

STAR WARS
THE HIGH REPUBLIC



WAYSEEKER'S END

S.A. CONOM



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Prologue

Deep Space

“You can’t do this!”

The bearded Kellonian skidded backward on the deck until he ran out of space. Emergency lighting cast strange shadows in the room, but there was no mistaking the imposing figure that calmly approached. He cupped bruised ribs through shimmersilk robes as he peered up at his assailant. A red glow lit up the other’s features. Eyes glared down at him with an intensity the Kellonian had hardly seen in anyone else.

“You don’t have the right!” The man had given up on standing, but somehow managed an authoritative tone.

The glow shifted upward as the source was raised up, poised to strike.

“I don’t need it. I have the Force.”

Part I

Planet Kello - The Outer Rim

It was a holo-picturesque day on a delightful planet, and Corris blinked as he stepped back into the sunlight and descended a grand stone staircase that led up to the Kellonian capital building, toward a bustling town square beneath.

The nice thing about exploring the Outer Rim, in places the Republic hardly knew existed, was that nobody gave your lightsaber a second look. The Force had led him here... at least, that was the standard line for Wayseekers. Corris was both Jedi and was operating here without the direct oversight of the Jedi High Council, the precise definition of a Wayseeker. A little too grandiose of a title, in his opinion. He usually left that part out when introducing himself.

Corris arrived at the base of the stairs and turned down the street, perusing the vendor stalls. They were lined with merchants selling an odd mix of produce and techy doodads. He stopped at one, picking up a palm-sized fruit that the signage dubiously called a melon. He did his best to imitate what he'd seen another customer do before they bought one. As he did so, something made his cranial antennae twitch. He glanced up to see the vendor staring.

"Just this one." He smiled, offering some local currency in exchange for the fruit. He might have bought more if he had the currency on him.

The vendor somehow managed a polite smile through their transaction, then watched him as he departed the stall and continued down the avenue. Corris's antennae finally relaxed as he got a few paces away. He chose to believe the human was more curious about his pale silver skin color and antennae, instead of the measly quantity of fruit he bought. He cracked open the fruit with his hands and took a satisfying bite from the insides.

While Kello was certainly an up-and-comer in the droid production industry (mining, protocol and home droids for the most part), there was an element of the old world here - melon farming and other agriculture, for instance. And just like anywhere else, some Kellonians had difficulty transitioning, but Corris thought they were doing

better than most. His report on this planet would probably shoot it up toward the top of this sector's Republic Pathfinder team's planets to visit.

Corris continued along the avenue, heading out of the bustling center, flanked by innumerable tall buildings, to a quieter area of the metropolis with buildings half the size of downtown. With the crowd suitably thinned, not to mention his melon consumed and rind disposed of, he opened his senses and let the Force come to him.

The Jedi knew the Force to be an energy field that connected people and things throughout the galaxy. Some perceived it in visualizations—a sea of waving reeds, the rush of a river's waters, a herd of animals—but Corris's senses were more abstract. He sensed pockets of raw possibility, with each aura weaving together with the Force into the tapestry of galactic causality.

Every living thing in the vicinity—himself, the other pedestrians, domesticated animals and even potted plants—had their own footprint in possibility. The challenge was to assess their potential. A security officer aiming a weapon might cause ripples through the Force, but so might a couple agreeing to get married, fruit falling from a tree, or a speeder as it turned a corner.

Other Force wielders sometimes thought Corris had some sort of unique precognitive ability, but that wasn't exactly true. He couldn't foresee important galactic events or infer the next card dealt in a game of Sabacc. Instead, he simply saw the moments when a person or situation was in a position to have the largest ripples through the Force. This perception was often ephemeral; when the resonance in the Force finally broke, its energies were immediately diffused through the Cosmic Force, and the moment was over.

Despite all that, Corris found he needed to rely on his regular senses to pick out critical details.

A glint of sunlight reflecting off metal caught Corris's eye, coming from an alley that snaked away from the main boulevard, something not often seen in the architecture in this area of town. Corris turned toward it, unhooking his lightsaber from his belt, but holding it casually at his side... after all, there was no need to announce the existence of laser swords and cause a panic.

Corris's antennae came together in thought as he entered the alley. The metallic object, a droid leg, was not without accompaniment. A plethora of various service droids lined the wall. They'd all been torn apart, either by blunt force or vibroweapons, in his estimation. Then they had been set up here in an orderly line, with a crude message scrawled above the droids in spray paint: "BANISH THEM."

Corris knelt beside one of the larger droid pieces, rolling it onto its side to get a glimpse of its serial numbers and corporate stamp, then repeated the action for all the droid pieces he thought might yield results.

As he expected, all the units here were manufactured here on Kello. Most were made by local manufacturer Endless Assistance - a name he'd heard before when he met with the prime minister and his associates.

It was as if the Force had some kind of dark humor, repaying him for considering Kello's progress on his walk. Sometimes people opposed progress even if, in Corris's opinion, that progress was better on the whole. Kello's changes weren't just the emerging droid industry. Recently, the planet had evolved from a monarchical system to an elected prime minister just a few years ago. Those kinds of revolutions had repercussions. But even knowing that, something about this vandalism rubbed Corris the wrong way. Kellonians were honor driven and forthright; leaving this kind of message in a back alley didn't do much for its political objectives. If there was real political dissent on Kello, the Pathfinder team would want to know about it when they decided to come here and establish diplomatic relations for real.

As he headed out of the alley, Corris clipped his lightsaber back onto his belt, but it made a soft electrical fizzing sound as it bumped against his hip. His kyber didn't like his latest jerry-rigged modifications to the magnetic field emitter...he'd have to look at it later.

Part II

Later that afternoon, the Jedi ascended a set of wide stairs that rose from the street to the entrance of the Endless Assistance company building. The structure provided a stark contrast with the historic architecture near the capitol building. While some design elements persisted between the two types of structures, the droid manufacturer's building mirrored the clean lines and glass paneling that made Corris think of Coruscant instead of an Outer Rim backwater. He doubted anyone from this place had been to the core of the Republic, but this newer building gave off a high-class, futuristic vibe that was hard to ignore.

Doors whooshed open obligingly as Corris approached, showing the way into a vast showroom. Every kind of droid imaginable was on display in the monstrously large chamber, from housekeeping and cooking to mining and protocol units. Spotlit demonstration units stood displayed atop myriad circular platforms of varying heights, surrounded by holos showing statistics and demonstrations. Kellonians of all walks of life gathered around various models, some of which seemed high-end... Corris supposed even the more opulent units were somehow affordable enough for the average citizen. Chrome-plated, bipedal droids doted on the visiting customers, taking orders and answering questions.

One such droid approached Corris as he took in the scene before him, its hands folded in an obsequious yet helpful manner. Five minutes later, after eventually convincing it he wasn't actually in need of a new household synthweaving droid—his gear wasn't in *that* bad shape, was it?—and name-dropping the Republic and the Jedi, Corris was escorted through the showroom to an employees-only door that led along a series of corridors to the corporate offices that adjoined it. From there, he was led down a hall into a grand meeting room with a large rectangular table, a dozen expensive-looking chairs, and glass paneling on the walls. Several holos hovered over the table, showing schematics, data, marketing materials and more.

After depositing him in the conference room, the droid quickly departed on a mission to fetch someone who could help the Jedi. Just as he was getting bored enough to seriously consider fiddling with his lightsaber's glitchy field emitter, the doors whisked

open and in stepped a suit-clad woman, her hair in a severe brown bob offset by a friendly smile, and Corris couldn't decide if it was genuine or just extremely practiced.

She offered her hand to Corris as she entered. "Welcome to Endless Assistance! Sorry to keep you waiting for so long, it's a busy day! I'm the current shift supervisor. What can I do to help a visiting Jedi?"

Corris maintained a friendly smile as he took her hand, mirroring her expression. Apparently word about him was getting around. "Nice to meet you, too. Nothing in an official capacity, but I do have a question. I was self-touring through the downtown district earlier and came across some droids... vandalized, with some pretty offensive graffiti. Wondering if you had any leads on those responsible." *Or any other reaction*, he thought.

The manager, who hadn't bothered to give her name, tilted her head and gave an almost sickeningly sweet smile of sympathy. "Yes, I'm afraid that's a common issue these days, but citizens are slowly getting used to seeing droids everywhere. Endless Assistance is one of Kello's most profitable companies, after all. We've contributed more to Kello's quality of life than all of our competitors combined!"

"I'm sure that's true," Corris replied, giving a tight smile and nod to one of the holos, which was still doing its best to extol the virtues of Endless Assistance's profit margin. "But whoever vandalized those droids had an agenda, even if it was barely legible. Many of the destroyed units were models made by your company."

Corris paused. As the silence lengthened to an awkward degree, he saw the woman wasn't rushing to fill it with anything helpful. Maybe he had to try something else. "Perhaps I could look at some of your records for these types of droids... in the interest of improving relations with the Republic?"

The woman hesitated, but as she did, Corris felt a sudden surge of the Force in the room. Subtle at first, but growing quickly... a sharp uptick in sheer possibility surrounding the two of them together.

Time seemed to slow as Corris let the Force flow through him. His eyes fixed on the woman as she wobbled between helping him and clamming up. Through the Force, he saw with clarity the change she could influence with him in the here and now. All she needed was a little nudge.

So he nudged her... a little push in the right direction. "You want to help me, don't you?"

His master wouldn't have approved.

"I want to help you," the woman said, in a tone a bit more neutral than her previously chipper demeanor. "Some local planets in the sector have purchased some containers. It makes a good amount of credits for us... not to mention tax revenue. We're ramping up our export business. Even non-Kellonians are seeking our droids these days."

"I see," Corris said pensively, as he felt the dissemination of Force energy ripple outwards. "You won't mind if I look at that next shipment? Is there one going out today?"

The woman consulted a datapad, then smiled. "There is. Right this way."

As Corris rose and began to follow his tour guide through the office building and back to a warehouse that connected to a set of landing pads, he continued to feel the cascading effect in the surrounding fabric of the Cosmic Force. He hoped that meant he was on the right track.

All it took to keep his new friend in his corner was the polite absorption of an incessant chain of facts and figures pertaining to the impressive sales figures for Endless Assistance, and how interested the company would be to work with the Republic once future envoys arrived.

The pair weaved through several dozen lots of crates containing packaged droids due to be shipped, according to their labels. Ahead, the rear of a boxy cargo ship of Kellonian make came into view, and while it was only one level, it was wide, with a huge lowered ramp indicating it was clearly designed for planet-side cargo loading. Slow clunks of mechanical legs sounded as cargo lifter droids made slow progress transferring containers of droids into the ship's cargo bay.

"Here we are," the supervisor said, back to her chipper tone, not seeing anything wrong with the escort she had just provided. "Due to take off tomorrow. Will there be anything else?"

Corris shook his head, then gave a wave of his fingers. "No. You've done a good job this shift, and you're ready to go home now."

"I'm ready to go home now," she repeated. And off she went, leaving Corris alone with the lifter droids.

"That worked out," the Jedi noted, turning away from the woman and facing the ship, taking a closer look. The Force had led him this far, so he might as well look around. While he wasn't an expert in security systems, he was fairly sure he hadn't seen any holorecorders on the way here, and the droids around him seemed too busy loading crates to mind him boarding the large craft. He resisted the urge to go into a half-crouch and skulk about like a villain from a cheesy holovid. He instead took the confident, *I belong here* approach, strutting up the ramp and into the cargo hold, through the maze of oversized packed crates to the other side of the cavernous cargo bay toward the forward part of the ship. He keyed in with his physical senses and opened his connection with the Force, taking in all he could as he made his way in.

Corris exited the cargo bay through an unlocked hatch and entered a series of narrow, labyrinthine corridors that lead through the comparatively smaller forward section of the ship. Eventually, strong strides led him to a sizable bridge, big enough for a crew of a half-dozen to comfortably fit... if it was to be manned at all. Sudden movement at the helm startled him, but when a non-threatening warble sounded from an integrated piloting droid that hadn't even bothered to tilt its lens in his direction, he breathed a sigh of relief. With that one exception, the whole bridge was empty. Just in case, he steered clear of the helm console and nearby navicomputer interface as he searched for clues.

While Corris disliked piloting, years of experience on starships navigating the frontier told him that the best place to sleuth around a ship was the navicomputer. But, with that being off the table thanks to the mechanical occupant, he also knew the second best place was communications. He strode over to the unmanned station on the far side of the bridge and leaned over the controls. The station wasn't even locked down. He smiled.

The databanks were packed with communication logs. Most were monotonous corporate entries, with long strings of nonsense characters in the recipient and sender fields, which he guessed represented entries of crates successfully loaded into the

ship's cargo bay. Corris's finger jammed down on the scroll button, the screen flickering as he bypassed entry after entry.

His eyes were just starting to glaze over when the mini-holo display flickered with the image of a well dressed person as he scrolled over one of the comms log entries. Corris thought he recognized the man, one of the ministers he'd met with when he had his audience with the Kellonian leadership. He strained to remember the man's name. Something that rhymes with bantha.

He punched a few buttons, selecting only messages from this source, which had the dramatic label of "Baron". A handful of messages, dating from a few days ago to a few hours ago, appeared in a list. Corris toggled the sound to a barely audible level, and after another quick glance around, played them, starting from the oldest.

The first was a short message from "Baron" to the prime minister, timestamped three days ago. In a rather boisterous message littered with unnecessarily flowery language, the minister had informed the rest of the government that he was due to be offworld for a few days. A second recording, registered a day later and dispatched to a location in the city he didn't recognize, dropped the bravado in favor of something more straightforward.

"Gentlemen," the "Baron" holo began. "I take chances by contacting you directly. Unless you have more details regarding your circumvention of law enforcement in the more visible areas, stick with your assigned areas and target the droids I specified. Your payment will be received in due time, once the effect on the populace has been confirmed." The transmission faded.

Corris's antennae waggled in confusion for a moment, but then slowed to an understanding gentle wave. Some people don't like change, and perhaps the minister had something to gain by manufacturing sentiment against the new droid economy. His eyes flickered down to the last remaining entry on file, dated yesterday. Might as well see what else he was up to.

He punched the playback button, and "Baron's" image flickered on again, though this time with a different demeanor. The transmission destination was somewhere in deep space. "My loyal allies," he began, with a tone and smile that even Corris could read as being less than sure they were loyal, or allies. "I will be on the next transport

out, scheduled for tomorrow. You can secure the cargo, as usual. From there, we will proceed as we discussed at the location near the moon. Make it convincing, but remember, you get no ransom for me if I'm... beyond ransoming." "Baron" pushed a smile with effort. "I'm sure your other clients will find plenty of use for the droids. Farewell." The image faded.

Corris's antennae widened their waving motions as he processed what this meant. Sure, he had seen some crazy stuff in the Outer Rim, but sabotaging your own government for what sounded like a power motive... or maybe just longing for days gone by. Either way, he figured being onboard a ship due to be commandeered because of the designs of a powerful government official wasn't ideal. He deactivated the terminal and, after double checking the pilot droid still hadn't taken any notice of him, turned back the way he came.

He called upon the Force, using it to instantly exit the bridge and nearly fly through the corridors on the way back to the cargo bay. He was going so fast he almost rammed face-first into someone coming the opposite way. He skidded to a stop, his boots squeaking on the deck plating, having to push with the Force to stop quicker and keep himself upright as he did.

His knee jerk apology died on his lips as he looked up at a man in fine shimmersilk that he, unfortunately, recognized. Two human guards flanked the figure, with two enforcer droids behind them. Their surprise was slowly fading, and the human guards were already placing their hands on their blaster grips.

Oh no. "Baron."

"Oh, uh, Minister... Plantha," Corris began, taking a wild stab at his name. "I was just touring your fine ship here. Really quite a marvel. Quite a... payload to deliver. Very impressive."

The minister, who had recovered from his surprise, realized the upper hand he held, recognized who he was facing, and let a thin smile spread across his face. "That's Minister Barthano. And I appreciate the fine praise."

Way off with the name.

“Jedi Corris, what an unexpected surprise,” Barthano continued, some of the bravado Corris had seen in the holos permeating his tone. “However, I’m afraid this is a restricted area.”

Corris did his best to look somewhere between embarrassed and apologetic, his antennae drifting to either side. “Er... is that right?”

“It is.”

An awkward silence stretched between them as they both realized they had reached an impasse. One of the guard's gloves squeaked as they tightened their grip on their blaster, the sleight sound magnified by the metal ship interior and the awkwardness of the faceoff.

Corris acted first. Swiveling on one foot, he dashed in the opposite direction, hoping that another route in the maze of corridors would lead back to the cargo hold. Blaster bolts flashed, either from the enforcer droids, guards, or both, and he tilted his body to avoid them without looking back. As he rounded a corner, he could hear Barthano yelling into a commlink. A second later, an alarm blared.

Corris weaved through another section of corridor, taking a sharp left as he unhooked his lightsaber from his belt. In the back of his mind, he wondered about the diplomatic repercussions of a Jedi slicing up a government official's ship, but he pushed them away... there would be a time to deal with that later. A few more twists and turns later, the corridors finally gave way to the transport's massive cargo bay, where the alarm was just as loud.

The Jedi was only a dozen meters into the bay when doors to cargo containers began popping open one after another, followed by metallic clangs as dozens of covers hit the floor in quick succession. Corris grimaced mid-run as a slow stream of droids of all shapes and sizes flowed out into the cargo bay from their containers.

A trio of housekeeping droids and protocol units made a lunge for Corris as he rushed by them. Without breaking his stride, he jumped, calling on the Force to ascend into the air with a flip and landing on the top of a nearby container. His sprint continued as he jumped from container to container on the way toward the exit ramp. Ahead, he could make out the long sliver of daylight over the tops of the cargo containers.

A blaster bolt sizzled by, uncomfortably close. Corris ignited his lightsaber just in time to deflect two more shots from completely different vectors with sharp lateral swings. The deflections slowed his pace as he leaped from crate to crate, but even so, he risked a look. Apparently, enforcer droids with integrated blasters were among those let loose. This was becoming more and more difficult.

Corris shoved himself off a crate he had just landed on a half-second earlier, flying into the air as a cluster of micro-missiles exploded under his feet. The grace of his Force-assisted jump was thrown off course by the blast, sending him into a tumble and landing hard on the metal floor. His lightsaber deactivated as he rolled, but he managed to preserve his inertia, righted himself and kept on running. He reactivated his lightsaber just in time to deflect the next blaster bolt into one of the droids that now blocked his path. He leapt over it before it finished crumpling, then ducked behind another cluster of crates to avoid more blaster fire. So much for making it through without any property damage.

Angling his run back toward the exit, he rounded the crates to find three enforcer droids, and their blasters, swiveling toward him. Corris reached behind him with one hand, finding the downed frame of the droid he'd taken down a second earlier, and hurled it through the air, over droid crates and his own head, toward the enforcers. Seeing it much too late, all three looked up just in time for the smoking hulk to land square on them, crushing them. A few uncontrolled blaster bolts fired harmlessly into the walls and ceiling.

The increasing glare of daylight told him he was almost clear of the ship. He broke out through the last containers, managing another few spins to deflect the shots coming from behind, and made it up to the lip of the ramp, breathing hard, with his lightsaber still burning at his side.

He came to a sudden stop as a dozen uniformed Kellonians, arranged in a semicircle, leveled their blaster rifles at him. He'd run straight into their ambush.

Corris hesitated. His hope for a quick escape was dashed. Slagging droids was one thing, but harming sentients was another. His eyes frantically scanned from one end of the firing line to the other, looking for a way out, but there wasn't one. Behind

him, he could hear the enforcer droids approaching, cutting off retreat back into the ship. For the first time in a while, he wished his master was here.

One of the soldiers yelled a command to open fire. Even through the dense laser fire, Corris took the only chance he had to break through the lines. Taking a running start, he deflected a series of blaster bolts before calling on the Force to amplify a jump. It was a sharp but graceful arc, designed to take him completely up and over the firing line.

He didn't make it.

A blaster shot hit him in the shoulder when he was three feet in the air, followed by another in the thigh. He cried out, falling end over end in a sharp descending trajectory. His lightsaber slipped from numb fingers, and he crashed head-first into the metal ramp. The last thing he thought before everything went black was how his master would have been disappointed.

Part III

Illum, Sacred Jedi Kyber Cave Entrance

13 Years Ago

Jedi Master Chellis Wou waited in the cave antechamber, his front flippers tucked into the front of his obi, with his hardly worn gold and white temple robes wrapped around him. He'd found a spot below one of the lightsaber-wielding Jedi statues along one side of the room, leaving the large central dais clear. The last time he was here, Master Yoda had given his youngling version *the talk*, and while he had grown in stature since then, large enough to tower over the small green High Council member, somehow it didn't seem right to take that spot.

He wasn't used to these kinds of cold temperatures that pervaded even the interior of the kyber crystal caves on Illum. In fact, he usually preferred the hot and humid over cold and dry. It had been a while since he'd seen the tropics of Mon Cala, but sometimes he tuned up the environmental controls in his ship's quarters so much that anyone visiting thought they might be inside some kind of shipboard sauna.

"Still waiting, are you?" A voice asked from the opposite side of the chamber.

Wou resisted the urge to jump in surprise, instead leaning into his connection to the Force to control his reaction. He righted himself and gave a low gurgling chuckle as his bulbous eyes swiveled to spy the same master he was just thinking about peering in at him from the entrance. He replied, keeping the annoyance at a minimum and the pleasantness in his face at a maximum. "It hasn't been that long."

Yoda nodded, keeping a neutral expression as he approached the seated Mon Calamari. He gestured over to the frozen waterfall opposite the entryway. "Frozen over, the waterfall is."

Wou stood in respect as the Council member approached, but shrugged. "Perhaps, but it is just water made solid. He will not be deterred."

"It is doubtful he would be," said Yoda, stopping next to Wou. His impassive expression melted into a pleasant, albeit guarded, smile. "A long time it has been, Master Wou. How are you and the youngling?"

“Fine. Barely managed to make this cycle. I’d have hated to wait the extra rotations it would have taken for the next opportunity to arise.”

Yoda nodded, giving a thoughtful pause before continuing, though Wou thought it was mainly for dramatic effect. “Missed him on the Crucible, we have. Benefitted he would, from Huyang’s tutelage on lightsaber construction, if a crystal he retrieves.”

“Master Yoda,” Wou began, a slight edge returning to his voice. “While I may not often stay in the Core systems, I retain the skills necessary to teach the youngling everything he needs to know, including lightsaber construction. Besides, I’m sure you remember his social preferences.”

Yoda nodded. “Remember, I do. Paslan culture promotes the individual, and late was he discovered. An unfortunate effect of the lack of Jedi influence in the Outer Rim. Lucky you found him, we are. Taking him as a Padawan too, I assume, if he completes the Gathering?”

“Not planning to rehash the discussion of admitting him into the Order, are we, Master?” Wou questioned. He continued on before Yoda could answer. “But yes, I am. I wouldn’t think that’s too surprising.”

“Surprising? No,” said Yoda, his tone carrying the same unwavering, infuriatingly wise quality it usually did. “Encouraging? Yes. Trailblazing, you and he are. No other Paslans in the Order. Great symbology with him, if a Jedi he becomes. Inroads to the Outer Rim, to other cultures. Much of what the Order aspires to do.”

Wou lowered his head and nodded. Much of that aligned with his own thinking, and what little precognition he could muster from the Force said as much about the boy. His coldness melted away. Typical Yoda... always picking the right words to get everyone on the same side. “I hope for all that for him, and more. But bringing him into the Order at his age, with the influence of his culture... he’s independent to say the least. But he depends on me to learn more about the Force, so we’ve achieved a certain... synergy.”

Yoda made a sound of agreement. “Ways there are to make the most of independent Jedi.”

Before they could say more, a loud crash echoed around the chamber as a silver-skinned teenager barreled through the frozen-over waterfall, smashed ice flying

everywhere as he cartwheeled through the air, then slid across the ice until he finally came to a stop in front of the center dais.

Yoda stayed where he was, looking over at the youngling with curiosity as Master Wou strode over, but the boy had already scrambled to his feet. Looking none the worse for wear, he wore a goofy smile as fingers dug into his parka pocket for something, but stopped when he realized someone else besides his master was present. Once he recognized who it was, his antennae flattened in embarrassment. His eyes flickered from the chunks of ice littering the chamber floor to the destroyed frozen waterfall.

“Sorry for breaking that, Master Yoda,” the teenager said, though the waterfall was already freezing over again. “It was the only way I could get out.”

Wou responded instead, with Yoda looking on with a silent smile. “It’s just water, Corris. No need for concern. Here.” He helped the boy up to his feet and let him brush himself off. “Was your quest successful?”

After giving another questioning glance to the silent Yoda, the boy turned back to the Mon Calamari and resumed his grin. Fingers dug into a jacket pocket, then pulled free a small crystal, holding it between his thumb and forefinger, and lifting it so his master and Yoda could see. It seemed to glow with a steady light, but as it neared the apex of the boy’s reach, it seemed to catch the light and refracted a glittering yellow around the chamber.

Wou felt many emotions all at once. Exhilaration. Relief. Pride. He looked down at the boy with a smile.

Strangely, as the crystal was held aloft, it seemed to subtly change in hue, despite the ambient light pouring in through the cave entrance remained unchanged. It was so subtle that the alteration might have been a trick of the light. The yellow wasn’t losing any of its luminosity, but slowly evolved into a strong, vibrant, resolute orange that reflected in the boy’s eyes. The boy’s face didn’t show surprise or recognition of the change, as he clearly communed with the future heart of his lightsaber. Wou looked on, feeling a clear swell in the Force.

Yoda gave a celebratory cry, and Wou himself couldn’t help but smile. The boy he’d encountered by accident in the Outer Rim, the one he’d taken in and trained, the individual whose induction into the Order he had persuaded the Council to approve...

this boy, simultaneously independent and stubborn, but also kind-hearted and aspirational, a youth both physically tethered to his side but intellectually eager... that boy and his crystal were one now, poised to enact the will of the Force.

Part IV

Hyperspace

Present Day

Corris stirred, the fog of nightmares slowly starting to clear from his consciousness. The first thing he wondered was why he felt so sticky. His tunic was plastered to his chest and side, and his pants clung to the side of his right leg.

He was then presented with a second puzzle: why couldn't he move? His hands were stuck behind the back of a chair he was propped up against. The attempt itself was a mistake... it *hurt*, but it elicited only a small groaning mumble from his lips.

A third issue surfaced as he tried, with serious effort, to raise his chin up from his chest, resulting in his head throbbing in pain that almost made him pass out again. The side of his face felt slick from the right side of his temple down to his chin, and one of his antennae felt slack against his head, bent at an odd angle. Forcing his eyes open also turned out to be a mistake; a bright light blinding him. A sudden surge of frustration assaulted him, something he didn't have much experience with. He grit his teeth, barely muting an irritated, guttural grunt.

A voice called out from somewhere nearby. "So, you're not dead."

Corris's head jerked in the direction of the voice, his senses still dull from his injuries. He forced a squint against the bright light, and finally made out details of the room. It was a cramped room on a ship, but most of the furniture was missing... except for the chair he was currently sitting in, of course. Just past the light, an open doorway led outside to a hall he recognized. So, he was still on the blasted cargo ship. How long had he been out?

"Not yet," groaned Corris, still struggling to make out details of a silhouette he'd spotted in the doorway to the hall, the direction the voice had come from. "But would it kill you to spare a little kolto?"

The figure chuckled a little as he entered the room, closing the gap between the doorframe and Corris. The Jedi was unsurprised to see Minister Barthano smiling down at him. Behind him in the hall, two enforcer droids looked on impassively. Corris

instinctively opened his right hand to reach for his lightsaber, only to have a shooting pain from his shoulder remind him that he was still restrained, and probably disarmed. He yelped, sucking in breaths in quick succession as pain flared. He struggled to slow his breathing as the pain plateaued, desperately invoking a Jedi calming exercise he hadn't thought about since he was a padawan, which would have been difficult even in circumstances where he didn't have a head injury.

Barthano stopped in front of him, his expression changing from amusement to concern. "I wouldn't put any more strain on yourself than you've already endured. You've already lost a lot of blood. I'm going to have to get a cleaning crew in here after you're gone."

Corris's labored breath had barely slowed down enough to speak. "Sorry for the inconvenience."

They locked eyes for a few seconds, but then Barthano resumed his previous, more jovial tone. "You know, I wasn't sure what to expect when the Prime Minister told me I'd be meeting a Jedi. Sure, I've heard the stories. Mystical warrior monks with laser swords, working hand in hand with the almighty Republic. Honestly, it's ridiculous that you're even out here at all."

Corris watched Barthano's mouth move, but struggled to hear what he was saying. Just following along was taking immense effort.

Meanwhile, the minister continued. "It's only a matter of time before all of Kello realizes how incredibly idiotic joining in on the droid manufacturing fad really is. Our people don't need a cargo hold full of droids. They need to get back to their roots."

"Droids help people," Corris managed to gurgle. "You're making a mistake."

Barthano sighed. "Spoken like a true tourist. Don't worry, this shipment will get 'pirated' and put to use somehow." He paused, tilted his head to the side, and smiled. "You know, when I told them I'd picked up a Jedi stowaway, they seemed very interested in meeting you. Seems their clients on some backwater world called Dalna have some kind of Jedi fascination. Just your luck."

Corris didn't have much to say to that. He wasn't interested in being handed off to someone, like an object to be traded. His chin fell back down to his chest, and he seethed quietly, trying to keep the growing feeling of frustration under control.

Barthano had paused when Corris moved, as if realizing he was soliloquizing instead of conversing. He took a deep breath, then turned back toward Corris with renewed interest. "But here's something I don't understand," he said, clasping his hands behind his back as he moved to Corris's side. "I've always heard about the Jedi as... some kind of unstoppable force, no pun intended. They're everywhere in the Core. They never come alone. I've heard they come in annoying, persistent groups. Maybe with Republic simpletons they can lord their powers over, using them as meat shields if the need arises. Or even in groups, masters and apprentices preserving their vaunted peace and justice with their ridiculous multicolored laser swords, clad in gold and white armor."

Corris managed a weak scoff, then spoke with a slight slur. "You've got a lot of funny ideas about us."

The minister smiled. "Maybe so, but I'm sure there's some truth here, isn't there? But here's the weird part. You're different." The minister shoved a finger in Corris's direction. "You're out here on your own. No allies. No soldiers. Just you and, I dare say, your less-than-elegant lightsaber. I wondered if you could tell me why that is."

Corris wasn't much in the mood for answering questions, especially ones that Barthano looked like he already had an answer for. Even his connection to the Force felt tenuous as his emotions fluctuated. His jaw flexed as he averted Barthano's gaze.

"Disappointing," Barthano mused, in reaction to the Jedi's silence. "But one thing you learn when dealing with commerce in the Outer Rim is knowing a thing or two about your potential customers, especially ones that aren't obvious Republic shills. I think you can see where I'm going."

Corris's jaw clenched. Barthano noticed the reaction and snorted with amusement. "Don't act so surprised. I know your species, Paslan. Sort of a freak accident, really. I did some bartering with Paslans a few years ago. You know what struck me as fascinating about them?"

Corris managed to tilt his head enough so that an eye could angle toward Barthano, and the minister gave him a knowing smile. "Their strong cultural tradition of individual achievement. Everyone does their own thing, if you catch my meaning. Your

station in society is directly proportional to how much you've accomplished. How that made my trade dealings with them extra lucrative is... well, beside the point."

"You took advantage of them?" Corris asked. He couldn't tell if his head throb was getting worse, or if it was somehow helping him focus. "They're simple, practical people."

"Don't I know it!" Barthano laughed. "The credits I made off those deals practically got me the minister position single-handedly. Amazing what you can pull off when everyone is out for themselves. But back to you. How does that fit with you?"

Corris couldn't help struggling against his bonds, before sucking in a breath and glaring back at his interrogator. It was rare enough for someone to know where he was from, and the sensation of being exposed was fraying his nerves. "What does it matter?"

The minister leaned in. "Let me spell it out for you. Understanding someone is the best way to figure out how to deal with them. The most amusing part is that you don't even understand yourself. But I do. You're Paslan, born into a culture that values accomplishment and self-sufficiency. But here you are, without the Republic, without an apprentice or master, without any brothers or sisters in arms, not even bothering to try and look the part. Perhaps some master with an overinflated sense of duty waved their sword around and granted you a title, but even they must have known the inevitable truth, sending you on assignment as far away from the Core as possible. They know the truth, and so do I. And, I suspect, so do you."

Corris felt like he couldn't breathe. He wasn't turning away, but his eyes squeezed shut. Any ability to summon the restraint that was so integral to being a Jedi was slipping further and further away. His hands clenched, palms slick with sweat.

Barthano sighed, like he was making an unfortunate but inevitable observation. "A Paslan Jedi, a contradiction on the most basic level. You're not a real Jedi. You're a fake. A fraud. A sham. You don't belong anywhere."

Something changed as the minister uttered those last words. The temperature seemed to drop in the chamber the two occupied. It wasn't a malfunction in the ship's atmospheric systems, but an abrupt spike in the Force.

Barthano stood and looked around himself in confusion, feeling the change despite his negligible Force affinity.

Corris cried out with a sharp, penetrating, enduring sound that crescendoed as it went on, the deck itself starting to resonate in response. It was more than just frustration, it was more than desperation... it was a spike of pure, unbridled anger. Barthano had triggered it, but as Corris's eyes remained squeezed shut during the unleashed torrent of emotion, it wasn't solely directed at the minister. Was it more targeted at the Jedi? Or perhaps even more at himself?

The vibration of the deck around Corris culminated in a powerful Force shockwave that blasted through the room with the Jedi at its center. The blast hurled Barthano back against the bulkhead, sending Corris's lightsaber, clipped to the back of his belt, sliding across the metal floor. The binders holding Corris's wrists behind him snapped down the middle. Electronic panels and lights popped and sparked as circuits and connections frayed.

Wide-eyed with surprise, Barthano forced himself to take a breath and scrambled to his feet, even as Corris staggered up out of the interrogation chair. He darted out of the chamber, turning down the corridor past the enforcer droids. Not bothering to stop, he yelled orders at them. "Subdue the Jedi!"

The droids only made it halfway to Corris before he threw one hand toward the one on the left, its servos and motors whining as it was held in place by the Force. His other hand shot toward the one on the right, throwing it back into the hall and crushing it against the nearby bulkhead. It fell uselessly to the deck, too damaged to right itself. The other droid suffered a worse fate, as its head and one of its arms were torn from its torso.

Corris lurched out of the room after Barthano, his twisted expression mixed with dried blood giving him a look appropriate to something out of an old Sith tale. He paused, then extended his hand. A familiar metal object tore off the floor and slapped into his palm.

Entering the monstrous cargo hold in a panic, Barthano huffed as he darted between the stacked crates of inactive droids. How was he supposed to know that one

barely-alive Jedi was still a threat? The Dalnans had made it sound like bringing him in would be easy, but he hadn't had many dealings with them, their pirate associates or Jedi. Either way, he only had one way out of this mess, and it wouldn't be on his own.

He had to control his breathing as he recalled the layout of the cargo hold, finally locating a control panel closest to a crate of enforcer droids armed with blaster cannons.

"Come on, come on," he breathed, activating the display and keying in the IDs of the nearby crates once he forced his hands to stop shaking on the second or third attempt. Another few button pushes, and the droids would be activated in a number massive enough to blast the Jedi into oblivion.

He was most of the way through the activation protocols when the lights to the cargo hold winked out, and with them, the control panel interface. A few seconds later, the massive ship shuddered horribly, a rough exit from hyperspace into realspace. Barthano's breath caught in his throat, his eyes wide as he took a few reflexive steps back from the panel. Emergency lighting activated, a red glow just bright enough to accent the dark silhouettes of the droid crates. Just a short while ago, they felt so comforting... now they seemed imposing and suppressive. An eerie silence overtook the chamber, with the usually persistent ambient sound from the ship's engines and inactive droids completely gone.

Barthano's eyes darted around the room. He strained but could hear nothing aside from his own shallow breaths and his heart, beating rapidly in his throat.

He forced himself to slowly head back toward the ship's bridge, where he prayed that the pilot droid, and isolating blast doors, would still be operable. He slowly made his way through. Carefully. Methodically. He'd dealt with threats worse than this. He could make it through.

Crouching beside a crate of housekeeping droids, he peered around the corner. Finally! There was the exit to the ship corridors. A furtive look left and right registered no threats. Unfortunately, just as he left cover and began creeping toward the door, he heard a sound he couldn't place. He froze, then against his better judgment, he turned to look.

A blood red radiance, brighter than the emergency lighting of similar hue, shone from the top of one of the crates. Its lance-shaped beam hummed with energy and cast

dark shadows across the floor of the chamber. The Jedi's silhouette, lit up by that light, was unmistakable. He leered down at Barthano with an expression of pure, unchecked scorn.

Barthano ran.

Corris coursed with power, the Force energizing him even as he stared down at his prey. When Barthano turned and ran, he reached out a hand, wrapping the Force around the man and yanking him backward. His target yelped as he flew through the air, then crashed hard against the side of a crate, stunned and gasping for breath.

The Jedi leaped off his perch and landed lightly on his feet, his ignited lightsaber burning through the dark as he moved toward the minister.

"Here's the thing about Jedi, Minister," he said. His tone carried a strange weight that correlated with his aggressive tactics and bloodied appearance. "We don't give up easily, which makes it clear to me that you don't know a thing about me, or the Order."

Corris sensed the incoming attacks of Barthano's hold-out blaster through the Force before he saw it. Still laying on his back, the minister brought the small blaster into view, gritted his teeth, aimed at Corris, and pulled the trigger as fast as he could. Eight shots fired before the weapon's power cell ran dry, and each shot was deflected in a blur of red, which ended in a spin that cut the small weapon in half. The minister yelped as he dropped the now useless item, then looked up in fear as Corris approached. He scurried backward on the floor with his elbows.

The Jedi gave slow chase. "You think you know me? You think you know Jedi? You think I'm a fraud? You're wrong. I've vanquished evils greater than you, been tempered by trials that make Kello look like child's play. You underestimate my strength and conviction, things you clearly lack. You're a blight on Kello, a blight on the Rim, and you deserve your fate."

Barthano had run out of space, backing up against the bulkhead as Corris backed him into a corner. "You can't do this!" he breathed, pressing his back against the metal wall in a futile attempt to escape. "You don't have the right!"

"I don't need it. I have the Force."

Corris drew his blade back, preparing for a killing blow. As he did, a powerful surge of the Force permeated the room, both attuning Corris's senses and imbuing him with strength.

But it did more than that. With every inch that he pulled back his hand, giving more and more power to his strike, the presence of the Force grew, crescendoing to its height just as he was about to bring his blade down.

He hesitated.

The Living Force was with him, and fluctuated with the possibilities and permutations that were repercussions of the here and now. His grip tightened on his weapon as he suffered through conflict. He was here, doing the right thing, ridding the galaxy of evil! What choice did he have?

That's the thing. There was always a choice.

Corris suddenly broke free of the emotional fog he'd been mired in. His hand slowly lowered as his lightsaber deactivated, the now-orange blade retracting back into the hilt. Barthano looked up at him with confusion, but mostly relief.

Corris reached down and pulled the minister to his feet, forcing a smile as he did. "Turns out the Force is with both of us today. Now I'm afraid I'm going to need to lock you in a droid crate until the Republic team arrives."

Epilogue

Republic Pathfinder Vessel *Curio*

6 months later

Corris kept himself busy onboard the cramped exploration vessel by making another pass on his lightsaber. The final modifications were complete, and he was attempting to jam his amber kyber crystal back into place with percussive therapy when there were a very specific series of knocks at his door. Corris sighed.

Without waiting for an answer, the door hissed open, and a Nautolan poked his head inside, sporting his usual mischievous grin. Sometimes Corris thought that constant smirk and extroverted personality of the other Jedi was enough to make him succumb to the dark side for real.

"We want you in the cockpit," the intruder said, gesturing with a thumb back out into the corridor. "Can't run the mission from your bunk."

"Yeah, I'm coming."

Corris hastily attached the external plate back on his saber and hooked it to his belt, then joined the other members of the Pathfinder expedition in the cockpit. Their EX droid warbled something in the back as it went to check on the sensor array.

During his wayseeker days, dropping out of hyperspace always meant it was time to review his mental checklist. Food, water, topography, culture. In short, things that were life or death. It was finally starting to get easier now, especially after the training refresher he'd taken on Coruscant. Still, he called on the Force to help quiet those anxieties.

"What've we got, Jedi Tippik?" Corris asked, looking over at the Nautolan, who was now sitting at the scanner console.

"Just about everything we've ever wanted in a comms buoy location. Nice and snug in the orbit of the third planet's moon. Should be another easy job. If we keep this pace up, I'll make master in no time!"

"You and I both know that's not how it works."

Tippik laughed. “Maybe not, but look at this. Mysterious ruins on the third planet as well!” He glanced over to the human at the helm. “If you would, please set a course after the buoy is away? It’s mandated exploration protocol after all.”

Kellin, the grumpy, middle-aged pilot, gave a surly look back to Corris, who folded his arms and shrugged in response. “Don’t look at me. I don’t make the rules.”

“Fine,” Kellin said, as he punched in the new course. “Just don’t blame me if you fall into a pit, or have a Sith ghost eat your face, or whatever nonsense we usually run into when you do this.”

Corris leaned against the back of Tippik’s chair as the crew began preparations for the expedition to the planet’s surface. At first, he wanted to handle every detail, every decision, every nuance on his own. But now he knew his crew; knew what they were capable of, knew what he could accomplish when he was on the team.

Tippik cracked wise as the *Curio* began its atmospheric descent, and Corris couldn’t help smiling. Back on Kello, Minister Barthano had been wrong about many things, but he might have had a point about the Jedi. There would always be situations requiring self-reliance, Corris knew. But the Jedi were the vanguard of peace and justice in the galaxy, and groups like Corris’s Pathfinder team were more than just the sum of their parts. Together, they would bring that light to anyone who needed it.

As the planet’s surface came into view through the clouds, Corris’s eyes shone.

“Let’s figure out what’s down there. Together.”