to it. Otieno was just one person and, in the grand scheme, of relatively little importance. Had Otieno been anyone else—Katdia, Master Gianlo, Master Jir’zo, any of the Jedi. her own father—Sib would have done as they said. Rescue would come later.

Instead, Sib had risked everything to get Otieno. She’d let emotions get the better of her. It wasn’t what Jedi did: it was antithetical to the entire credo of the Order. There was no passion or emotion...just the Force, and the Jedi, and the individual’s ability to think clearly and control themselves. She couldn’t even do this one thing right.

Tears surprised her. She touched her lashes and smeared her vision. Otieno was the only consistently not-awful thing happening and as soon as Sib returned to the Jedi they wouldn’t see each other much, if at all. Master Gianlo was already mad that she’d left for so long and after so much exposure to the secular galaxy he’d insist she stay cooped up among the Jedi. And she couldn’t even be mad! It was all so reasonable. The rules existed for a reason. The Jedi Code was the result of thousands of years of experience. Sib had willingly agreed to follow those rules. She’d even had more say in the matter than most other recruits.

She still found it hard to believe this would lead to anything evil. A thousand other fallen Jedi had probably thought the same thing. Darth Ruin might have even had the exact same reason — if that thing was even capable of love. The Padawans joked about following in Master Phanius’s footsteps, but none of them ever would. The Order protected them and cared for them and even though Sib made such a terrible Jedi she no longer knew how to live without them. So what did she do?

Admiral Brina Teck had already taken the next step. With the advanced hyperwave relay the Republic had set up between Coruscant and Iridonia Brina had quickly made contact. Otieno would stay with Brina to help investigate the Sith planet and Sib would return to Coruscant—she had to anyway, the Order wanted her back—and would let the Military Assembly question her. Otieno had prepared a report during the long ride in the starfighter that Coruscant could read before Sib arrived.

Within the day, Otieno and Sib would go their separate ways. A crew and cargo shuttle would take Sib back to Coruscant along with some of Brina’s people. Sib would take the starfighter too.

Within a half day and a short nap Otieno was able to walk around. Admiral Teck found a uniform for Otieno and some old command stripes. The infirmary gave her crutches, pain medicine, and released her. Otieno couldn’t get out of there fast enough. Otieno and Admiral Teck would leave on
Teck’s cruiser before Sib. Otieno and Admiral Teck would join the fleet on Ansion and head to the Sith planet to see what they could find.

Otieno did her best to walk straight and lean on her crutch only every few steps as Brina accompanied her to the shuttle that would take them to Brina’s cruiser. Brina kept a hand on Otieno’s elbow. She knew she looked awful, tired with chapped lips and messy hair, but being back in a familiar uniform and with freedom of movement returned made it immaterial.

Otieno hadn’t been able to find Sib since she’d woken and left the room to find a change of clothes for herself. Otieno waited in unease for Sib to appear the entire walk to the hangar. It felt wrong to part without a proper goodbye, but Otieno wouldn’t delay their departure to seek her out.

At the bottom of the shuttle ramp Otieno was surprised to look back and see Sib jogging over. She was in a borrowed outfit with the small pack she’d rescued from the Senator’s shuttle over her shoulder. Brina and her accompaniment of soldiers headed on into the shuttle. Otieno stepped into the shadow of the shuttle wing to give some sort of privacy. Otieno shifted her weight onto the crutch as she waited for Sib to jog over.

Sib was a bit out of breath when she came up beside Otieno. They were both still recovering. “Good luck on your travels,” Otieno said. “You have an easier journey than me.”

“Well, I get to return home,” Sib said. “I’m sorry you can’t.”

“Oh, soon, I’m sure.”

“I hope so.”

“You know what you need to do?”

“I’ll get in contact with the senator and the Jedi Council.”

“Right. You’ve got control of this.”

“I do, I promise.”

“It’s very important.”

“Of course, of course.”

Otieno suppressed an awkward smile. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. You’re nervous.”

“Yeah.” Otieno rubbed the back of her hand across her face. She was nagging someone who didn’t need it, she knew that, but she was so anxious to ensure this went right. “When will we see each other again, do you think?”

Sib glanced away and was quiet for a moment. “I don’t know.”

“Soon, I hope,” Otieno said. Sadness tried to claw its way out of her. She forced it down and away. “Until next time.”

“Yeah. Until then.”

Neither of them moved. Otieno was glad the crutches occupied her hands. Wanting something she couldn’t have was a particularly excruciating form of self-harm.
Sib heaved a sigh, her face as ancient and tired as Otieno’s probably looked. “Okay, bye,” she said and moved to the walls of the hangar. Otieno hurried up the ramp before Sib could turn back. The ramp hissed shut and Otieno took the empty seat beside Brina. The soldiers kept their gaze on the floor or ceiling, but Brina stared at her.

“What?” Otieno said. It came out as a defeated sigh.

“You’re different,” Admiral Teck said. “That’s all.”

“People change.”

Brina made a face somewhere between a smile and a sneer. “Not people like you.”

The Sith had fully abandoned the planet within the day and a half it’d taken the Republic cruisers to reach the planet. A quick scan revealed subatomic ripples from their jumps to lightspeed immediately around the planet. From those, the cruisers calculated trajectories within the half hour. Shuttles and droids landed on the planet to investigate whatever facilities remained while Otieno and Brina remained aboard. Otieno and Sib’s scan had suggested a number of large buildings and at least one power plant. Otieno remained on board Brina’s cruiser.

They’d brought three other cruisers along, what Brina could gather at such short notice, and sent scouts out to track down the Sith while the ground crews worked. The Sith ships had split into four groups and departed in separate directions, but all farther into uncharted space. If they were smart they’d make a number of stops in various systems and be more careful in their departures before rejoining.

Any fears Brina or her captains might have had was resolved when the first images of a weapons factory was sent up. All the computers had been scrubbed and a few buildings hurriedly demolished, but it wasn’t enough. The evidence was plain and the pieces not difficult to put together. Everything they found confirmed Otieno’s story. A lot of manufacturing of some very dangerous machinery had been done.

Otieno took one of the spare seats on the bridge, in considerably better care than the last time she’d been in a bridge, as Brina stood at the helm and managed the survey. Otieno watched a live feed from one of the scout droids. Massive production floors and machinery seemed endless. The self-destructed shells of the worker droids littered the factory floor. She could only imagine the number of weapons and armor and supplies that had been produced here. They prepared as if they were an army of a million.

Nearly an hour passed like this. The slow spread of troops and cumbersome investigations played out in a slow and less than engaging fashion. Otieno watched, but her mind began to wander later on.

“Aurnath.” Brina tapped Otieno on the shoulder. “They found a human in the buildings and they just deposited him in the cells. Would you like to speak with him?”

“Yes.” Otieno had no hesitation in that. She wanted answers and something to do.

“Come with me.”

Otieno followed Admiral Teck to the cells as fast as she could manage. Brina adjusted her pace to accommodate Otieno. Six soldiers served as an escort and Brina made them stay just out of earshot.
“What’s the story on that Jedi, Aurnath?” she asked, her tone mindfully hushed. Otieno had spent most of the trip to the planet asleep and Brina in work. They hadn’t spent any time together.

“She’s very unique,” Otieno said.

“Clearly. I’m more interested in…her personality. A Padawan out and about in the world with someone like you? A military person, I mean.”

“She never told her teacher the whole story.”

“Ah, there it is,” Brina said. “What she’s like?”

Otieno frowned. Why did Brina care so much about this? “She’s very secular. She’s brave, a bit foolish, but smart. She’s very skilled. Why do you want to know?”

“How do you feel about her.”

Otieno glared at Brina and willed her leg to work better. “Why do you care about that?”

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Aurnath.”

“It’s not a game I entered willingly, Brina,” Otieno said. “And it’s none of your concern.”

“When the people I care about are getting themselves into trouble, it is my concern.”

Otieno’s snappy reply was tempered by Brina’s far too earnest expression. When Brina cared about something, she wholly cared. For the short trip in the lift they were silent.

The cells on Brina’s cruiser were empty but the guard room remained appropriately manned. All the troops stationed on Iridonia, a few thousand, had been moved onboard. Most waited for further orders. The warden allowed Brina and Otieno into the cell and closed the door when he left. They weren’t in any danger.

The prisoner wore faded clothes that had been patched several times over but were otherwise in good condition. The man had all the physical hallmarks of an isolated life in the far reaches of space, though he was hardly from the tales of horror that reached the civilized galaxy. Otieno had seen other humans and non-humans with similar physiological changes. Strange mutations from a combination of radiation, unnatural environments, inbreeding, and crossbreeding.

“I’m Admiral Teck, this is Rear Admiral Otieno,” Brina said, her tone firm but not cruel. “I’m in charge here. What’s your name?”

The prisoner was silent, his eyes turned down.

“Do you speak Basic?” Otieno asked.

The man nodded. “I speak it.”

“So what’s your name?”

“Mm…Max.”

“Alright, Max, what were you doing on that planet?”

“I was…mm, I was one worker.”
“Who did you work for?”

“They didn’t call themselves nothing.” Max rubbed his fingers over his knuckles. “Sometimes said they were ‘the final army.’ Heard ‘peace-bringers’ too.”

Brina glanced over at Otieno. “Who led them?”

Max shrugged. “Never knew, never saw. Got orders from boss and not much more.”

“What were their goals?”


“Were you a slave, Max?” Otieno cut in.

Max tensed up, then nodded. “Yes. They…mm, they came and attacked my planet. Stole people. Killed things. Stole me. Left my parents.”

Brina had a sharp frown now. “Could you find your planet on a map?”

“Yes.”

Brina opened the cell door and asked a guard to fetch a map. Max hunched down and shied away from the sudden attention. “Why do you want my planet?”

“We’re trying to learn about the people who enslaved you,” Otieno explained, feeling rather sorry for the man. “It will be helpful if we know where they’ve been, and we might be able to arrange for you to return home.” Brina gave a tight shake of her head at Otieno. “If we decide you can be released,” she amended.

“I want to go home,” the man muttered. He cast his eyes down and seemed to recede into his own head.

Brina cleared her throat. “What did you build for them, Max?”

“Ship parts. Starfighters, little things.” His answer came slower than before. “I was…mm, an engineer. Repairman and tinkerer, back home.”

“How long were you with them?”

Max frowned and his brow pinched together. “Years, I think. It was hard to track time.”

“Why were you left behind?”

“Left all at once. Escaped in confusion.”

“Were there other slaves?”

“Yes…a few hundred. People with skills like me. Hard labor done by droids and machinery.”

“Do you know where they’ve gone?”

“No…never told us nothing.”

Brina tapped Otieno’s bicep once and left the cell. Otieno waited a moment before following. Otieno sensed something bothered Brina. “Thank you, Max,” Otieno said. “We have to keep you in here for
now, but we’ll see about your legal status. I’ll instruct the guards to make sure you’re comfortable.”

Max bowed. “I’m free from them. That’s all I wanted.”

Brina waited just outside the door for Otieno, her face pinched in concentration, just as a guard appeared with a map. Brina instructed him to head in and find out where Max was from. Brina went to the guard station and once there gestured for the guards to leave.

“Aurnath,” Brina said, her voice low enough Otieno had to lean in. “If they’ve taken slaves why haven’t we heard about it? Why haven’t I heard of it? I know everything that happens in my sector. Even on the planets that aren’t officially part of the Republic. If pirates attack a mining facility a thousand light years off Kalee I hear about it. If anything suspect comes within a hundred lightyears of Csilla or their hyperspace routes the Chiss tell me about it! And I’m expected to believe a Sith have not only been building a fleet on a planet less than five thousand lightyears from the fringes of the Republic but have been conducting raids and taking hundreds of slaves?”

“There’s a lot of incredibly isolated planets out there and not all of them are space-faring. It’s not inconceivable, especially since it wasn’t a Republic planet.”

“No, I don’t believe it.” Brina opened the comm channel to Max’s cellblock on the warden’s station. His holo image and the image of a soldier wavered to life. “Max, did your planet have spaceships? Could you use hyperspace.”

Max looked around, uncertain where the voice came from. “Mm…yes. Also, I’ve found my planet on this map.”

“Guard, bring it to me,” Brina said. She snapped off the holo and looked at Otieno, as if expecting an answer.

Otieno shrugged. “Maybe they didn’t leave anyone alive after all. I wouldn’t put it past them.”

“I would hear about an entire planet that went out of communication, and you know I keep track of non-Republic planets too. They depend on Republic routes and our economy. We all know they’re too backwards to make most technology on their own.”

The guard with the map arrived and offered it up to Brina with a curt “sir.” Brina opened the holo. It was map of the entire galaxy compressed to a half meter. Max’s home planet was marked with a red “X.” Brina zoomed in on it until they could see Max’s home, not actually present on the map and certainly not labeled, as well as its neighboring systems. It was roughly two thousand light years from the line of Republic space and three thousand lightyears from Esfandia, the Republic’s relay point for communications between the Republic and Wild Space. Just outside of Brina’s sector.

“Look!” Brina said, her tone pitching up. “Look! Look! They’ve—fuck! They’ve stolen these people right from under my nose!”

“Brina, they’re very good at what they do, they’ve been operating in secrecy for ten years.“

“But I’m better,” Brina snapped. “I’m better than these half-witted, space-addled—!” Brina shut her eyes tight and pinched the bridge of her nose. She took a few deep breaths and let her shoulders fall. She opened her eyes, her lips still pinched into a thin line, but her voice calm now: “They have someone who works for me. It’s the only explanation.”

“It’s certainly possible,” Otieno said. If they’d gotten General Kodin and possibly the Queen of Naboo it would be easy for them to pick up any random officer that happened to agree with their principles. “Any ideas who?”
“I’ll have to think about it,” Brina said. “I can’t imagine any of my officers betraying me but…I never imagined anything like this.”

“We’ll figure this out. We know what to look for now.”

Brina wrinkled her nose, but acknowledged this. “Let’s head back to the bridge. I need to get in communication with Iridonia.”

Otieno motioned for their accompaniment to follow as Brina headed for the lift. They’d need to do quite a bit of cross-referencing to find whoever’d betrayed her. Brina had a good memory for her officers, but not perfect and occasionally lower officers would reassign the people they were in charge of.

Otieno, Brina, and the six soldiers barely fit into the lift. Otieno’s palms itched in the small space as Brina remained deep in thought. The soldiers left Brina and Otieno just enough room to stretch their elbows out.

“Aurnath, I need to investigate this,” Brina muttered. “I’m putting you in charge of ground reconnaissance.”

“Yessir.”

“I’m going into—”

Alarm lights blasted on and washed the room in red. A precisely neutral voice instructed “all crew to battle stations.” The ship lurched to the side an instant later and Otieno and Brina were knocked off their feet, the soldiers falling down with them. The lift briefly ground to a halt as the ship’s computers readjusted power outputs to shields and turned on auxiliary generators.

Brina didn’t even get to her feet before she’d answered her comm. The lift started back up and Otieno and the soldiers helped each other to their feet as Brina rapid-fired instructions. Any hint of earlier concern was replaced with the unshakeable resolve of an Echani in battle.

The soldiers drew their blasters and got into a tight formation around the admirals as the lift opened. Brina kept on the comm as the group sprinted for the bridge. Otieno listened to the discussion. Three Sith cruisers had come out of hyperspace on the opposite side of the planet and immediately opened fire. Sith starfighters were coming towards them and the bridge-commander had scrambled their own starfighters the moment the Sith ships appeared. A single blast from the cruisers had hit them before the shields were at full capacity and done some surface damage.

The bridge enfolded Brina back into the chain of command the moment the doors opened. A guard at the door announced “Admiral on the bridge.” Brina took her place. An officer handed her a headset and at her right hand holos of the rear admirals in charge of the other two cruisers sprang up. The bridge had both helm and tactical staff on watch precisely in case of this scenario. Everyone was already at work.

Otieno found a place in the back, out of the way, and watched. She had no position in this crew and any attempt to help would only muck up the chain of command and the discipline Brina had carefully installed in her officers. Otieno tried to hide her terror at the situation, though no one paid any attention to her. Otieno had no experience in this sort of battle. The worst that had happened under her command were small pirates and smugglers. She’d never faced an opponent who could match the power of a Republic ship—only a handful of admirals could say they’d had the experience.
Admiral Teck was, fortunately, one of those. She’d been involved in a short Separatist conflict seven years before. A massive Separatist force had gotten hold of the Tallaani Shipyards by subterfuge, moved several cruisers to their mid-rim base, refused any surrender or peace deal, and been finally dealt with by the newly minted Admiral Teck.

Otieno figured if she couldn’t help she could at least learn something. The Republic cruisers were positioned a few kilometers from the planet’s thermosphere, not an ideal position for a battle, but the Sith cruisers had chosen a poor place to come out of hyperspace. Their engagement line was tangent to the planet and head-on with the Republic ships. The three Sith cruisers were all of the same size and design and were roughly the same length as the Republic cruisers. Readouts indicated small fighters were already en route for the Republic ships.

Subsequent volleys were absorbed by the Republic shields. Scans indicated the Sith had turbolasers, a variety of missiles, and ion cannons. A standard load out and nothing suggested their weapons had any edge on the Republic nor their shields particularly better.

The equally matched cruisers would be caught in a slugging match decided by either the skill of their captains or the strength of their starfighters. If any more Sith ships showed up the Republic would definitely be forced to retreat. It was only because of the soldiers they had on the surface, which Admiral Teck had immediately ordered to return to their ships, that they didn’t already. They were unprepared and had no reason to risk themselves in this fight.

The first few squadrons of starfighters shot from the hangars and split apart to either engage the Sith fighters or to defend the ground shuttles. Their coordinators were stationed around a triangular holo table near Otieno. She used it to keep track of the ships. She was about as far from the viewports as one could be.

Despite the rush and the blaring lights (now shut off on the bridge) the first minute or so of the encounter were, frankly, boring from the perspective of a bystander. The Republic cruisers lumbered into a defensive position. A handful of fighters met in the empty space between the two groups but were too far for their lasers, green and blue and red, to be more than glitter. The officers on the bridge were mostly seated and spoke in calm voices over their comms and to each other. The two sides fired at each other but the lasers were readily absorbed by the shields and the anti-missile defenses caught incoming torpedoes in small, silent explosions. Otieno hoped the Sith were in a bit more of a disarray. Ideally, their lack of experience would cripple them in a crucial moment. Even the youngest officer on Admiral Teck’s bridge had at least a thousand hours of experience, most more.

“Rear Admiral Otieno.” Admiral Teck turned and motioned Otieno forward.

Otieno went to her at a quick walk. “Sir?” Otieno said, the old role of mentor and mentee one she was glad to return to.

“It’s going to be at least another twenty minutes before we can get all our crew onboard,” Admiral Teck said. “You’re currently our expert on the Sith. What do you think their plan is?”

Otieno had been considering the question. “I think they’re just going for a show of strength and trying at an easy victory. We discussed this, but again their leader feels they’re finally prepared to come out of the shadows. They want open war and blatantly attacking a Republic cruiser is an easy way to do that. "One of the pit officers, the shield engineer, called up that shields were at ninety percent. Otieno continued: “And this puts them at very little risk. There’s three cruisers, but because of our troops we can’t easily retreat, but we were at least marginally better equipped for something like this, but they can easily retreat, so on.”

Admiral Teck’s gaze flicked between the weapon output displays in front of her and the viewport
but she gave a strong nod when Otieno finished. She was an excellent multitasker. “I had the same thoughts. Captain Linus, Captain Den, did you hear that?” she looked towards the small holo figures of the commanders of the two other ships. They both responded in the affirmative. “If that’s all they want, I feel good that we can hold out. We’ve avoided fighter casualties so far and our pilots are landing quite a few hits. The ground evacuation is going quickly.”

“I hate to have our fighters out there like that,” Captain Linus commented. His normal voice synced with his very small figure.

“So do I, but it’s necessary. As long as they maintain their defensive formation they should be fine.”

“What if they do call in reinforcements?” Captain Den asked.

“We’ll deal with that when it becomes an issue,” Admiral Teck said. Just in front of the viewport a laser exploded again the shields in a firework of plasma. They were blinded for a moment and the closest officers ducked down. The plasma faded and vision returned. The scene was unchanged.

A flare of red on the navigation consoles caught Otieno’s attention. An instant later the officer yelled back at Admiral Teck: “Someone’s coming up on our rear, at our three-fifty. Forty seconds until entry.”

On the small holo depicting the ship's on the battlefield a disk appeared to mark the entrance point. Hyperdrives on large ships were powerful enough that most noticeably bent space in their landing as well as their exit. “Linus! Swing around as quick as you can, starfighters too. Balance shields towards our rear. Do we know who it is?”

“No communications, Admiral.”

“Twenty seconds!”

“Shields balanced.”

Admiral Teck and Otieno braced against the handgrips for whatever came next.

#

Sib noted the two soldiers in an uncommon drab grey uniform at the end of her transport ship’s gangway. Small craft and transport shuttles rose and fell from Coruscant’s Terminal One tarmac as soldiers hurried to their flight or to the exit and droids moved equipment. Sib was the last to exit the shuttle, her temporary shipmates passing the grey soldiers without issue, and she walked slowly down the ramp. The soldiers watched her descend. She braced herself for a few more hours of military nonsense as the one on the left opened his mouth.

“Padawan Sib, would you please come with us,” he said, a young human, and the two neatly stepped into her path.

Sib hoisted her pack over her shoulder. “Where to?” she asked.

“Command center,” the other said. “You’re not under arrest.”

“Good to hear. Lead on.”
An unmarked speeder idled in the parking area on the edge of the tarmac. They put her in the backseat and took the front for themselves. The driver followed a restricted access lane off the tarmac towards the command center.

Terminal One was the primary planet-side shipyard/tarmac for the military, but due to complicated zoning restrictions the command center and terminal were a few minutes drive apart. Shuttles and private lanes eased the distance. Fleet headquarters, where Sib had first meant Otieno, were a bit closer, but still a few minutes off, and in a different direction.

Returning to Coruscant after time out of the Core always left Sib overstimulated. It passed after a day or two, but for the moment she wanted to shrink into a ball just from a glance out the speeder’s shaded window. Their path suddenly veered low and the thousand meter tall buildings and endless traffic crowded out the sky. She already missed the stars.

The soldiers didn’t speak. She assumed this was about a debriefing. Admiral Teck had tried for an audience with the Military Assembly, the highest internal governing body of the military, but that was a long shot. They tended to be more selective than the Jedi High Council.

The speeder dipped into a unlit underground passage. A HUD appeared on the speeders windshield as the driver turned on autopilot and locked onto the passage’s electric rails. The speeder slowed to a crawl as they entered a garage half-filled with a variety of speeders and vehicles in the same matte black/grey paint jobs. She assumed they were now underneath the command center. Sib gave a cursory examination of the soldiers moods, just to reassure herself there wasn’t any funny business. Both were unconcerned and bored. If something was up, those two didn’t know about it, and Sib still had her lightsaber.

They pulled up to a curb near a lift. A Mon Calamari with a briefcase and a human in officer uniforms waited with a single secretary. Sib opened her door before anyone else could. There were all lightly armed but not ready to draw.

The Mon Calamari extended a webbed hand. “Padawan Sib, I’m Admiral Korta.”

The human did not offer a handshake and introduced himself as General Dago.

“You clearly know who I am,” Sib said. “Why the secret garage?”

“This is a matter of galactic security,” Admiral Korta said. “Please come with us to a secure room.”

Admiral Korta lead the way. The initial two soldiers remained with the speeder. Sib sensed General Dago was somehow unhappy with the state of affairs. She’d ask Otieno about him.

They were the only ones in the lower levels. Sib didn’t know how far down the command center went, there were quite a few levels of Coruscant yet below them, but Sib guessed they were closer to the bottom than to the top. The lift took them even farther down. She’d heard a lot of rumors about the sort of operations conducted so far from the sky.

There was an absurd multitude doors, sequentially numbered in the thousands, and they walked for several minutes down the straight corridors and sharp corners. Admiral Korta stopped at door three thousand two hundred twenty-eight and tapped his keycard against a hidden panel. The door slid open.

The room was nicer than Sib had expected. The spacious conference room had a round table large enough to accommodate about twenty individuals. There was a large holo platform installed in the table and plenty of standing room around the edges. The walls were deep blue with dark wood
floors, unscratched. Admiral Korta pointed Sib to the seat nearest the door and the two officers settled on either side of her with a few chairs as buffer. Sib leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest. The secretary waited without.

“Padawan Sib, we received your initial transmission concerning the presence of what you call ‘Sith’,” Admiral Korta said. “Followed by a formal report from Rear Admiral Otieno and a message from Admiral Teck. She strongly recommended we speak personally with you while she corroborated your report. We also examined the briefing Rear Admiral Otieno sent in and, naturally, desire to discuss this with you.”

“Naturally,” Sib said.

“What we want to get at, padawan, is that are you aware of the extreme sensitivity of what you’re involved with?” General Dago asked. He probably ate screws for breakfast.

“Of course.”

“Then why did you send out a transmission over an unsecured channel?”

“It wasn’t ideal, yeah, but I wasn’t certain I was going to make it out and I didn’t have any secured channels.”

“You do comprehend that this was a serious breach of security.”

“Sure.”

“Fortunately for you, we were able to cut off the worst of the fall out. The information is still mostly out of public channels, but do you understand the panic that would ensue if a news organization had gotten hold of it?”

“I admit it wasn’t ideal, but it was all I had. I didn’t do it because I wanted to.”

Admiral Korta chimed in: “General Dago just wants to ascertain you understand the scale of the issue here.”

“Of course I do. Probably better than anyone else.”

“What you probably aren’t so aware of is that these things have to be handled in a very particular way,” Admiral Korta said. “And the severity of the consequences if it were mishandled.”

“To get to the point,” General Dago said. “It is of the utmost importance that you do not discuss this with anyone. Not the Senate, not the Jedi, and not any journalists or civilians.”

“This whole affair has been classified top secret, Padawan Sib,” Admiral Korta said. “Until we can figure out the whole situation you are to deny all knowledge of this and to refrain from investigating it any further.”

Sib didn’t like the point of this conversation, but was glad they’d finally gotten to it. “So what, not even the Jedi?”

“Not even the Jedi,” Admiral Korta said. “Not until we give you permission. If you ignore our warnings and speak with anyone we will prosecute you for treason.”

Sib raised a brow. “So are you going to tell the Jedi about this?”

“When we think it’s appropriate,” Admiral Korta said.
Sib uncrossed her arms and leaned forward as she tried to glare at both of them at the same time. “This is absurd. If there are Sith the Jedi need to know about it. Unless that decision comes within the next few hours it’ll be too late.”

“We doubt that it will be ‘too late,’” General Dago said. “Padawan, we need you to sign a document saying you’ll refrain from discussing this.”

“And if I don’t sign it?”

“Then we’ll classify you as a security threat, arrest you, and keep you in confinement.”

They seemed serious. Sib couldn’t talk them out of this, and physically forcing her way out would be suicide. Arrest would be fruitless and embarrassing, considering her background. She still had options even if she signed the document, but this made her life far harder than it needed to be.

“Fine, I’ll sign it,” Sib relented.

Admiral Korta produced a sheet of flimsi and a writing stylus from his briefcase and slid it over. Sib had heard the government sometimes used flimsi for sensitive topics. She experimentally clicked the stylus end as she read over the document.

The contract managed to cover everything she could and couldn’t say or do and all the ways she couldn’t say or do it in in a couple of paragraphs. They were certainly efficient in regards to security. Sib scrawled her three letter name on the bottom line and let the stylus clatter onto the table.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Padawan,” Admiral Korta said as he stretched across the table to gather the flimsi and stylus. “The drivers will take you wherever you want.”

Sib had no intention of following the contract. She’d meet with the High Council as soon as they’d let her and speak with Master Gianlo. The drivers dropped her off at the Jedi Temple’s public entrance, back again in the sunlight.

The path was clogged with petitioners, non-Force-sensitive acolytes, tourists, government officials, and Jedi going about their work. Sib slipped through the crowd easily. A few children gave her curious looks and a being, fully concealed in ragged clothes, made a grab for her coat and jabbered in an alien language. The masked Jedi guards at the door let her pass through as the civilians waited in line for their IDs to be scanned.

Inside the temple, the crush diminished. Padawans and their master rushed by, tiny younglings and their teachers bumbled along in noisy bunches, droids carried packages and cleaned and gave direction, and lone Jedi made a stately pace to their destination. Sib kept her hood up. She’d contacted Master Gianlo on the ride over and he’d said to meet her in one of the library wings. He hadn’t indicated anything over the conversation and neither had she. The military probably had signal interceptors in their vehicles.

Sib had deliberated on what to tell Master Gianlo. He was her ticket to a meeting with the council. Admiral Korta and General Dago’s warnings had her appropriately concerned. She knew she was right, but treason was a heavy accusation if they got wind of her plans. Her newfound paranoia had her at a level of triple-thinking she wasn’t used to.

Sib reflexively slapped her hand against her pocket when the senator’s secure com vibrated. Otieno and her had agreed it made the most sense for Sib to hang onto it. Sib answered immediately.
“Which one is this? Where are you?” the senator said.

“Hello to you too. It’s Sib,” she said. “I’m in the Jedi Temple.”

“Good. I have a copy of your report.”

“How did—”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m working on getting a waiver for you to discuss what you found with the Senate inner chamber. I’m hearing some serious chatter. We need to speed things along.”

“Okay, what do—”

“Keep your head down, be wary, contact me if anything odd happens. I’ll set up a meeting with you soon.”

The com light blinked off. Sib stared at it for a moment. What an odd woman.

Sib had done some research on the queen of Naboo and her relationship to the senator. They didn’t seem to be personal friends, but their policies mostly agreed and they had a clean record of interaction. They both came from Naboo’s royal houses, the queen a lesser one, but still prestigious. The queen received a first class education and top marks. Fancy internships, all the social graces, unmarried, childless, no scandals of any sort. A moderate liberal with a propensity for free trade. She was a steady hand on the wheel.

Even without the Hutt’s warning, Sib didn’t trust politicians, no matter how clean they were. She’d known all about her father’s political connections. There were senators and governors considered shining lights of democracy on his payroll.

Sib had agreed to help the senator on their first interaction because she’d felt the senator’s overwhelming conviction. The senator had believed, presumably still believed, what she did was right, and the presence of that conviction had given Sib the certainty needed to agree. The senator’s belief may have been earnest then, but that didn’t mean she was uncompromisable, or that she always had the best judgement on who to trust. They needed to be wary with her moving forward.

The rest of Sib’s walk was uninterrupted. A few padawans and knights her age nodded hello. It was a busy time of the day and most hurried to lunch or their next appointment. Stars, she was hungry.

Master Gianlo awaited her in one of the many semi-private alcoves of the library. Since the flimsi books and some of the more valuable holocrons weren’t allowed outside the library there was an excess of reading spaces. Master Gianlo had no holocran or book. Sib threw her pack in and sat opposite him.

His beard bristled as he frowned at her, but there was concern in his expression. “I’m glad you’re alright, Sib.”

“Me too.”

“We have a lot to discuss.”

“Definiteley.”

“Please tell me about your travels, before we go any further. I trust the rear admiral is well?”

“Otieno’s fine,” Sib said. “She’s still working. So here’s the thing: officially I’m not supposed to tell
you or anyone else anything, because I signed a legal document that says I won’t and if I do I can be arrested for treason.”

Master Gianlo’s frown deepened. “Treason? What in the world did you two get up to?”

“We didn’t do anything, promise, it’s just a whole weird security thing,” Sib said. “And it’s a bit of a story.”

She told Master what had happened. She left out a few personal details, but talked about Eriadu and her father and everything else. The words came easier than she’d anticipated. Master Gianlo refrained from interruption even as his expression grew more and more concerned.

It all felt so much more real and not nearly as insane when said out loud. There was logic and reason and a chain of events that she could follow. She felt less like a conspiracy theorist when Master Gianlo didn’t immediately laugh her out of the building. She also wanted his advice. Otieno was clever and well educated, but they were both fairly young. Sib could allow that some knowledge came with age.

Master Gianlo tugged at his beard and creases Sib had never seen before appeared in his forehead. “I’ll admit, Sib, I’m disturbed by what you’ve told me. About the Sith threat you believe exists, of course, but also your own actions. It seems nothing more than pure luck that you didn’t fall to the dark side.”

“But I didn’t, so that counts for something, right?”

“Everyone’s luck runs out eventually, Sib. I know you think you’re nigh-on immortal, but you are not, and in the past few weeks you nearly got yourself killed or captured several times, by your own admittance.”

“I tried my best.”

“I think you barely stopped to consider your actions in this entire time. You should consider yourself fortunate the rear admiral has more of a presence of mind than you. Why would you not do what she said onboard General Kodin’s ship? An important part of working as a team is listening to and following reasonable instructions.”

“And just leave her to whatever those assholes would do to her? That’s insane. I’d never do that to someone!”

“The rear admiral would likely have, because she would have recognized the greater importance of getting your data out.”

Sib had no answer to that and her cheeks flushed as she realized that was so. She didn’t know what Otieno would have done. She knew what she wanted to believe. “Well, that’s why I sent the transmission out.”

“And if it hadn’t worked?”

“Except it did!”

“But what if it hadn’t,” Master Gianlo said. Sib drew back, unnerved by his intensity. He grimaced and rubbed his jaw as he spoke more: “You can’t just hope that everything will work out every single time, Sib, that’s what I want you to understand. I will allow that there are times where one must simply trust in the Force, but that doesn’t mean you can’t take things seriously. You have responsibilities, as a Jedi, and I can’t fathom why it’s hard for you to understand that your actions
influence others. You can’t just *blindly act* like you seem to so love doing.”

Master Gianlo leaned back and sighed. “You are not an idiot, Sib. I have never thought you are. You clearly have potential and deep intelligence, and yet you…ignore it. You blithely carry on with your life. You don’t do what you should and you do what you shouldn’t. I am entirely at a loss.”

Sib stared at her hands on the table as her throat tightened in a way she didn’t like at all. This wasn’t what she wanted. Not what she intended. She’d been chewed out before, but this one had been unexpected, and more true and hurtful than all the rest. She remembered the disappointment on her father’s face as she left him. At least her father had no choice when it came to his daughter. Master Gianlo had made the deliberate sacrifice to his career to take her on as a pupil.

“So what now?” Sib asked, quietly.

“I’m not going to kick you out, if that’s what you mean,” Master Gianlo said. “I still believe in you. I see in you still what made me first offer to become your teacher. Perhaps that makes me the greater fool between us.”

“Thank you,” Sib said, a little tension relieved in her chest.

“Things will have to change moving forward. I will reconsider my approach to training and make some other adjustments. You won’t be galavanting off around the galaxy anymore. Most importantly, I need you to recommit yourself to this.”

“Of course, yeah. I promise.”

With slight hesitation, Master Gianlo nodded. “Good,” he said. “As for the rest, I will contact the council for a meeting. You are clearly serious in this, at least, and I agree it warrants consideration. I’ll inform you when they’ve agreed to discuss this with you.”

Sib nodded weakly, unable to do more at the sudden relief of everything not completely falling apart around her.

“I’ll do that as soon as I can,” Master Gianlo said. He haltingly patted her shoulder, that sort of physical encouragement not the norm between them. “Stay safe, please.”

Sib considered her next step as she followed the circuitous path to the dining hall and tried to ignore the pure anxiety that vibrated from the top of her head down to her toes. She trusted the council would keep her involvement quiet for the time being. She didn’t want to go to jail. The Jedi had a little leeway when it came to Republic law but not that much. If the council was on her side they might convince the Republic to exchange her sentence and have the punishment dealt out by the Jedi. Or she might be tried and sentenced to the next few decades in a secret Republic jail. Funny, she thought she’d gotten out of a life of crime.

Keeping with the theme of no rest for the wicked, Katdia intercepted Sib before she could get her meal. Katdia had changed clothes from when Sib had left her. The new robes were longer, darker, and made of a thicker material. Katdia cheerily waved down the hall. Besides the robes, she looked the same and she smiled warmly as she approached.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Katdia said as she looped an arm through Sib’s. “I was a little afraid you’d run off.”

“Can’t get rid of me that easily.”
Katdia rolled her eyes. “You’re like a bad chip, huh?”


“Same old. What did you find?”

“Can’t really tell you, sorry.”

Katdia pouted. “Oh no?”

“Not right now, anyway,” Sib said. “There’s a lot of stuff going on. I suspect in the next few days you’ll hear about it.”

“Hm, I’ll have to be patient,” Katdia said. “I’m still mad you didn’t bring me along.”

“Maybe next time,” Sib said. “And everything’s normal here? Really?”

“Well, I’ve been working in the archives, so I might have missed something,” Katdia said. “Are you going to Master Gianlo right now?”

“I just met with him actually. What are you up to?”

“Going to a seminar. You should join me, it’ll be fun.”

“You sure?” Sib said.

“Absolutely. You seem preoccupied,” Katdia said. “It’ll be good for you.”

Sib allowed Katdia to take the lead, curious enough about this to ignore her stomach and glad for the normalcy of Katdia dragging her off to something interesting. “Who?”

“You don’t know all of them,” Katdia said. “They’re mostly knights visiting from Dantooine. They showed up while you were gone.”

“What are they doing on Coruscant?”

“Tourists. Visiting scholars, too, kind of. They wanted to look at some holocrons in the library.” She shrugged.

Katdia acted more blasé on the surface than usual, though her fast pace and firm grip suggested otherwise. As if it was imperative they get wherever they were going soon.

“Sib, before you meet them, I want you to promise you’ll at least listen to what they have to say,” Katdia said. “It’s going to sound a little out there, but they’re good people, I promise.”

Sib nearly stopped right there. “That’s not a great intro. Are they cultists or something?”

“We’re already cultists, Sib,” Katdia said with a bit of a strained laugh. The muscles in her jaw were tense. Paranoia strongly recommend Sib not go a step further, but this was Katdia. Not a mysterious senator or Hutt or whatever. Her best friend since she’d joined the Jedi. Katdia deserved the benefit of doubt.

“Okay,” Sib said with a very poor attempt at good cheer.

Katdia’s grip lightened and an honest smile appeared. “I’m so glad. I think you’ll get along great.”
The Dantooine Jedi stayed in one of the many guest dormitories. It was a quiet time of year and the sparse halls in the out-of-the-way section of the temple were quiet. Katdia knocked twice on their door and waited for entrance.

The panel slid open and a Jedi Sib didn’t recognize stood at the controls just to the left. Seated on the ground and on the beds were twenty-odd Jedi—all strangers to Sib. They were in a rough circle, just enough for casual conversation.

A lecturing red-skinned Togruta was the center of attention when Sib entered. The Togruta abruptly cut herself off at Sib’s arrival. Focus shifted to the newcomer.

“This is Sib, the friend I told you about,” Katdia said as everyone stared. “This is Master Sohkdi, she’s the organizer of their trip.” She gestured to the Togruta. Master Sohkdi bowed her head.

The energy of the room was as though Sib had walked in on a life or death conversation. She already regretted agreeing to this. “Hello,” she said.

“Glad you could join us,” Master Sohkdi said. “Have a seat. We were just discussing Revanic interpretations of the Jedi Code. How long have you been a Jedi, Sib?”

“Since I was twelve. I joined late.”

“You lived with your family?”

“Yes.” The attention of the room intensified on her. “Just my father.”

“Did you have a hard time adjusting to being a Jedi?” Master Sohkdi asked.

“Yeah…."

“What was the hardest thing to adjust to?”

This was an easy thing to answer and the line of questioning was odd enough that Sib did. “The particular responsibility associated with it.”

Master Sohkdi looked around at the other Jedi. “Which relates nicely to our discussion. How do we decide our responsibilities? How do we balance the many creeds of the Jedi? This was the fundamental issue Revan faced when she split with the Jedi, and even later when she became Darth Revan. At any given point we have to make a choice about where our true values lie and what shall yield the greatest benefit to the galaxy as a whole. It is a unique burden to those with the Force. We have the ability to fundamentally shape the galaxy in ways others can not imagine. Reflect on this as you eat dinner tonight.”

The Jedi stood nearly as one and gave polite bows to Master Sohkdi. Sib and Katdia stepped aside to let them file out. Sib got a few curious glances but no one said a word to her, or to each other. Master Sohkdi remained, now on her feet, and waited for the last to shut the door.

Master Sohkdi’s head tilted to the side as her dark eyes gave Sib a quick look-over. “What did Katdia tell you about us?” she said.

“Very little,” Sib said. “You’re study group looks like fun.”

Master Sohkdi’s face twitched in a peculiar way and she clasped her hands over her stomach. “The intention is enlightenment, not fun.”
“Why not both?” Sib said, smiling.

“Have you been part of discussions about different interpretations of the Jedi Code?” Master Sohkdi asked without acknowledging Sib’s joke.

“Not too many.”

“That’s no surprise,” Master Sohkdi said. “You don’t get much of that discussion here. The Jedi who consider dogma open to discussion are generally discouraged from residing on Coruscant.”

Sib nearly made another joke about burning heretics, but Master Sohkdi clearly wasn’t interested in humor. “So why are you here?”

“I want my pupils to create a better future,” she said. “To do that they have to know the current ills.”

Nothing Master Sohkdi said so far was new. There were always agitators for reform, and most recognized there were times when the Jedi Code was impossible to exactingly follow. Sometimes there had to be compromises and change. The current Jedi High Council was known for its liberal stance on quite a few topics.

Yet Katdia and Master Sohkdi hesitated to bring her in on whatever discussion was happening. It was an odd thing in a chain of odd things. Her anxiety faded as this new puzzle presented itself.

“Yes,” Sib said. “Why’d you want to bring me into it?”

“Master Sohkdi looked to Katdia and nodded towards the door. Katdia bowed and lightly rapped her knuckles between Sib’s shoulders, a friendly gesture, as she left. Sib’s concern spiked as the one friendly face left.

“I spoke with Katdia about you, naturally, as you two are good friends and trained together,” Master Sohkdi said. “We spoke about how she thinks you’ve deserved the mantle of a Jedi Knight for some time now.”

Sib frowned. An odd discussion to have with a visiting Jedi, not matter how insightful she might be. “What about it?”

“I understand you don’t always agree with your Master Gianlo,” she said. “I think you might agree with me more.”

“So?”

Master Sohkdi’s lips tightened and her head tilted a little more forward. “You are aware that a padawan may make a request that her training be handed over to a new teacher if she believes her current situation is not sufficient?”

Sib kept her body disciplined, Master Gianlo’s lessons fresh in her mind, and only the slight tightening of her eyes betrayed her surprise. “Sorry, what are you suggesting?” she said, keeping her tone light.

“I’d like to take over your training.”

Master Sohkdi—a complete stranger—was offering to take over Sib’s training based solely on Katdia’s recommendation? It was completely ridiculous. Sure, Sib didn’t always get along with Master Gianlo, he’d just chewed her out for being an idiot, but she’d never argue he was an incompetent teacher. It was an incredibly irregular thing to suggest.
A favorite lesson of her father whispered in her ear: nobody did anything unless there was something in it for them.

“Why?” Sib asked.

“I sense an important future in you,” Master Sohkdi said. Her demeanor was almost comically serious. “I can give you what you’d otherwise lack. I believe it is my duty to the galaxy to ensure such a promising student reaches her potential. With Master Gianlo you’ll just be another Jedi, one of thousands, mindlessly upholding antiquated doctrine. You don’t have to be mediocre if you train with me. You can leave a mark on the galaxy. You can be remembered.”

Sib could so easily imagine agreeing. She knew dozens of Jedi who would without a second thought. In one of her weaker moments, before the last few months, she might have agreed. But the person she was now didn’t want that. She’d had a taste of what it meant to be important and what leaving a mark on the galaxy looked like. She knew all the stories of all those important Jedi that the Force centered around. She knew everything you needed to know: they’d been miserable, and died miserably, and been entirely alone. Half the time they fell to the dark side and were struck down by a Jedi who had an important destiny too, and the cycle continued.

“No thank you,” Sib said, softly, her nerves quieter than she expected. “Clearly I’m not who you think I am. Maybe somebody else would want to be important, but not me. I had the opportunity to be important and I decided against it. I don’t regret that choice. And I like Master Gianlo. He’s a good person, even if he’s stodgy and old and a slave to rules. I wouldn’t still be here if anyone else had taken me on. He’s the only one who’s as stubborn as I am.”

Sib turned to leave, but Master Sohkdi grabbed her sleeve and pulled her back around. She had an apologetic look—as if she regretted the use of force even as she held on. “Let me rephrase then, Padawan Sib, and tell you a story about my old Master,” she said.

Sib was curious, and still calm, and didn’t like the tightness of Master Sohkdi’s grip. “Fine.”

Master Sohkdi smiled, relieved. “My old teacher was a Jedi called Master Phanius. I suspect you’ve heard of him. He was well respected but eventually left the Jedi Order twelve years ago, by his own decision, because of certain disagreements. He was my second teacher. The first had been rather like your Master Gianlo. I thought I was content under his tutelage at first, but I decided to take a chance and transferred my apprenticeship to Master Phanius. I was like you. I thought I understood myself, but I was wrong. I understood a false image of myself. A shell that the Jedi had built up for me and had convinced me to believe in.

“Master Phanius broke that shell. He showed me my true self. My true strength. He gave me will and conviction to be as good as Jedi as I could be. He showed me the truth of the Force. I think you’ve come to suspect that there is more truth in the universe that what the Jedi say. What I desire to do, and Master Phanius did for me, was to discover my own truth. It doesn’t have to have anything to do with making a mark, or being important, or destiny. It can be as simple as recognizing what you and the galaxy are really made of. Consider this offer for the sake of your own self-fulfillment. I would hate to see a bright young mind dimmed because of a failure of education.”

The argument felt viscerally familiar to Sib and with a wave of dread she remembered the underground lake in Garos and the awful, gripping voice that had tried to drown her. The words were different, but the selfish enticements the same. Sib could feel the same conviction in Sohkdi as what been in that lake. The promise of strength, knowledge, and freedom. At the unspoken cost of everything that made her human.

Sib squared up to Master Sohkdi. Though it hadn’t been her intention, Master Sohkdi’s final plea had
only galvanized Sib’s decision. “What’s in it for you?” Sib asked.

Master Sohkdi hadn’t seemed to expect the question, to Sib’s immense satisfaction. It was nice to have the upper hand sometimes. “I get the opportunity to put someone on the right path,” Master Sohkdi said. “To see you succeed.”

Sib pulled her sleeve from Master Sohkdi’s grip and put her hands on her hips. “I’ll prove to you right now that I’m not the idiot you seem to think I am: I don’t believe you,” Sib said. She kept her voice firm and her gaze fixed on Master Sohkdi. “I don’t believe in your altruism. I have a hard time believing anyone does anything for genuinely unselfish reasons. I don’t like you, and I don’t trust you, because you rub me the wrong way with all your talk, and I’m being petty, and I also trust my gut, and I’m not going to leave Master Gianlo because I’m not a quitter. I know all about how the Jedi are liars and how they don’t represent truth. I’ve spent twelve years outside of here, remember? But I stick with them because I think most of them care, and they want to do good. I’d rather be with honest fools than whatever selfish, self-righteous clique you’re a part of.

“So, it’s not happening,” Sib said. Master Sohkdi’s nostrils flared in frustration. Small victories. “No offense.”

Sib used the Force to open the door ahead of her so she didn’t have to stay a second longer. The echoes of the cave on Garos had her still queasy and unhappy memories bubbled just below the surface, but she had never felt more certain she’d done the right thing and said the right words. The desire to be out of doors as soon as possible nipped at her heels.

Katdia leaned against the wall with her arms crossed in the hall. She said something as Sib passed her. She was primarily mad at Master Sohkdi, but it extended to Katdia for dragging her into this nonsense.

“Talk to me, Sib,” Katdia said as she followed. “Whatever you’re freaking out about, just stop and talk to me, okay?”

Sib kept on, but did reply. “I do not believe for one second Master Sohkdi has good intentions, Katdia. If I were you, I wouldn’t listen to her. Did you really not notice yourself? Did you really think I’d go along with this?”

“I just wanted you to try it, okay? You’re not under any obligation to do anything.”

“Did you know she’d ask what she asked?”

“Well, what’d she ask?”

“She wanted me to be her pupil,” Sib said. She stopped and drew up close to Katdia to keep the next words between them. “She talked about potential and strength and important destinies. Katdia, it felt like what a Sith would say.”

Katdia scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not,” Sib said. “If you’d experienced what I’d experienced—”

“Oh, for the love of light, you think I’m not at least a little bit familiar with the dark side?” Katdia said. “I’m a knight now. I’ve seen the dark side, Sib. I’ve felt its relics and gone to its burned out planets. This is not the same.”

“It’s the same to me.” Sib moved on and Katdia kept pace.
“You’re being so ridiculous right now, Sib,” Kadtia said. “If you don’t want to be her student, fine! Just don’t compare what she’s doing to the Sith.”

Sib didn’t respond. She was so tired of her every experience and belief and thought being questioned. She knew what she knew. It was cut from the same cloth, even if Master Sohkdi had no evil intentions.

“Well, if this is how you’re going to behave,” Kadtia said, her face twisted into a scowl. She followed Sib for a few seconds more, maybe expecting an apology, then scoffed again and fell behind. Sib kept on. She didn’t need to justify herself to Kadtia more than she already had.

The argument didn’t concern Sib as much as the rest of it. They’d probably reconnect in the next few days with both rather sorry for what they’d said. They just needed time, and maybe Kadtia would actually consider what Sib had said. This wasn’t their first argument.

Sib still couldn’t figure why Master Sohkdi had offered this opportunity to Sib. Why, of all the infinitely more capable Jedi in the temple, did Master Sohkdi choose her. Sib didn’t believe in fate and destiny quite like the other Jedi did. She thought people had a lot more freedom than the Jedi gave credit for, and Sib suspected Master Sohkdi would agree. There were absolutely other Jedi that had the same potential as Master Sohkdi had seen in her, yet Sib had been singled out.

The coincidences made her skin crawl. That she’d find an echo of what she’d seen on Garos in her own home, right when she returned. That it was only a few days after she’d narrowly escaped a Sith Lord. Something was worse than she’d thought.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Sometimes things don't work out like you want them to.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 7a/7b have been combined, so this is the official chapter 8.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Captain Linus maneuvered into position as fast as his ship could manage. Otieno watched the holo map as Admiral Teck coordinated the starfighters. A few swung back to meet whatever would appear from hyperspace while the bulk remained engaged with the Sith. The Sith remained as they were.

“They’re here,” the navigator said. Information dashed across multiple screen as the Republic ships scanned the newcomer.

There were two ships. One was a mid sized freighter and the other a sleek scouting ship designed more for speed and maneuverability than firepower. They were an unexpected pair. If a freighter wanted protection they’d hire a gunship, not this small thing.

“The scout ship is registered as Chiss and the freighter to a corporation from Naboo,” the navigator turned back towards Admiral Teck, any confusion or concern hidden.

“I’m in contact,” the comms officer announced.

“Put them on,” Admiral Teck said. “Patch in the others.”

“Yessir.”

Another holo sprung up alongside Captain Linus and Captain Den. A Chiss man, the captain of the scout ship, stood casually in the plain uniform of the Chiss military. His features were partially obscured in the static of the holo.

“Greetings,” the man said. “I’m Captain Cag’osaesh’on of the Chiss expansionary defense fleet. The freighter we are escorting is a Naboo merchant vessel.”

“Admiral Teck, Republic Navy.”

“Do you require assistance?”

“We have the situation under control.”

“Certainly.” The captain relayed instructions in Cheunh to someone out of sight. “I see that you have troops still on the surface.”
“Hence why we remain.”

“You’re holding your own.”

“So we are.”

“Who do you battle? I don’t recognize the ships and they refuse to answer our attempts to hail them.”

“Once this is settled I’d be happy to discuss the situation with you,” Admiral Teck said.

“In person?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. I’ll head over at the first opportunity. Admiral.” He tipped his head to her.

“Much obliged, Captain.”

The Chiss captain ended the communications and as if on cue the Sith starfighters retreated to their hangars. Admiral Teck ordered the Republic starfighters to hold position and not pursue. The scanners noted an energy surge from the ships and a moment later the Sith blinked out of real space.

The shoulders of half the bridge crew relaxed as one.

The bridge remained in battle settings but the officers turned their attention to reconnaissance and retrieving the starfighters. Reports filtered up to Admiral Teck. They’d sustained no real damage and the shields recharged quickly. The teams still planet-side proceeded with evacuation. They’d discovered what they could and it was possible the Sith would return with reinforcements. The tractor beam brought in the wreckage of two Sith starfighters that remained in the area. Most scraps had been thrown out of range.

Once the situation had settled down some more, the Chiss and Naboo ships spat out shuttles. Admiral Teck put the coxswain in command and she and Otieno headed for the guest hangar. A small guard followed Brina and Otieno at a discreet distance.

“The Chiss have allied themselves with the Sith in the past, correct?” Admiral Teck said, voice quiet.

“Yes. During the Great Galactic War.” Otieno had done significant research on the Sith over the past few months. “But that was several thousand years ago and it didn’t turn out particularly well for the Chiss. I’d be surprised if history repeated itself.”

“Are we sure, though?” Admiral Teck said. “If the Chiss thought these Sith better equipped they might shift, and you did mention Naboo might be wrapped up in this.”

“I agree it’s rather suspicious that a Naboo freighter is out here but I’m not certain these Sith would so blatantly approach a former ally.”

“We can only hope,” Admiral Teck said.

The Chiss shuttle looked more like a personal craft or small yacht that hadn’t seen hard or long service. The Naboo shuttle, in comparison, was a roughed up thing with a few decades of wear on it. Both captains and their accompaniments had already stepped out and joined together. The Chiss soldiers had their rifles slung across their chest and hands on grips, fingers over triggers. Did they trust the Republic so little or was it just habit?

Republic soldiers stood nearby, a bit uneasy, but in good form. When Admiral Teck approached the
Chiss captain stepped forward to greet her.

“Captain Cag’oasesh’on,” Admiral Teck said and extended a hand towards the man.

The captain received her handshake with an arm politeness. “Admiral Teck. I’m glad the situation was resolved.”

“I as well.” Admiral Teck gestured to Otieno. “This is Rear Admiral Otieno, she’s the closest thing we currently have to an expert on the group who attacked us.”

Otieno had wondered why Admiral Teck brought her along. “Pleasure to meet you, captain.”

“Certainly, Rear Admiral,” the Chiss said. He gestured to his own group. “This is my Second Officer Cerm’wok’ornes, Captain Sabosen of the freighter, and Ambassador Naqua of Naboo.”

The second officer was a round-faced youth, the Naboo captain a heavily jowled middle-aged woman, and the ambassador an older women in and airy white-and-gold robes with the well-aged features of someone who’d never seen hardship or significant labor.

“Ambassador, captain,” Teck said. “It’s an honor to receive you both. Are you returning or venturing out?”

“Venturing out,” the ambassador said. “Aboard Captain Sabosen’s ship. For efficiency’s sake it’s useful to travel onboard freighters and such. Captain Cag’oasesh’on kindly agreed to escort us.”

“I have some questions, and I’m sure you have some questions for me,” Admiral Teck said. “But we should discuss it in private. We have a secure conference room.”

“Is the nature of this information classified?”

“It’s highly sensitive, but not yet classified.”

The Chiss captain motioned forward. “Lead on, admirals.”

Admiral Teck took the head and the Chiss captain walked alongside her. Otieno followed with the ambassador, Naboo captain, and second officer. They walked in perfect silence. Otieno didn’t know enough about Naboo’s politics to say if the ambassador was a junior or a senior. By her age Otieno guessed a senior.

The conference room was small but had a wide viewport that happened to be turned towards the planet. The last of the troop transports were specks of reflected light leaving the atmosphere. A droid had prepared pitchers of water and glasses.

The Chiss and Naboo sat without invitation on the window side and Otieno and Admiral took the other. Their various guards waited outside.

The Chiss captain clasped his hands on the table. “So who were those people, Admiral?” he asked.

“You first, I think. What brought you here?”

Otieno wondered if that was the ghost of a smile on the man’s face. “Well, our actives are no secret. I was escorting the ambassador. We stopped at one of our mining stations between here and your space, a routine maintenance check, and while we were there a ship of unknown make and affiliation, similar to the ones we found here, came out of hyperspace. It refused to respond to our communications and after several minutes went on its way. We managed to stick a tracking bacon on
its side. We traced it here. We’re still tracing it, if you’re interested. I’m sure they’ll shortly find the beacon. So, Admiral, who were those people?”

Admiral Teck pinched at her lower lip. “Do you think they intended to arrive at your mining station?”

“One-for-one, admiral.”

Otieno hoped only she caught the slight twitch in Admiral Teck’s eyes at this retort. “We think they’re Sith.”

All four responded with what impressed Otieno as un-fakeable surprise. “The Sith? As in the actual Sith?” the Chiss captain said. “Well…I didn’t expect that.”

“We have good evidence for it.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“Now it’s your turn for an answer.”

“We believe the mining station was their target. It’s related to why the ambassador is here. There have been…” the captain looked at the ambassador. “Acnisystor?”

The ambassador stirred. “Admiral, Naboo’s reasons for contacting the Chiss is of a similarly sensitive nature, but considering your helpfulness so far and that you were just in battle with these people we’re willing to discuss it. This group you’re calling ‘Sith’ have attacked and raided a number of freight shipments from Naboo to the Ascendancy and made incursions into Chiss territory. Initially we didn’t think much of it and, because this was all happening in unclaimed space, the Chiss requested they be allowed to handle it. We assumed they were simple pirates or wayward colonists. Piracy happens, it’s a fact of trade, as I’m sure you’re aware. But they broke their pattern and attacked a passenger ship with no valuable cargo other than one of Naboo’s junior ambassadors, and a daughter to a minor noble family, that dealt with trade relations. The ambassador and her entire crew was killed and the ship scuttled. I have arrived to take possession of her body and try to figure out a way to deal with this. It has become a profound nuisance.”

“What makes you think these aren’t simple pirates and instead related to the ships we saw now?” Admiral Teck asked.

“Because these pirates also attacked one of our colonies,” the Chiss captain said. “In the battle one of their ships was destroyed. In the wreckage we found the suggestion of…disturbing ideas.”

“Did you intend to bring this to the attention of the Republic?”

“It was discussed,” the ambassador said. “The Chiss desired to handle it internally, as I said, but with this new information that may no longer be an option.”

“Does the information you found suggest Sith?”

The ambassador pulled the hem of her scarf closer. “Neither of us teach nor keep records of Sith ideologies.”

Admiral Teck nodded. “Of course.”

The captain spoke: “Has this been brought to the Senate’s attention yet?”
“As we speak.”

“Are the Jedi aware?”

“They are being made aware.”

The ambassador and Chiss captain spoke a few quiet words in Cheunh to each other.

“Your information brings a new urgency to the situation,” the ambassador said. “We will need to seriously reexamine certain decisions.”

“I would strongly recommend you forward any intelligence you’ve obtained on to the Republic,” the admiral said.

The captain nodded. “I will contact our own ambassadors and suggest they open up discussions.”

“I very much hope so,” Admiral Teck said. “I will give you my personal line to pass on to your ambassadors, should the need for my backing arise.”

“That is much appreciated, Admiral Teck,” the captain said. “Your hospitality and openness is well noted.”

Admiral Teck cued the conference was over by standing. “I’m so glad we could discuss this. I believe we all learned something valuable. Captain Cag’oasesh’on, Second Officer Cerm’wok’ornes, Captain Sabosen, and Ambassador Naqua of Naboo, you have my thanks,” Admiral Teck said with a polite nod to each. “Rear Admiral, I have to return to the bridge, could you see them to their ships?”

“Yessir,” Otieno said, mostly on instinct. She hadn’t expected the request.

Admiral Teck departed first at a brisk business-like pace. The Chiss and Naboo lingered a moment longer while Otieno waited at the door. They didn’t speak and kept their attention forward as Otieno walked alongside the ambassador and Chiss captain. The Chiss might perceive being foisted off on a lower rank an insult, but Brina was legitimately a busy woman at this particular moment. The walk allowed Otieno some time to digest what she’d just heard. Brina would likely debrief with her later.

It was a gamble, in many ways, to bring the Chiss in at all on the situation, but it had benefited them in the end. If they hadn’t revealed some of their hand the Chiss wouldn’t have in turn. Brina had done well in revealing just enough to get them engaged and interested without genuinely compromising anyone. At this point, secrecy was out the window. The Republic clearly had figured out the existence of the Sith and now possessed some sense of their resources. If the Chiss were in contact with the Sith they couldn’t bring anything they hadn’t already figured out, as Otieno figured it.

The same uneasy state between the Chiss and Republic soldiers remained in the hangar. The captain and second officer boarded their shuttle and the Naboo captain boarded hers. The ambassador hung back and lightly gripped Otieno’s elbow to draw her closer.

“Rear Admiral,” the ambassador murmured. A line had appeared on her brow as she stared, uncomfortably intensely, at Otieno. “There’s quite a lot going on here. More than you suspect. Do be careful, for the galaxy’s sake.” Otieno had no response as the ambassador slipped a small data-chip into her hand. Otieno glanced down to see it was nothing more than a business card. “You have a friend in me,” the ambassador said. Her face smoothed over and she swept away to the open hatch of the Naboo shuttle.
Otieno concealed the data-chip in her fist and waved with the other as the two shuttles departed. The skin of her hand prickled as her grip tightened around the data-chip. Naboo wasn’t as innocent as the senator believed…or would have them believe.

Two weeks passed of fruitless search before Admiral Teck called off the hunt. They catalogued and stored what they could of the Sith planet and placed a lockdown on the planet—a series of beacons around its equator that was the equivalent of red tape. It wouldn’t stop anyone who really wanted to land but it gave a warning that doing so was illegal and sent a message back to Admiral Teck.

Two of the cruisers returned to Iridonia while Admiral Teck’s flagship continued on to Coruscant. The ship needed certain upgrades, replacements, and restocks anyway. Otieno tried to put the pieces together over the hours spent in hyperspace.

The Sith needed more than an army to conquer the galaxy. They needed, and all signs indicated they had, a network of agents, allies, and sympathizers throughout the galaxy. Friendlies placed at key points in the economic and political world would ensure that when the Sith finally made their attack, however that might appear, important industries and planets would make no move to resist, and might even join. The Republic would be caught unawares. Even the highest echelons of power in the Senate, Jedi, and military weren’t beyond suspect. There were any number of planets that were discontent with the Republic and susceptible to bribes or coercion. The candidates included some of the key galactic travel and resource hubs. It would only take a few and if the Sith leader was genuinely half as clever as he seemed to be he’d know exactly which ones.

The Senator’s data suggested some suspects, but to an extent this was pure guesswork. The Sith were exceptionally good at covering their tracks. Tantro and Garos had been a slip up that they’d quickly dealt with.

Otieno paid close attention to Naboo news and noted there was no mention of the death of Naboo’s ambassador. Not on any channel, not even an obituary in the society papers. The galaxy was a busy place but the death of an ambassador by an act of piracy would have warranted something. Otieno confirmed there really had been a death through her own contacts, so it wasn’t a ruse, but Naboo had exercised a lot of power to keep it from the general public. The Republic was also guilty of this manipulation, though; Admiral Teck’s brief conflict with the Sith had been passed off as a small firefight with some pirates and kept from public attention.

A conspiracy at every level of society and government. A massive army growing in secret for a decade right under the nose of the Republic. Who’d designed those ships? Who’d supplied them with the resources to do so? How had, by Max’s count, thousands of people between the slaves and soldiers gone missing without a whisper coming back to the Republic? This was more than willful negligence—this was sabotage. And that they’d only heard about it now, when the ships and soldiers were already gathered…was it really so easy to fool an entire galaxy?

Coruscant was pleasantly unchanged. The official speeder that carried Otieno, Admiral Teck, and Admiral Teck’s adjutant cut underneath the traffic jam in a reserved lane. Coruscant was a comfort after so long in the backwaters of the galaxy. Amenities, reasonable drivers, properly kept buildings, and atmospheric control were the real signs of civilization.

Admiral Teck angrily flicked through the messages on her datapad. They were going to be ten minutes late to the single most important meeting of their lives.
Through the combined efforts of Admiral Teck and Senator Naiher, two women who’d never met but suddenly found themselves fighting the same fight, a meeting of the Grand Admirals, the Jedi High Council, and the Senate inner chamber members was arranged. Because of their knowledge on the situation, Otieno and Sib were also brought in. No one quite knew the last time there’d been such a meeting.

“Can you go faster?” Admiral Teck snapped at the driver. Her right leg bounced like it was about to jump out the door.

The driver nodded slightly but seemed to share none of Admiral Teck’s concern. She was probably used to pushy officers. “I’ll certainly try, admiral,” the driver said. Their speed picked up slightly.

Admiral Teck’s entire face twitched before she returned to her datapad. For Otieno’s part, she was more calm than she’d been in a while. Their entire focus had been on finding evidence and forcing the Republic to respond. Both those things had occurred. If the meeting went well, everything that happened next would be out of their hands. It was almost sad.

The shuttle pulled up in front of the Senate chambers five minutes after the meeting had begun. Admiral Teck had called ahead and reigned in her annoyance long enough to calmly explain the situation to a secretary. They walked at double speed through the grand lobby, Admiral Teck’s adjutant using his considerable size to bully a way through the midday crowds, and forced their way to the front of the line for a lift. They received a few nasty looks, but no one challenged them directly. Even in the senate chambers people were inclined to assume someone walking fast in an officer’s uniform was doing something important.

They were the last to arrive in the board room. A window stretched across half the wall and provided an impressive view onto Republic Plaza. Swivel seats were arranged in a large circle. A small holodeck was at the center, but there was no table. Four Jedi, five senators, including Grand Master Boha and Senator Naiher respectively, three admirals, and one general were already seated. An array of assistants had the second row of seats against the walls. The difference between the senator’s assistants’s flashy outfits and regal bearing and the military assistants’s uniforms and stiff backs was remarkable. A final seat in the inner circle was available for Admiral Teck. Otieno recognized Admiral Teck took her seat casually, all control now, and Otieno made a line for the empty seat next to Sib. She was in civilian clothes and had casually rested a hand on the seat beside her to save it. They nodded to each other, a moment of wordless communication to confirm everything was well, as the meeting began.

Senator Naiher, in a relatively understated maroon and crimson velvet dress, opened the meeting.

“Distinguished colleagues,” she said. “We are all here for one reason: we love the Republic and the galaxy we call home. And this galaxy is now under threat.” The senator pressed a series of buttons on her arm rest. The holodeck woke to show the original flat image Otieno and Sib had made of the Sith planet. A holo of the Sith planet Admiral Teck’s people had made appeared alongside it. In the flat image, the Sith ships were highlighted in red. “In this image alone, ten cruisers are visible. Analysis by the Republic Intelligence Agency from these images and other interviews has given us an idea of the capabilities of these cruisers. They range in size from twelve hundred meters to just over two thousand, they possess advanced weaponry. The run on a low-burning Tafera engine, similar to the engine standard to most Republic ships. It is the opinion of those knowledgeable they are not fully staffed, but have the capability to transport thousands. Moreover, they are staffed by competent officers and soldiers. Comparison to historic Sith ships shows intentional similarities in design.

“These are not the vessels of a rag-tag, unfunded, rogue group. These are the vessels of an
organization that is prepared for protracted war and planet siege. In a three-on-three battle between these Sith cruisers and Republic cruisers that lasted only fifteen minutes the Republic cruisers suffered twenty-five percent shield failure across the board. The naval standard is ten percent damage for every ten minutes of combat.” The senator allowed that fact to land on an uneasy audience as she changed screens.

A video holo of Max seated at a desk began to play. His arms were unbound but he sat hunched over and nervous. Max had been transported directly to the military prison on Iridonia. Otieno hadn’t heard anything more about him, though she did ask. The holo began to play in the middle of his sentence.

“—Thought I’d leave that planet,” Max said. “I want to go home now.”

“And you can,” a bodiless voice replied. Whoever was debriefing him wasn’t included in the holo. “You just need to answer some questions first. What did you do on this planet? In detail, please.”


“What parts did you build?”

“All parts…engines, hulls, controls, wiring, shields, wings, propulsion, guns.”

“What sort of engines.”

“Big and little. Mostly interplanetary engines.”

“Hyperdrive equipped?”

“I didn’t build hyperdrives.”

“Did you see any hyperdrives?”

“I installed them.”

“Do you recall any brand names or specifications? Did they have serial numbers?”

Max shook his head. “No numbers, no brand. Never seen hyperdrives like them before. They worked good. Saw them work. They were good.”

The holo jumped ahead. “How often did you complete a starfighter, when you worked on them?”

“One a day, was the quota for my team…we always had enough parts to meet quota, so we always did.”

“And cruisers? The big ones?”

“Six months. Those were harder…had to be built in pieces. Put together in atmosphere quickly.”

The senator paused the holo and stood. She began to stalk the floor, hands clasped over her stomach and small remote in hand. “This is Max. He was picked up by Admiral Teck on the planet and is currently in military custody. He is from a small planet that you’ve never heard of and is officially recognized as a ‘colony.’ He knew very little about the galaxy as a whole but only a few minutes of discussion showed a remarkable aptitude for engineering and shipbuilding. He was a slave on this planet for six years. Repeated tests proved without a doubt he is telling the truth.

“There are two things I would like you take away from Max’s testimony. First, the materials used to
build these ships were not smuggled or stolen. They were specifically manufactured. Max provided schematics, based on his memory, of the ships. There are pieces in them so unique they had to be special make. Many of the individual parts, such as the hyperdrives, had no brand names or serial numbers.

“Second, they had the resources and power to manufacture these ships at a remarkable rate. The Kuat Drive shipyards can manufacture a cruiser of comparable size in two months. Kuat Drive is the single most advanced shipbuilding company in the galaxy yet they are barely twice as efficient as those who worked on this planet. This planet had hundred of slaves—transported off, except for Max, before we could arrive. There is no doubt whatever fleet they’ve managed to build is considerable. This is further supported by a starfighter Rear Admiral Otieno and Jedi Sib took from onboard one of these crafts. Custom made, un stamped parts that function perfectly but don’t quite match any known manufacturing process.”

Senator Naiher paced the floor around the holodeck, locking eyes with every single person as she passed. “My final words are these: no matter the names of these people, no matter their motivations and connections, no matter what we may feel about conflict, they are a real and credible threat to the security of the galaxy and the Republic. All efforts must be made to hunt them down before they can bring destruction upon us. Thank you for your time.”

Senator Naiher turned off the holodeck and returned to her seat. A few words were exchanged amongst the different groups. The senator’s gaze was slightly glazed and fixed at a random point on the floor. Every muscle in her face looked tensed. She spoke like an old pro, but she’d just argued for open warfare. Probably the first time she’d ever had to do that.

“You did not mention the supposed identity of this organization, Senator Naiher,” a Jedi said. Otieno recalled she was Sien Keelhen, a human and member of the High Council for nearly twenty years.

“They call themselves Sith,” the senator said, rising immediately from her introspection. “There’s evidence they have at least one powerful Force user on their side.”

“Do you believe they are truly Sith?” Master Keelhen asked.

“I am not familiar enough with the ideology of the Jedi to firmly make such delineations, but it is significant that they call themselves ‘Sith’ and that they are targeting Force users.”

“‘Targeting Force users’?”

Senator Naiher gestured to Sib and Otieno. “While Rear Admiral Otieno was captured she came into contact with a Force user via holo named Darth Ruin. He strongly implied that he desired to capture Padawan Sib, who was free at the time. In an earlier interaction with Darth Ruin on the planet Garos a month before, the rear admiral reported he possessed strong Force powers. Currently, he is the only known Force user, but there is no evidence he is the only one in total. In the past ten years the Jedi report nearly three hundred cases of non-Padawan Jedi leaving the order, willingly or unwillingly. Any one of those could have become a follower of Darth Ruin, or might even be Darth Ruin.”

“You desire Jedi support in any upcoming conflict,” another Jedi said, Master Johza if Otieno’s memory served.

“Yes. I fully believe it will be necessary.”

Attention turned Grand Master Boha. His eyes were closed, but he opened them after a moment. “I would like to first hear the response of the military and Senate.”
Admiral Talerion, the supreme commander of the entire navy, cleared his throat. “We have already begun maneuvers to find and intercept this force. They have attacked a Republic vessel and we agree they are a credible threat to the security of the Republic. We encourage the Senate to submit a formal declaration of war. We currently operate under emergency ‘reasonable threat’ procedures. More resources and authority would be favorable. Senator Naiher has already written a piece of legislation, under my advisement, that has everything we need.” Admiral Talerion was known as something of a lawyer. Rumor was he could recite the summary of every piece of law that governed the Republic military.

“I’ve sent a proposal to the inner chamber for review,” Senator Naiher said. She turned to her colleagues. “Will I have your support?”

The four other senators represented only a portion of the ten member inner chamber. Senator Naiher wasn’t a member, but she was a senior member of the upper chambers and had considerable sway. She was anticipated to succeed Senator Jori after her retirement in a year.

“I read your proposal, senator, and your argument is persuasive,” a Rodian senator said. “However, your proposal is…rather too unilateral for my tastes, and I know Senator Jein Ro agrees with me. There is a desire to avoid panic, and a proposal of war would certainly kill the fuel trade bill we’re trying to get through.”

“This is far more important, senator,” Senator Naiher said.

“The trade bill represents the possibility of five trillion credits worth of growth in some of the least developed regions of the galaxy,” a different senator, a Bith, said. “We’re in a period of historic stability. It would be foolish to interrupt it with something so dramatic.”

“The budget for the next two years is in discussion right now. We anticipate it will pass in a month or so. We can certainly add an extra, oh, half trillion or so on,” the Rodian senator said. “For now, the military can continue to operate under ‘reasonable threat’ measures.”

“Senator Geelo, ‘reasonable threat’ measures are not enough,” Admiral Talerion said. “It is likely that we will have to engage in protracted warfare. We need to be prepared for a long term siege against our planets. We need to lock down shipping lanes and our most vulnerable resource points. We need to be able to make decisions that we currently do not have the authority for.”

“You need wartime authority, is it?”

“Exactly senator. Funding is only one part of it.”

Senator Geelo nervously tapped his suction cup fingers against his leg. “I’m sorry, but I can not in good faith submit the current proposal. It certainly wouldn’t pass, as it stands.”

“We can make it pass,” Senator Naiher said. “I know of several dozen senators that I could sway to a ‘yes.’”

“And many more are fearful of giving the military too much power,” Senator Geelo said. “They know their history. They remember the numerous occasions a too-powerful military has threatened the foundations of democracy. Ah, no slight intended, of course. I’m simply speaking to past experiences.”

“It would be foolish to deny that we have behaved inappropriately in the past,” Admiral Korta said. “But the threat to the galaxy is undeniable.”

“I’m willing to work on a revision with you,” Senator Geelo said. “One that allows greater oversight
by the Senate, more budgetary control, restrictions on extent and types of engagement, a ratification process, civilian council—.

“The current proposal was arrived at after extensive discussion and input from Senator Naiher and our own legal consultants,” Admiral Talerion said. “The final bill we have created is exactly what we require in order to effectively meet this threat. It will only be in effect for one year. If the conflict extends past that then the bill can come under review and we will make changes as necessary.”

Senator Geelo actually laughed, a short chirp of disbelief. “You are asking me to force an unedited declaration of war through the Senate! I can not and will not do such a thing. The Senate has a duty to be deeply critical of the military and to ensure no one part of this government oversteps its bounds. We represent the people. We have to protect the people not just from external threats, but internal as well. There is a threat, yes, but if we ran scared to the military every single time someone threatened the Republic—”

Admiral Jisaroy, silent up to that point, leapt to his feet. “These aren’t some pirates who got a bit too big for themselves—!”

Admiral Korta reached for Jisaroy’s arm; “Control yourself Admiral—.”

“The very galaxy is at threat!”

“And we’ll survive without resorting to such drastic measures,” Senator Geelo said, his voice loud but controlled. “The inner chamber will review the proposal and pass something in the next few weeks.”

“For all we know they could attack tomorrow,” General Dago said.

“Or they might attack six months from now,” Master Boha said. “I agree with Senator Geelo. I council patience and careful review. I acknowledge that in the history of the galaxy inaction has hurt us, but there have been just as many points where rushing headlong into an issue has resulted in devastation.”

Senator Geelo nodded thanks towards Master Boha. “If war is declared, will the Jedi join?” he asked.

“We will monitor the possibility of Sith, certainly, but the Jedi will otherwise refrain,” Master Boha said. “Reflecting again on history, our presence may make more issues than solutions.”

Otieno looked at Sib. Her face was slightly pinched and she frowned when she caught Otieno’s eye. Sib had officially been removed from the situation.

“This is a mistake, Senator Geelo,” Admiral Talerion said.

“If this is a mistake I will resign my office,” Senator Geelo said. “But I am certain it is not. Would you like Senator Naiher to remain your contact point with the Senate? She’s already familiar with the situation.”

“Very well,” Admiral Talerion said, grudgingly. “Send us your concerns and we shall revise the bill.”

“I very much want this to be a collaborative process.”

“As do we all,” Senator Naiher said. “If there isn’t more to be said I suggest we close the meeting. There’s quite a lot of work to be done.”
Senator Naiher joined Admiral Teck, Otieno, and Sib on their walk back to the shuttles. Brina and Otieno still had their speeder but Sib had to take public transportation. Otieno offered to for her taxi or something but she refused. Incredibly, she enjoyed the busses.

Senator Naiher and Admiral Teck spoke on business as Otieno and Sib trailed behind. The two exchanged short summaries of what they’d been up to but otherwise had very little to discuss. The entire thing was out of their hands. The military would prepare their defenses as the senators worked on the bill. Some time in the next few weeks a war declaration would pass through the Senate and the defense of the Republic would begin in proper.

Sib had her hands stuffed into her pants pockets and walked with a slight hunch. She wore an outfit Otieno hadn’t seen before with high-waisted pants and a linen shirt, but it didn’t fit her quite right. She must have borrowed it from someone. Her lightsaber was clipped to a tightly cinched belt. Except for the weapon, she looked like any of the other civilians in the senate building lobby.

“Are you going to be leaving?” Sib asked, suddenly.

“In a few days,” Otieno said. “My fleet will head to the opposite side of the Core and set up defenses.” Otieno had spoken a little with Admiral Vargin and learned in the next few days he’d move his fleet out to defend the section of the Core he was in charge of, including Otieno’s home world. They’d travel through the Deep Core and come out opposite Coruscant and set up a perimeter. She missed the Tourbillon. Bivu had done an admirable job the past few weeks but she’d be glad to be back on its command.

“You’ll probably be gone for a while, then.”

“That’s likely. I won’t be back on Coruscant for a few months, definitely.”

“We need to have, like, lunch or dinner together or something.” Sib said. “Not a work thing, just a friend thing.”

“Yeah, that’d be nice.” Otieno clasped her hands behind her back, not certain what to do with them anymore. “There’s a good restaurant by my place. It’s usually pretty quiet.”

“I’ve got some free time tomorrow evening—”

The slug pierced the floor at their feet and the senator’s blood followed a moment later. Otieno jerked backwards as Sib sprung into action. Sib’s lightsaber flashed and she hurled herself in the direction the shot had come from. Admiral Teck caught the senator as she collapsed. Otieno drew her blaster and stood over the senator, craning her neck to find the shooter.

The senator gasped, the first sound out of her, and pressed her hand against her right shoulder. Admiral Teck’s adjutant, similarly stupefied by the turn of events, dropped to the ground and applied pressure to the wound. The crowd around them, as they finally realized what had occurred, erupted into panic and stampeded for the exits.

“There!” Admiral Teck pointed upwards. A figure leapt between the decorative rafters and towards a skylight. Sib was making chase on foot, pushing her way through the screaming crowd, and just as Admiral Teck shouted Sib jumped.

It was a forty foot vertical leap and Otieno was once again reminded the Jedi weren’t like everyone else when Sib flipped up onto the rafter with ease. Only a few feet separated Sib and the shooter. Sib opted for a shoulder tackle and the two fell into the crowd.
“Go help her, I’ve got the senator,” Admiral Teck said. She was also sprawled over the senator, blaster out, and Otieno noted two senate guards had nearly arrived.

Otieno shoved her way through the crowd who now fled in the opposite direction. The shooter was entirely in dark clothing and his face hidden behind a mask. Their weapons, lightsaber, rifle, and pistols, were knocked a few meters away as Sib and the shooter brawled in a messy scramble.

Sib had the shooter in a headlock but with a quick twist he pulled away. He kicked out and Sib ducked below. She grabbed his ankle and pulled until the shooter was forced to lurch forward. Before they could regain his balance she swept their other leg out and the shooter fell flat on his back.

The shooter attempted to roll and twist away but Sib dragged him back and in a blindingly fast move had her knee on his spine and his arms twisted back. They struggled for a moment longer, but Sib kept her grip and dug her knee in, hard. Otieno took the opportunity to come up with her blaster pointed at the shooter’s head.

“Who are you working for?” Sib demanded, slightly out of breath.

The shooter wheezed as if he’d tried to laugh. “I think you know who I work for.”

“Say it anyway,” Otieno said.

“The Sith, idiots,” the shooter said. “Senator Naiher had to die…and so will the rest of you.” The shooter jerked their head in a strange way. “I’ll see you all in hell.”

Sib again reacted before Otieno could. She shoved his head into the ground and the shooter’s long howl of pain did not seem proportional to the small slam of the head. Their entire body shook, as if he had a seizure, and Sib tightened her grip on his head. Otieno shivered as a tearing and savage energy filled the air around them. For a moment, the universe bent and her eyes couldn’t focus. She barely remained upright. Memories of a cave and dark water rose up.

Then the universe corrected itself, all at once, and Otieno righted herself. Sib removed her hand from the shooter’s head and released his arms. She looked to Otieno, her expression troubled and her gaze hollowed.

“He died,” she said. “He took a poison capsule. I got into his memories, though.” Sib stood as the Senate guards approached with weapons drawn. She called her lightsaber to hand and stepped aside to let the guards fall on the dead man with binders.

“What did you find?” Otieno asked.

Sib returned to Otieno’s side and spoke quickly and quietly. “He was a Sith soldier from the outer reaches. He’d been working with them for years as an assassin. He was charged with killing Senator Naiher by Darth Ruin. He’d been specifically told to kill her as she came out of this meeting and in public. He hadn’t realized any Jedi were around.”

Otieno looked back at the body. The guards had flipped him over and removed his mask. He was just another human, pale-skinned and gaunt.

Otieno suddenly remembered the senator and jerked around. The senator was surrounded by guards and two medics worked on her. A medical droid rushed over a gurney. Admiral Teck and her adjutant had moved to the periphery. Admiral Teck had removed her bloody jacket and was in a black undershirt. Otieno glanced down at her own pants to find a light blood splatter. Sib’s pants were similarly ruined.
“Senator Naiher will be fine,” Sib said. “She’s unconscious now but the medics all feel good about her chances. The slug missed her heart and important veins but clipped her scapula.”

“The shooter used a slug thrower, didn’t he.”

“Some assassins like them,” Sib said. “You have to account for more variables like bullet drop and wind but they don’t draw as much attention as a blaster does.”

“Would Naiher call a hit on herself?” Otieno asked, keeping her voice barely above a whisper.

Otieno watched Sib come to the same realization Otieno had arrived at moments ago. “Unlikely. It barely didn’t kill her, and Darth Ruin was the one who told the assassin to kill her. No intermediary that she could have used as a front…and if she was working for Darth Ruin why would he kill one of his most powerful allies?”

“Or have her argue for war and the preparation of defenses.”

“I don’t think whatever’s happening on Naboo extends to her.”

“Me neither.”

It was a satisfying realization. They still needed to be careful, of course, but there was relief in knowing there was still one person they could trust.

#

The news had spent the past twenty-four hours feverishly dissecting the attempted assassination of Senator Naiher. Coruscant News Network played, muted with subtitles, on the holo set of the restaurant. A panel of five political experts discussed if this would have any impact on the upcoming fuel bill.

Sib and Otieno watched though neither of them really wanted to and Sib had to half turn in her booth to see. The official story was that the assassin had been a member of an unspecified radical group upset about an unspecified action taken by the Senate. The senate guard was being tight lipped and none of the news outlets had gotten wind of the association with the Sith, or Sib and Otieno’s involvement for that matter. Sib had thought for sure someone would leak the security footage of her taking down the shooter. After the senate guard got their statements of what had happened neither Sib nor Otieno had heard anything more from anyone. According to the news, Senator Naiher was awake and in the hospital under heavy security. Her family was nearly arrived from Naboo.

“How long before the truth comes out, you think?” Otieno asked.

Sib sat forward and put the news out of her mind. “I think we’ve got a few more days. You’ll probably be gone.”

Otieno sighed and the strain in her face grew. “Hopefully they’ll have the good sense not to harass me at work.”

“And Master Gianlo definitely won’t let a news crew within a hundred meters of me.”

“You’ll be locked up tight in your tower.”
Sib laughed. “Yeah, for sure. It’s easy to ignore the news in there.”

Otieno rolled the stem of her cocktail glass between her fingers. Sib had her fingers a bit too tightly clenched around her beer. The restaurant was mostly empty and they’d been given a four-person window booth that looked out on a busy thoroughfare. The sun had just set and a last few streaks of red still painted the sky. Otieno wore a loose, tropical dress in pale blue and red. Her braids hung loose over her shoulders and down her back. Sib was embarrassingly underdressed in the only pair of civvies she had. Her Jedi robes were finally patched up from her accident the day before last and she’d returned Katdia’s outfit that morning, after the bloodstains had been cleaned out. Things were still tense between her and Katdia, but on the mend. Sometimes friends argued.

“Do you expect the Jedi to change their minds?” Otieno asked.

“I really doubt it. Mater Boha is a pretty staunch pacifist, and, honestly, it hasn’t turned out great in the previous wars for the Jedi. It’s definitely a ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ situation. We might be able to help, but to some extent involving the Jedi just breeds more conflict and stokes hatred. People forget there’s a difference between Sith and Jedi. It’s better if we just act as peacekeepers in the end.”

“Are you disappointed?”

Sib considered it, then shrugged. “I’ll miss hanging out with you.”

Otieno laughed, quietly, and wrung her fingers together. “Me too. I’ve…liked it. I have embarrassingly little life outside work.”

“It can’t be worse than mine,” Sib said. “My life is my work.”

“It’s funny, the last few relationships I’ve had ended with a poignant and accurate accusation of precisely that. How I care about my work or school more than her and what-have-you. It’s a bit more literal for you, isn’t it though.”

Sib grinned. “So you’ve given up on dating?”

“As much as my mother would love to have some more grandchildren, it doesn’t seem to be in my future,” Otieno said.

“You have two siblings, right?”

“Three. Afuara’s the only one with a kid and also the only married one.”

“But you’ve got like…three younger cousins that live with you?”

“Yes, my mother’s younger sister’s children. She dotes on them, but they’re all teenagers now and not as cute as they once were.”

“Ha, she wants little babies she can pinch the cheeks of?”

“And a big happy wedding to plan. My family is very into weddings.”

“That sounds like fun,” Sib said. She was quite earnest.

“Were your parents—sorry, no, it’s rude.”

Sib gestured her on. “Go ahead, we’re talking about it already.”
“Well, were your parents married?”

“No. I don’t actually know anything about my mother. My parents had a thing together and nine months later I showed up on my father’s doorstep.”

“And I suppose your father was more interested in you taking on the family business than getting married?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Sib said. “He never even thought he’d had an heir. He was grateful for what he had.” She’d allowed the topic to start but it was starting to smart. She didn’t actually want to be reminded again of how she managed to fail Junag.

Otieno noticed and quickly steered them to a safer topic. “What’s your favorite planet you’ve visited?”

It was such a dumb getting-to-know-you first-date question that Sib actually laughed. “I thought Jedha was nice, in the way deserts sometimes are. I visited a Jedi temple there. They have all these massive statues of Jedi. It’s really insane.”

“Are there differences in what the temples teach?”

“Some more than others. Coruscant’s pretty, like, traditional. I actually spoke to a group of visiting Jedi from Dantooine recently.” Sib frowned as she remembered the encounter. While she’d spoken to Katdia a little bit since, she hadn’t seen hide nor hair of the others. She assumed they were still around. “They had some…well, alright,” Sib said and leaned forward. Otieno gave a quick look around to confirm the seats around them were empty before she moved closer. “I met this Jedi Master Sohldi and some of her students. I don’t know if this is a real threat, but how she spoke reminded me of what happened on Garos in the lake. She tried to recruit me with all this nonsense. She promised glory and strength and knowledge. And she had students with her—people who were listening to her. I don’t know if they were actually associated with the Sith or anything, but there’s definitely people thinking things that are close to it.”

Otieno’s expression was that of a commander, not a young woman in a pastel dress. “Did you take this information to anyone?”

“I spoke to Master Gianlo but he wasn’t convinced that this was an actual Sith influence. He claimed what Master Sohldi spoke about was something he’d heard when he was Padawan. He said it’s just.…,” Sib gestured helplessly in the air. “Just normal variation in belief. I’m not sure I believe him, but if I can’t convince him I certainly can’t convince the Council. I’m keeping an eye on it though.”

Otieno’s lean backwards clearly conveyed she didn’t love this response but knew that was all there was to it. Sib hadn’t liked Master Gianlo’s answer either. Master Gianlo had explained the Jedi had tried to cull all non-establishment thought many times. The result was always a bloodless but brutal inquisition that left the Jedi weaker than before. Surely this wasn’t the time to let it fester, though.

A little disagreement was healthy. A lot was disaster. Knowing the balance was the hard part.

“I get the feeling there’s more going on than what we understand,” Otieno said. “A lot more.”

“And you can’t decide if it’s because we simply haven’t uncovered it or because someone’s deliberately ensured we don’t?”

Otieno ran her fingers along the rim of her glass and fixed the table with an intense glare. “Precisely. My greatest fear is that we’re pawns in a game we don’t even know.”
Sib nodded eagerly as Otieno voiced the concerns Sib had been trying to place. *This* was what Sib loved about her. Someone who understood her and didn’t require her to put on airs about being a good Jedi or a settled person. It was so profoundly good to know there was someone in the galaxy that would get it when Sib blabbered about how watching a children’s television made her want to be a Jedi. She didn’t have to hide a single part of herself from Otieno. She just hoped Otieno didn’t hide from her.

“I find it kind of hard to believe someone like you would put up with me,” Sib blurted as honesty suddenly gripped her. Otieno, the military wunderkind from a humble but law-abiding background, putting up with a not-very-good scatter-mouthed Jedi padawan? It was unbelievable.

Otieno’s frown transformed into a soft smile. “It’s nice to hang out with someone who isn’t obsessed with career advancement,” she said. “Don’t worry, Sib. You really think I’d put up with someone I didn’t like?”

On reflection, that was something Otieno absolutely wouldn’t do. Sib had *seen* the overbearingly polite and formal Rear Admiral Otieno. This most definitely wasn’t her.

Sib felt a blush cover her face. It wasn’t even a pretty blush—just red and splotchy and embarrassing. “Sorry,” she muttered.

“Don’t worry about it.”

A waitress came around with their meals and a basket of chips. Otieno had ordered a meat curry and Sib a large salad. She’d been trying to stick closer to the meal plan Master Gianlo recommended, even if the beer had been a cheat.

Their conversation turned to lighter things. Sib got to dig into Otieno’s extended family. It was…a lot. There were a lot of aunts and uncles and cousins who weren’t actually any of those things but also technically were and half of the entire family lived in a single apartment block. Only a handful had dared to find work off-planet. Most were content to get their education and work on Aurnai. It still astonished Sib that people could willingly live on one planet their whole lives and be content with that. Otieno clearly felt the same.

Sib wanted to meet Otieno’s family. How did someone like Otieno come from a family that boasted five hundred years in the same section of the same city? They weren’t a family of soldiers, or career makers, or criminals, or high-minded intellectuals, or of wealth. They were just people. What did *that* look like?

For Otieno, leaving home had also meant cutting certain ties. She spoke warmly of her family, but a hardness entered her speech at points that Sib could empathize with. No matter how good the cause the cutting always hurt.

There was still something funny in how Sib and Otieno had taken opposite paths and ended up in the same place. Sib had noticed it before, on Eriadu, but it struck her again. Sib came from everything to be a piece in a cog and Otieno had come from utter mundanity to excel at everything she tried. And they’d wound up in the same place fighting the same fight. They cared about the same thing in the end.

Otieno graciously paid the bill and initiated their departure. Sib was sorry to see the night end but it had grown late and Otieno needed to leave early. Otieno’s apartment was just a short walk away and they continued the conversation along the mostly empty sidewalks. They weren’t in the heart of any district but restaurants and businesses stayed open late. Droid police hovered above the crowd as an assurance of safety from pickpockets and thugs.
They were at Otieno’s apartment block’s entrance sooner than Sib liked. Hesitant, Sib reached out with the Force and was gratified to feel the same disappointment from Otieno. She didn’t want to part either. How novel.

A slight wind carried a cold front that mixed with the warm air and the homey scent of something spicy frying on a grill. They were down a slight walk, away from the main path, and somewhat protected from prying eyes and the harsh lights of speeders. Here, at night, the city was…gentle. The quiet murmur of voices from somewhere, the music-like rise and fall of speeders. A slow, quiet press of life. They stood side-by-side, caught in their own moment. Sib closed her eyes.

The imperfect synchronicity of a city full to bursting with life. Two people, stumbling at the same moment, on opposite sides of the same planet. A couple reaching for each other without a single word exchanged. A thousand people dreaming of miracles.

Sib wouldn’t say she hated the city, but there were few things she liked about it. This was one of those. Proof they were more than crude matter.

She feared she might cry as the gentleness and madness of Coruscant flooded into her. The galaxy was strange and beautiful and here she was, one small person, caught in a moment. They were imperfect beings of longing who raised torches to the night and achieved the impossible. The knowledge there was so little she could do to save this place might kill her.

She opened her eyes, forcing the connection closed, and was pleased to see Otieno watched her with a smile. Could Otieno feel it too? If she really tried to listen, could she feel the Force?

“Jedi are very strange,” Otieno said, her voice an amused murmur. “What were you listening to?”

Sib shrugged. “The city. There’s a lot out there.”

“Is Coruscant at peace?”

“Coruscant’s never at peace, but it’s also not actively trying to tear itself apart, and that’s an accomplishment in its own way,” Sib said.

Otieno laughed. She had one arm crossed over stomach and clasped the elbow of her other arm. She’d put on her slightly beat-up canvas jacket when they’d left the restaurant. Otieno had mentioned during their travels that she didn’t pay much attention to fashion and her civilian clothes were all old and out of date. She’d always seemed a little uncomfortable outside of her uniform, but Sib didn’t see that now. She looked as at-ease as she was on the command deck of her ship.

“Do you regret becoming what you are?” Otieno asked. She asked in that neutral, inoffensive way she had. All business and no judgement.

Sib shrugged and twisted her fingers together. It was a question she’d reflected on often. “I’d have regrets no matter what I did,” she said. “I still believe this was the best path for me, even if it’s not perfect.”

“I suppose no path is perfect,” Otieno said. “This is a pretty good one, though.”

They both looked away from the other. Sib filled with some mix of trepidation and fear as the reality of what she’d have to say next settled down on her. It was necessary.

“We…like each other, a lot, right?” Sib said. Not quite as elegant as Sib had wished but Otieno would get her point. “What do we do about that?”
Otieno returned her gaze and offered a slight smile. “To use a trite phrase, ‘we’re more than friends.’”

“And we’re both adults, so we should discuss it.”

“It won’t ever work,” Otieno said, a blunt statement of fact without acrimony or misery.

Bless Otieno to the moon and back for saying it first. Sib nodded. “I’d have to leave the Jedi and with the way you work we’d never see each other.”

“It’s so profoundly impossible that it’d be ridiculous to pursue it,” Otieno said. “In a more-perfect world…maybe.”

“But we don’t live in a perfect world.”

They stared at each other as the words settled in and two people who’d accustomed themselves to sacrifices accepted another. It was the longest silence of Sib’s life.

Otieno moved first and put Sib into a wonderfully crushing hug. Sib gratefully reciprocated after the moment of surprise wore off. They rested their chins on the other’s shoulder, easy when they were both about the same height. It was the best damn hug Sib ever had in her entire life.

“I still care about you so, so much,” Otieno said to the back of Sib’s head. “I want to be your friend. I don’t want this to be the last time we ever talk.”

“This won’t be, I promise,” Sib said. Her throat had begun to tighten and she took a few centering breathes. She would not cry over this. “You’re my friend. One of the best friends I’ve ever had. You’ll always be.”

“Thank you.”

They held each other for a minute longer with a desperate strength, as if they were about to go into battle and not just going home. Sib took the initiative this time and broke them apart. Sib ignored how Otieno’s eyes looked a little bit red and she took a moment longer to release Sib’s wrist.

“I still have to pack,” Otieno said. She took a deep breath and her expression smoothed. “I’ll update you with what I can.”

“Me too.”

“Well, bye, then.”

“See ya.”

Otieno swiftly disappeared into the apartment building. Sib turned away and began her walk to the public shuttles the moment she could. She didn’t linger to see if Otieno looked back or changed her mind. Sib had no recourse for such an event. She would go back into Otieno’s arms without a second thought.

Chapter End Notes

You know how in slow burn fics there’s always that chapter where the author has to
remind everyone it does in fact have a happy ending? This is that chapter.

End Notes

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