

Star Wars

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Elusion Illusion

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SEVEN DAYS AFTER THE BATTLE OF GEONOSIS.

Aayla Secura suppressed a rising Sense of anxiety as she entered the council chamber high in the Jedi Temple. Jedi Master Mace Windu stood with his back to one of the arched windows that revealed an expanse of Coruscant cityscape. To the right of the doorway stood another Jedi sniffing at the petals of a flower placed in a wall niche. He was a Caamasi with long and supple limbs. Golden down covered his body, with purple fur masking his eyes and sleeping up in stripes to his crown.

Aayla bowed toward Mace Windu. "Forgive my lateness, Master."

At first, Mace nodded slowly, as if only distantly hearing her. Then he looked up at the Twi'lek and gave her a more certain nod, clasping his hands at the small of his back. Aayla felt a wave of serenity flow through the Force, from the Jedi Master to her. He said, "Though the war leaves us thinking that there's not a second to lose, you are not late. Right now, the portal of opportunity we're afforded is not yet closed."

He nodded to the other Jedi. This is Ylenic It'kla, a Jedi Knight of Caamas. He'll work with you on this particular assignment."

The Caamasi offered Aayla a slender hand, and she shook it. Ylenic held her hand firmly, but she knew he was exerting only a fraction of his strength. The fluid motion with which he had turned to greet her suggested speed and power that would make him 3 formidable warrior. With his long reach, Ylenic could be a deadly duelist if he were at all practiced with a lightsaber.

Aayla smiled at the Caamasi and looked back to Mace. "How am I to serve. Master Windu?"

"This is a delicate mission, Aayla, one that requires guile and intelligence, not just martial prowess. You have proven yourself with the latter at Geonosis."

"But the former, Master?"

"I have meditated on this matter, and you are the right choice."

"Yes, Master," said Aayla. She wondered what Windu was leaving unsaid, but she quelled the questions in her mind.

Mace nodded in acknowledgement of her discipline. "Corellia, due to the influence of Garm Bel Iblis, has declared itself neutral in the current conflict. Despite this stance, both the Republic and Confederacy of Independent Systems exert some influence on the world. Along with a few other neutral worlds, Corellia has become a haven for refugees from both sides."

Aayla raised one eyebrow as she grasped the implication. "And havens for those who would profit from trade with both sides?"

"Your knowledge of trading practices on fiylloth serves you well, Aayla." Mace smiled briefly before composing his face in a more serious expression. "In preparing for the war, the Techno Union started many development projects. Most of the researchers had little concept of how their work would be used, but one of them figured things out. His name is Ratri Tane. He stole his project's critical files and the only working prototype of some very valuable circuitry. He's sent his wife and child into hiding and he has made his way to Corellia. From there he seeks to hire transport to a place where he and his family can live in peace."

"Tane is from Corellia?" asked Aayla.

"No, Coruscant, though his wife was from Corellia - the city of Coronet." Mace ran a hand over his jaw. "We believe Tane stole the prototype and files as insurance in case the Techno Union found his family before his return."

Aayla nodded. "And you want us to find him and retrieve the files?"

"Yes," he said. "But it must be done quietly."

"Will we have any help from the Jedi on Corellia?"

Mace shook his head. "No, and that is why you must be careful. They have become somewhat territorial, and with the politics of the system being as complex as they are, this is understandable. When Corellia declared itself neutral in this conflict, loyalties within the Jedi there were split. Siding with the Republic might bring the war to the Corellian system, the system they've sworn to protect."

Aayla frowned. "But they are Jedi."

Ylenic opened a hand. "They are Jedi, and will defend the peace in their system."

"And if we need them to defend peace in the galaxy?" said Aayla.

Mace shook his head. That is a matter for later, Aayla. Your mission is to find Tane and extract him, Ylenic has been to Corellia before. The two of you will fly a smuggling ship, and you will be in command. You will be looking to move any number of cargoes, but will prefer passengers. To Tane, you will appear to be the perfect escape from Corellia. Briefing files have already been loaded into your ship's computer."

Aayla smiled, much preferring the undercover role of a smuggler to being a slave dressed in too little to conceal a comlink, much less a lightsaber. "I've seen plenty of smugglers and seedy pilots. I can do this."

Mace nodded and held up a hand. "You can expect to find the Techno Union hiring a variety of criminals to find Tane. You must be especially wary of Gotals. Their horns make them sensitive to emotions and possibly even the Force. They are common among the criminals of Coronet, so watch for them."

"I understand," she said, growing excited at the prospect of this mission. Through the Force, she sensed both Mace and Ylenic react to her unchecked delight. She reined in that emotion and glanced down. "I shall be very careful, Master."

Mace nodded solemnly. "I know in you we've made the right choice."

Aayla settled into the co-pilot's seat in the cockpit of the Kuat Leisure I21-B modified yacht Flare. "Gear's all stowed. What do we have for a cargo?"

Ylenic punched a button on the command console. "Foodstuffs, mostly. Delicacies that ex-patriots can't live without. We'll get a good price for them."

She laughed. "Do you think the Jedi Council is much concerned about that? "

The Caamasi shook his head and punched the ignition control sequence into the ship's computer. The ship's twin turbines came online with a whine. Ylenic shunted power to the repulsorlift coils, and the ship floated delicately before rising into Coruscant airspace. They were departing from a commercial spaceport so they would attract little or no attention. Although Aayla did not like to dwell on the prospect, she was certain there were both mechanical and living spies watching the Jedi Temple and all other sensitive areas on Coruscant to transmit data to the Separatist leader Count Dooku - wherever he was.

Ylenic received clearance to leave the atmosphere, set the navigational computer for the prescribed outbound vector, and switched on the autopilot. The Flare left the angular streams of daily traffic behind, and soared past the highest towers to join a thin line of ships departing the Republic's capital. Aayla watched the oilier ships, big and small, private and commercial, and even a few vessels with the distinctive red hulls denoting official Republic duty.

"How many of those ships do you figure are leaving on secret missions?" she asked.

The Caamasi smiled, "I would think, Aayla, that all of them carry secrets of one sort or another. Illicit operations, I would assume for most. A mission like ours? One or two, perhaps."

"You're probably right."

"Am I?" The Caamasi's amber eyes softened slightly. "How do you draw that conclusion? I am guessing without a shred of evidence - no sense of the Force, just idle speculation."

"It seemed correct to me." Aayla felt color rise to her cheeks and streak her lekku.

"This question should not be a cause of embarrassment, Aayla. The Force might well speak to you in ways it does not me."

She thought about that possibility as the ship made the transition from atmosphere to the daik cold of space. The Flare inverted, giving her a view of Coruscant's surface, especially the glowing lines and flickering lights of the night side. The skylanes appeared like giant circuits with luminescent electrons moving along them. She picked one out and focused the Force on it, trying to receive some sense of its purpose. She felt nothing she could consider even the merest of impressions.

"Probably not the Force," she admitted, "but a guess on my part, too."

Ylenic smiled and scanned the computer readout, "At least we are guessing along the same lines. This bodes well for our effort. We are clear for the jump to hyperspace."

Aayla nodded and gave the order, "Go."

The Caamasi flicked two levers forward, engaging the hyperdrive. The ship lurched forward and the stars went from pinpricks to bars all pointed down into a well that exploded up at them and filled the viewport with bright light. Aayla raised her hand to shield her eyes before the viewport dampers kicked in.

Ylenic nodded. "We will make the journey in four jumps. This course will add several hours over a direct trip, but it will mask our point of origin. It will also bring us into the Corellian system on a vector that is not much watched by pirates."

"Good thinking," she said dryly, "I would have suggested or approved that planning,"

Ylenic reached out with his right hand and patted her on the left shoulder. "Yes, Aayla, you are in charge of this operation, but as your pilot I sought not to bother you with this sort of tedious detail."

She gave him a quick smile and a nod. "I do wonder why Master Windu placed me in command."

"Do you?" The Caamasi canted his head to the side. "This means you doubt the wisdom of our Masters, or else you doubt yourself."

"Our Masters, no." She shook her head firmly. "But myself, yes, a bit. I am hardly the most experienced Jedi Knight in the galaxy, or even on this ship. You have been a Knight longer than I, so I wonder why I am not subordinate to you?"

This is simple: while I have been to Corellia before, I have filled a more traditional role. The Caamasi often counsel and mediate, and this is what I do most of the time. My skills as a pilot are likewise valued, but seldom have I spent time among the people we will meet while seeking Tane."

Ylenic's voice had strength, but it came quiet and warm. She liked listening to him, and watching his right hand move through the air as he spoke made his comments almost hypnotic. What he had said about the Caamasi was true, and they were highly valued for their skills. They were also known as pacifists and, try as she might, she could not remember ever seeing or hearing of another Caamasi Jedi.

Aayla commented on that fact, and Ylenic nodded as if expecting the remark. "It is true, we Caamasi have not produced many Jedi. It is also true that I am a pacifist."

"But here you are, willing to take part in a war," She frowned. "Doesn't that violate your

philosophy?"

"There is a point at which pacifism, while seeming good, can serve the dark side."

"How can that be?"

His fingers extended, then half-curved back in on themselves, "There are those, especially within the Confederacy, who could characterize the Jedi as bloody-handed and aggressive warriors. Is that accurate?"

"No. Jedi are defenders of peace, counselors. We use our combat skills only as a last resort, only when forced to."

"Exactly. So, while we value peace and abhor violence, we know there is a point where we may have to place our lives between those of innocents and people who would harm them."

"Clearly."

"It is just as clear, Aayla, when pacifism becomes evil. If beings are capable of protecting others but refuse to take action to preserve their own sense of peace, they are being selfish. They place themselves and their sense of peace over the peace of others, and so they defend a philosophy instead of lives. In this way, they fail everyone. This is where their choice is evil."

She nodded slowly. To do nothing in the face of evil was to condone it and permit it to prosper, 'This Tane, then, is he being evil?"

Ylenic's face screwed up in concentration, and Aayla caught a quick sense of some emotion she couldn't identify.

"He is acting to save his family," said the Caamasi, "so I would think not."

She nodded. "What you say is wise."

The Caamasi nodded appreciatively. "I have a question, if you do not mind? Why do you doubt yourself?"

"I am young, I am inexperienced." She searched his face, looking for any sign in his amber eyes that these reasons rang true for him. She caught flickers through the Force, but nothing more. "This is a delicate mission. If it goes wrong, it might create a bad feeling with the Corellian government. They might see our effort as the Republic interfering in their affairs, and that might help ally them with the Separatists. That is quite a lot of responsibility to deal with."

"Good points, all." His eyes narrowed slightly, "Does it concern you that you have doubts?"

Aayla thought for a moment, then a moment longer. "No, I think it is good. I trust in my skills and training, but without doubts, without realizing that things could spin out of control, would become arrogant, a failing that could lead to the dark side."

"Very good, Aayla Secura." Ylenic smiled broadly. "Now you know why you are worthy of being entrusted with so important a mission,"

Both Aayla and Ylenic managed to sleep and meditate on the journey, so they arrived in the Corellian system refreshed and ready to act. A pair of security fighters looked them over as they came in past Selonia, but flight control cleared them on a vector for Corellia. The city of Coronet was just slipping into dusk as they landed at one of the myriad spaceports in the seaside city.

The lights had just begun going in the section of the town known as Treasure Ship Row. Aayla found that the place paled in comparison to Coruscant, but that could rightly be said of any other city in the Republic. Though there had been little in the way of cloud cover on the flight in, once Ylenic landed and popped the hatch, the city's humidity dragged at her.

Aayla shivered, 'This air just feels wrong." Ylenic sniffed and wrinkled his nose, "It smells worse." They had chosen clothes that suited both their assumed roles and their personal preferences. For Ylenic this was a red kilt that ran to his knees, with small boots and a sleeveless blue jacket that buttoned to the throat and had long tails in the

back. Over that he had thrown a black cloak that shrouded his form and let him easily conceal his lightsaber,

Aayla bound her lekku in a braid of black and brown leather strips that attached to her traditional Twi'lek headgear. Black boots came to her knees, and red - and black-striped leggings from there to her waist. A black and red tunic that was cut to expose to midriff and cleavage matched the leggings. While she took no great pleasure in revealing clothes, she knew such raiment was both unrestrictive in combat and distracting during trade negotiations. A black nerf-hide jacket cut short enough to reveal of band of blue flesh at her waist completed the outfit and let her conceal her lightsaber within easy reach.

A number of "commodities brokers" approached the ship and immediately began bargaining for the cargo. Aayla haggled with a pleasure that surprised her. She mentally split the lot and sold off each piece, pitting broker against broker. She refrained from using the Force to sway the brokers, but could sense avarice building as the bidding grew furious, and then panic rising as the prices became too dear. Within half an hour, she had disposed of everything at a tidy profit.

As she finished, Aayla noticed Ylenic talking to two of the brokers who had withdrawn from bargaining as they learned the Flare carried nothing in the way of serious contraband. She politely refused the offer of a drink with a flapping Toydarian and wandered over to join the Caamasi. The two shady brokers, a cloaked human and a Devaronian, acknowledged her with a nod before leaving.

Ylenic smiled at her. "You enjoyed yourself."

Aayla nodded but then froze for a moment. "I thought I had kept my emotions closed to the Force."

"You did, but you also smiled, and your victims were relieved when the bidding was over." He gestured casually in the direction of the retreating brokers. Those two asked what they were looking to take away with us, I suggested that while the hold was sufficient for almost anything, a yacht carries passengers better than cargo. Word will spread, and if Tane has been making inquiries, he will find us."

From the data files they'd received from Master Windu, Aayla knew they were looking for a human male of average height and weight, with green eyes, light hair, and a recently grown full beard. As humans went, he was not bad looking and not very old. Still, there was something about him that seemed unlike a research scientist.

Then again, she mused silently, if he were nothing more than a typical dataworm, he never would have undertaken the theft or sent his family away to safety.

Ylenic pointed to one of the passageways heading north. "Our friends indicated that those who seek quiet passage off Corellia often look for opportunities at a cantina called Homestar. I suggested we would find our way there."

They headed out together, with Ylenic clearly shortening his strides to match her gait. Despite wearing a cloak, he moved quietly. If he weren't there at the edge of her vision, she might have thought he had vanished.

Losing him would have been easy, she thought, as they moved from the freight section of the spaceport to the passenger terminal. Throngs of people milled about—predominantly human and Selonian, but with enough Neimoidians, Devaronians, Weequays, Klatooinians, and even Bith to demonstrate what an important crossroads Corellia had become since the war began.

Aayla watched for Gotals and spied one lurking near a group of Neimoidians. She saw no other obvious dangers, and even from the Neimoidians she sensed no malevolence. She knew it was foolish to assume that every member of a particular species would be in lock-step with its leadership, but she decided to err on the side of caution and keep her senses open for potential enemies.

"I've spotted a Gotal," she whispered to Ylenic.

"There was a second." When he noticed her surprise, the Caamasi tapped his nose lightly. "They have a scent of old sweat and mildew."

"And I thought they looked bad."

They exited through another portal and turned east. The crowd thinned as they moved farther from the spaceport. On the kilometer-long walk, the passages grew dim in a few spots, but they encountered no trouble. That didn't mean Aayla couldn't sense people lurking in the darkness, but she and Ylenic were judged by the cut of their clothes, so they aroused no special interest in the urban predators.

Treasure Ship Row-or simply "the Row," as natives seemed to call it-surprised her because of the cosmetic overlay of lights and signs. All were bright and kept in good repair. They gave the area an air of respectability, which she suspected was more to shield the establishments from the scorn of its commercial neighbor; than any fear of outrage from its visitors.

Homestar stood a quarter of the way along the Row, on the south side. It could have been mistaken for a planetarium on any other world. The music issuing forth might have dissuaded some from making that mistake, but otherwise the facade seemed plain. It did not excite the senses and, save for the odd collection of people coming and going, could have been described as unremarkable.

As Aayla and Ylenic entered the place, however, "unremarkable" gave way to "impossible." The doorway opened on a tall and wide set of stairs leading down into a round pit floor. A circular bar dominated the center, with concentric rings of round and curved tables spreading out around it. All around the walls and hanging from the ceiling were platforms and cages in which dancers undulated to the music. The band played on a stage directly opposite the stairs, and the area in front of their stage had been cleared for patrons to dance.

And dancing they were, in combinations of species that defied cataloging. And the manner in which they danced sent a shiver down Aayla's spine. She knew enough of the art to pass as a dancer, and she had a Twi'lek's delight in the sensuous movements a body can make. Those beings on the dance floor might well have been having fun, but to her eye they appeared to be writhing spasmodically as the result of some excruciating poison.

Ylenic shut his nostrils completely. "No, I do not like how they look, either."

The Caamasi led the way down to the floor and halfway around on the left. In the centermost of the table-rings they found a small space where they could stand. Ylenic moved around so he faced away from the bar, and she stood facing him, allowing them to cover the entire cantina. They punched in their drink orders on a small datapad built into the table. Soon a droid brought them two tumblers of Corellian whiskey, which they left untouched on the table.

As she studied people, Aayla could definitely see that Jedi on Corellia must have their hands full. The war had exacerbated the situation by bringing in a lot of beings under a lot of pressure-and adding to that mix agents of either side who wanted to cause trouble.

And if war came to this place: she shivered. Geonosis had been a wasteland before the battle, but the aftermath was still hideous. Droids blown into shards, Geonosians dead in droves, Jedi killed and hideously maimed. And the losses among the clone ranks were appalling.

Ylenic laid a hand on her forearm. "What is the matter?"

"Just remembering the first battle," she said.

Ylenic nodded. "It must have been terrible. While I would have gladly stood with my comrades, I am happy I do not carry memories of that event with me."

"There she is!" With a leathery slap of his wings, Lorfo, the Toydarian from the spaceport, landed on the edge of their table. "You were the best bargainer at the port, so I have a deal for you,"

She shot him a withering glance, but something beyond him caught her eye. Aayla tapped the back of Ylenic's hand. "To your right, fifty degrees. That's him, near the two Gotals,"

Ylenic looked and then nodded and breathed deeply. "I have him, and them. "

"I have a deal for you, pretty one." Lorfo repeated, chuckling. "Forget them. Their boss would have nothing for you."

Aayla frowned at Lorfo. "Not now." She moved past the Toydarian and started around the ring of tables on the outside. Ylenic mirrored her path on the inside.

The Gotals spotted Tane at the same time as the Jedi and started directly toward him. He saw them and spun, looking for an escape route.

Aayla felt someone grab her right shoulder, She twisted away and, without thinking, flicked her left hand at the Toydarian clinging to her. She gave him only a tiny push with the Force, but that was enough to bounce him back onto their table, splashing their drinks onto a pair of Grans. The two aliens Clinked all six of their eyes in surprise and grabbed Lorfo.

Aayla's action had alerted the Gotals. One continued after Tane, while the other drew a blaster and fired a shot at Aayla.

Time slowed for her even as she saw him reach for his weapon. As it slid from a well-worn holster and a thumb snapped the safety off, her right hand had disappeared into her jacket and grasped the silver cylinder of her lightsaber. She had it out and pointed down before he finished arming at her. When he hit the trigger, she ignited the blue blade and batted the scarlet bolt high, making it pass between two caged dancers,

The music swallowed both the whine of the first bolt and Lorfo's outraged cries, but the light of the second bolt scattered Homestar's patrons Aayla had to deflect it high again, for if she missed in trying to direct it back at the shooter, she'd kill dancers or members of the band. The patrons' panic spread to the dancers, and the band faltered, save for the lone Dorenian Beshniquel player tearing off on a riff in counter-point to the whine of blaster bolts.

The bolts not only dispersed the crowd but showed the Gotals' allies the location of their foes. Fully alive in the Force, Aayla felt someone coming at her back. She spun, bringing the sizzling blue blade a round and down through a wrist. The hand and the vibroblade it had been holding dropped away, accompanied by a hiss of pain. She clipped her attacker on the head with the blunt end of her lightsaber and slashed right, driving away another bolt.

She spun to follow her cut and dropped into a crouch to scythe the blade through the center post of a table. The gunman who had leaped upon it tipped and tottered, then pitched over. His blaster sprayed an arc of fire toward the ceiling as he went. With a minor thrust in the Force, Aayla pushed him into two others ruffians, spilling the lot of them to the floor.

A Weequay leaped over the tangle of limbs and came at her with a truncheon held low in his right hand. His thumb hit a button, and the end of the weapon sparked as he thrust it at her, Aayla shifted onto her right knee and brought the blade up and over in a cut that sheered the truncheon in half. She ducked her shoulder, catching the Weequay in the stomach, and tossed him up and over in a somersault that toppled another table.

Panic and fear surged through the cantina, and in its wake came a near silence. Patrons and dancers had fled the building or crouched behind whatever cover they could find. Aayla glanced left and saw Ylenic, his cloak off, his green lightsaber gleaming. Around him lay a number of ruffians, all of them radiating enough pain for her to know they were alive and likely to stay that way.

Four humans pushed in against the tide of customers fleeing through the entrance. Three of them, two men and a woman, wore the green-and-black uniforms of CorSec officers. In their wake followed a tall man, quite slender, with black hair and cold gray eyes. He paused halfway down the stairs to take in the whole scene as his people rushed forward, drew their blasters, and leveled them at the Jedi.

Ylenic's blade vanished, and Aayla likewise extinguished hers. One of the CorSec officers put his blaster back in its holster and bent to check the one-handed man who had been wielding the vibroblade. He glanced back at his boss, got a nod, then produced a comlink and called for medical services.

The tall man approached Aayla and waved Ylenic over, "I am Inspector Rostek Horn of the Corellian Security Force. You are Jedi?"

Aayla hesitated for a moment, but before she could answer, Ylenic spoke. "Yes, Inspector, we are Jedi, passing through the system. We inquired at the spaceport where music and food

might be had for weary travelers, and we were directed here."

Horn raised an eyebrow. "You are not dressed as Jedi."

Aayla nodded. "Given the neutrality of Corellia, we thought keeping our presence hidden would avoid creating unnecessary tensions."

"Unfortunately, Inspector, it did not,"

The Caamasi patted Aayla gently on the shoulder, "These individuals hoped my companion would wear something more revealing and dance for them. I was taken as harmless, since I am Caamasi."

Aayla opened her senses to the Force, trying to determine whether Ylenic was using a Jedi technique to influence the inspector's mind. He was not. She did know the ability to manipulate minds depended on the target's strength of will. She suspected, quite strongly, that Inspector Horn would have been close to impossible to influence that way.

Mote CorSec officers arrived and began to gather the casualties. Horn studied those being hauled away in silence. He nodded. "This crew's caused trouble before. They're not going to tell us anything. There don't seem to be any other witnesses, so your version of events must be the truth."

He looked closely at Aayla. "Unless there's anything else you want to tell me?"

"Lot a thing, Inspector."

"Defending yourselves is not a crime, but I'll need to see your identification." He pulled a datapad from his pocket and began entering their information. "Have you communicated with the Jedi here?"

"No, Inspector." Aayla twitched her lekku in the equivalent of a shrug. "We wished to be no bother."

"That's probably best, then, to be no bother. You'll be leaving soon?"

Ylenic nodded. "Very soon, Inspector."

"Good. Don't let me keep you."

Ylenic took Aayla lightly by the elbow, but she gently freed herself and turned back to Horn, "Inspector, if you don't mind, a question?"

"Yes?"

"When you said they were a crew, you didn't mean they were from a starship, did you?"

"No, Small time hoodlums who hire out to whomever's being free with credits."

"And in this case?"

"I don't know who, yet, but I will." He smiled slowly. "You will be long gone by then."

"Of course we will, Inspector." Ylenic bowed gracefully. "A mere memory by then."

The Jedi left the cantina and cut through the crowd gathering around the medical transport. Already they heard stories of wholesale slaughter within the club. Aayla braced to hear the words "Jedi" and "Lightsaber" used, but most folks were recounting how they had narrowly been missed in a hail of blaster fire. Their role appeared to have escaped notice in the chaos.

Instead of heading back toward the spaceport, Ylenic walked farther east. His long-legged stride ate up the ground, and Aayla found herself trotting to catch-up. "Where are we going?"

"Away from there, I am seeking, perhaps in vain, a whiff of our quarry. Did you get anything?"

Aayla cast her mind back, sorting through recently perceived sensations, but she found

nothing she could attach to Tane. She'd seen him, but she had not sensed him in the Force, and that surprised her. Given his situation, he should have been radiating anxiety with the intensity of a solar flare. "I got nothing."

Ylenic stopped, and his shoulders slumped. "I do not like this."

"Do we assume they have Tane?"

"He was spirited out quickly, or else he escaped and is being trailed. Either way, I think we have to assume he is in unfriendly custody."

"It's my fault this went bad, isn't it?" Aayla frowned. "I used the Force to flick Lorfo away, and that alerted the Gotals."

Ylenic took a deep breath in through his nose and snorted. "For you, the Force and telekinesis come easily, and you use them almost unconsciously. While what you did was a mistake, you were far more circumspect in how you dealt with your assailants. Had CorSec not arrived so quickly, we could have hidden our lightsabers and been away without anyone identifying us as Jedi."

"Except for the Gotals."

"Yes, the key point in it all. This is why time is now of the essence. Before we could lay out bait and wait for Tane to come to us, but now we must find him." Ylenic rested a hand on her shoulder. "Your question of Inspector Hotn was good, by the way, and I wish he could have shared useful information with us."

Something tugged at the back of Aayla's mind, but before she could focus on it, the dry flapping of wings and a grating voice drove it from her mind. "There's the pretty lady. She's a Jedi." Lorfo hung in the air and laughed. "I'm most impressed. She bargained without using her powers."

Aayla smiled as much in apology as in greeting. "Who would want to cheat an honest merchant?"

"If only I was one."

Her pale eyes narrowed. "Lorfo, you knew the Gotals. You know who they are working for."

"Yes, yes. I told you they would be no good for dealing."

"I need to find the Gotals and their boss, Lorfo. Do you know where they ate?"

"Well." The little winged creature rubbed a finger over his bulbous nose. "I am a merchant. I'll refund you ten percent on our previous deal."

"Twenty."

"Fifteen."

"Done!" His voice rose triumphantly, and he soared into the air. Roaring down a bit awkwardly, he grinned and pointed down an alley heading south. "This way, not far, hurry."

The Jedi raced after the Toydarian. Their course soon turned west again, through rubbish-choked alleys that set Ylenic to sneezing. Aayla assumed the alley's miasma was for him the equivalent of blinding lights to her. Her sympathy for his discomfort only increased as she found the stench so revolting in a few places that she had to pinch shut her nose and breathe through her mouth.

Lorfo led them to a small warehouse with tall, heavy-duty shelving units crammed with duraplast crates. Lights burned deep in the warehouse's heart, and Aayla heard voices inside. She refrained from reaching out with the Force so she would not repeat the mistake she'd made at Homestar.

Turning, she pointed Lorfo back toward the door. "Thank you for your help. You don't want to be here if more trouble happens."

He darted down, kissed her hand, and gave her a wink. Spinning almost elegantly, he fluttered off low to the ground and, as quietly as possible, left the warehouse.

Aayla and Ylenic crept forward, slipping through tight spaces, peering around corners. She dearly wished she could use the Force to get a sense of her surroundings. Ylenic had been correct - sometimes using the Force came so naturally to her that she did so without a second thought. Now, not being able to without alerting any nearby Gotals, she felt blind.

They had crossed three-quarters of the way to the heart of the warehouse when two voices rose in the center of the building. One was clearly surprised, and the other shouted the first down, then let forth with a great laugh. As the echoes of its laughter died, the voice called out, "You Jedi might as well come in. Things are well outside your control. If you would like to see Ratri Tane live, I suggest you cease skulking about."

Aayla glanced at Ylenic, and he nodded, so they both straightened from crouches behind crates and walked forward. She kept her head up and covered her surprise as those gathered in the middle of the room came into view. She'd wondered how their presence had been betrayed, but the first creature she saw, hovering there, explained everything.

Lorfo shrugged with only a trace of embarrassment. "You should have given me twenty percent."

Beneath the hovering Toydarian stood four individuals. The two Gotals from Homestar pointed their blasters at the Jedi. Between them were Tane and a large, heavy-set man with a florid face, a bright shock of red hair, and freckles so thick they almost masked his eyes as effectively Ylenic's purple fur did his. He held Tane in front of him, with his left arm around Tane's throat and a blaster jammed into his ribs. A twitch of the trigger would broil Tane's heart.

The man smiled, revealing a tumble of teeth that made Lorfo's grin look like a work of art. "My name is Tendir Blue, and I'm actually pleased to see you. The Techno Union and its allies were willing to pay very well for Tane and the things he'd taken, but Count Dooku is exceptionally generous when Jedi are delivered to his keeping."

Aayla estimated the distance between her and the Gotals, knowing she could clear the seven meters in a leap. If she could keep herself from being hit by blaster bolts, she could cut them down and: arrive just in time to watch Tane collapsing with a smoking hole in his chest.

Blue punched his left thumb down on something that had been concealed in his fist. From above and behind Aayla, crates creaked open as six Trade Federation battle droids unfolded themselves. Their limbs straightened with a clatter, and their blasters oriented on the two Jedi.

The large Corellian smiled even more broadly and stated what Aayla already realized. "As you can see, it is quite impossible for you to do anything. Even if you were to cut down the Gotals, my droids would kill you, and I should certainly have killed Tane by then."

Aayla shook her head. "Kill him, and you don't get the prototype or the files."

Blue laughed and Tane looked crestfallen. "He was so eager to leave here, the silly man had the files and prototype on him. While my clients would love to have him in their possession, they have instructed me that his life is expendable. Will you have his blood on your hands?"

The Jedi remained silent.

The Corellian ground the blaster's barrel hard against Tane's ribs. "Your lightsabers. Slide them over here, slowly or, Tane dies."

Aayla glanced at Ylenic. He shook his head, opened his cloak, and withdrew his lightsaber held lightly between thumb and forefinger. The Caamasi stooped and slid the weapon to within a meter of the Gotals. Unable to think of an alternative, Aayla did the same. A Gotal picked up the weapons, and Blue nodded with satisfaction. "Very good. I am glad we can all be civilized about this. Lorfo, you shall be well rewarded..."

Then something odd happened. Aayla could still hear Blue speak, but his mouth moved out of sync with his words. A lightsaber sailed across the warehouse, and she snatched it from the air. As she ignited it and swung the silver blade around to ward off the droid's shots, she sensed Ylenic moving between her and the Gotals, protecting her back.

Then the vision faded. Ylenic still stood at her right. Her hands remained empty, and one of the Gotals snapped his head in Blue's direction. "The Force, they are using it,"

The Corellian groaned. "Stupid Jedi." Blue stroked the blaster's trigger. Smoke puffed from Tane's jacket. The man gasped and slumped. Blue let him fall to the floor.

Then almost exactly as it had been in her vision, a lightsaber flew across the room. She did snatch it from the air and ignite it. The battle droids started to focus on her, but she gathered the Force and launched herself into the air. She soared to the level of the highest droid, landed, and batted aside one bolt before she swept the blade through its middle and sent the pieces tumbling to the duracrete floor.

Aayla leaped away as more scarlet bolts chewed into the shelving and blasted other crates to melting shards. She landed in a crouch and cut the legs from beneath one of the droids. She reversed the blade and stabbed it through the chest of a second as she stood up. With a flick of her left hand, she dumped a third droid backward into the crate from which it had emerged.

A bit more of the Force lifted that crate and dropped it, dashing crate and contents onto the floor.

Yanking the silver blade free of the pierced droid, Aayla spun and redirected a hail of bolts at the droids who fired them. Three shots hit one on the left side, spinning it about wildly before its legs tangled and it went down smoking. Yet another bolt took the head of the last one clean off. It stood there for a moment, then a gentle Force push dropped it backward, where it lay with limbs splayed and unmoving.

Aayla turned and looked at where the Gotals and Blue had been standing. Both Gotals writhed on the floor, their hands clutching painfully at their horns, Ylenic stood over them with his lightsaber burning brightly.

Blue was also down, his blaster in two pieces on the floor. Tane knelt beside him, his right hand on the man's forehead and his left hand wrapped around the hilt of Aayla's lightsaber.

Aayla thumbed the silver blade off and reversed the hilt.

"Your lightsaber? Thank you for the loan."

She floated the lightsaber over to Tane, who caught it in his right hand.

The man then stood, extinguished her lightsaber, and extended it toward her. "I would send this to you, but I am afraid it wouldn't get very far."

Aayla crossed to him and retrieved her lightsaber. "Who are you?"

The man held up one finger before bending and scooping up one of the Gotals' blasters. He flicked the selector lever to stun and pumped a blue bolt into each of the horned ruffians. Their bodies bowed spasmodically and relaxed.

Ylenic rested his left hand on Tane's shoulder, "This is Jedi Master Nejaa Halcyon."

"What?" Aayla bowed her head. "I am honored, Master."

"I'm the one who is honored. You're a hero of Geonosis."

"I was there. Others were heroes." She looked at him and at Ylenic. "I couldn't get a sense of him in the Force because he was shielding his thoughts."

The Caamasi nodded. "He had to, or else the Gotal would have spotted him as a substitute,"

She frowned and her lekku shivered. "We were sent here on a mission to get Tane and not involve the Jedi guardians of Corellia. I don't understand. Was I included because Master Windu suspected I would be out of control enough to alert the Gotal? Clearly you wanted Blue to think Jedi were after you, so he'd believe you were the genuine article. I was chosen not for my skill, but for my lack of experience."

Nejaa shook his head. "Actually, Aayla Secura, you are here because Master Windu thought you best for the job."

She snorted. "Anyone could have done what I have done."

"I would disagree." Halcyon clasped his hands together at his waist. "What we have accomplished here was rather complex."

"And, so far, done very well."

Aayla spun at the new voice and saw Rostek Horn entering the warehouse. "You knew about this place and this scheme?" She looked back over her shoulder at Ylenic. "And you are part of this conspiracy, too?"

"Don't forget me, pretty Jedi," Lorfo flapped down from the rafters. "I played a key role."

Aayla sighed and sat on a crate. "I didn't think gullibility was a trait for which Jedi were valued."

"That is not why you were chosen." Nejaa pointed at the wreckage of the droids. "Your combat skills were vital. Moreover, you are known as a hem of Geonosis. The Separatists watch for the Jedi it knows about, and Geonosis survivors come high on their list. Lorfo was able to spot you, to draw attention to you at Homestar. That's why Blue's people were close to you when the shooting started - which it would have done regardless of how you reacted, to keep you occupied while they got me. I had on me a small tracking device, but it failed to work. Had you used it to find me, Lorfo would have betrayed you to Blue as he did, but without guiding you here first. When Ylenic discovered he could not track me with the locator, Lorfo flew up to lead you."

She shook her head. "So, Lorfo keeps them looking at us, so they won't realize you're not really Tane. We were the misdirection."

Ylenic smiled. "More correctly, we all are misdirection. You and I, here, for Blue, yes; but this whole operation as well."

Aayla's lekku twitched and she nodded. "While the Confederacy is looking here for Tane, he's already off being relocated. And that would mean the files and prototype are flawed."

"They are." Nejaa nodded solemnly. "Not hopelessly, though, just a hasty attempt at sabotage. Techno Union scientists will repair the damage, but Tane is willing to prepare counter-measure products that will render the new droids less than effective. The entire Separatists' effort to retool factories and produce a new generation of battle droids will be futile."

He pointed to the robotic carnage Aayla had left behind. "Those droids and the fact that Dooku is paying for captured Jedi likely will not be enough to sway the Corellian government to throw in with the Galactic Republic. On the other hand, they should be enough to show the other Jedi in this system that the evil of the Clone Wars is at hand. I hope it will free us to act with the rest of the Jedi."

Aayla pointed at Halcyon's jacket. "Blue shot you at point blank range. Why aren't you dead?"

Halcyon shrugged. "The Halcyons are weak when it comes to telekinesis. We are good at broadcasting visions, however. Hence, you saw my message. We also have a rare ability. With preparation, we can absorb a fair amount of energy. We have to bleed it off somehow, so I used it to send my lightsaber to you-as I could not normally have done."

As he finished speaking, he held up his left forearm and slipped the lightsaber into the sheath hidden there, "Tearing yours away from the Gotal would have been a bit much for me to do and get a blade to you quickly."

The Twi'lek looked over at Ylenic. "What did you do to the Gotal?"

He smiled. "You'll recall the alley stench was overwhelming?"

"Yes."

The Gotal pick up on things like the Force through their horns. I simply used the Force to hit them with its version of the stench."

Aayla winced. "Neat trick."

Ylenic's smile broadened.

"So, how much of all this did Master Windu know? I caught no deception from him."

The Caamasi opened his hands. "Nejaa is an old friend. When Tane reached Corellia and this plan began to form, Nejaa asked me to act as a liaison between him and the Jedi Council. The Jedi getting Tane and his family to safety are not from Coiellia. They are acting under Master Windu's orders."

Nejaa nodded. "Of internal Corellian Jedi politics, he knows about as much as anyone does on Coruscant."

Inspector Horn smirked. "That's likely as much as anyone here knows about it, too."

Nejaa shook his head, and Aayla sensed a strong bond of friendship between the two men. "Nothing could send us over to the Confederacy, so the chance of finding something to win us over to the Republic's fight was one worth taking. You were not told everything, so your reactions would be natural and read true to anyone watching."

"I don't like it, but I understand. There is something else I need to know, however." Aayla thought for a moment and narrowed her eyes. "Your intention is to implant a memory in Blue that he will carry off to his masters, and that will verify that the data and prototype are the real thing?"

"That's the plan."

"That may be the plan, Master Halcyon, but I am willing to bet that Count Dooku will sift through his mind, and things will unravel from there."

Ylenic canted his head to the side. "Her point is a good one."

Nejaa nodded. "Agreed, but I'm not sure I see a good fix."

"Don't worry." Aayla boosted herself off the crate. "I know just what will do the job."

Tendir Blue drifted back to consciousness as Lorfo tugged on his left arm. The man had slumped against the wall in a passageway in the spaceport. The Toydarian's breath came heavy and sour, his words rushed and full of panic.

"Get going. Now! She's still coming after you."

Blue shook his head to clear it. He raised a hand to his forehead, where fingertips brushed over the wound from a glancing blaster bolt. What happened?

"Who's coming, Lorfo?"

"The Jedi!" The winged creature's eyes grew wide. "The Jedi you didn't kill."

Tendir scrambled to his feet and patted his pockets. He had datacards and the prototype of the chip. Those things he remembered. He added to that the memory of shooting Tane. After that, blackness, nothing - must be amnesia from the bolt.

He looked around and recognized his surroundings. This way, to my ship."

"I know. I called and it's pre-flighted."

The Toydarian fluttered in front of him.

"You owe me."

"Yes, yes, you'll be paid."

"Paid, no. Get me off this rock."

Pain throbbed through the man's head.

"What happened?"

"Everything, There was shooting and lightsabers-and the gold Jedi, he died. Your Gotals, your droids, gone. She is hurt, but you stumbled out."

"I helped."

The Toydarian's voice rose to a shriek. There she is!"

Blue took one glance behind him. He saw her in the tunnel, illuminated by the azure light of her lightsaber. She dragged her left foot, and he could hear her rasping breath. She slumped against the wall but pointed her lightsaber at him.

"You won't escape me, Tendir Blue!"

She gestured with her left hand and Lorfo squealed. His fingers clawed at the shoulder of Blue's coat, and the man could feel the Jedi tugging at the little Toydarian with the Force. He tried to keep going, but Lorfo's grasp kept him anchored to the spot.

"Help me, Blue!"

"If it's you she wants..." The man smashed a fist down on Lorfo's hands. "She can have you."

Another blow broke his grip, and the Toydarian flew back to slam into the Jedi. Both of them went down in a tumble, and Tendir sprinted forward. He cut through the crowd, knocking people left and right as he ran to his ship. Once inside, he sealed the airlock and lifted off. As he urged his ship forward, he saw the Twi'lek Jedi enter the hangar bay. She gestured at him, and he slewed the ship around, letting his turbine exhaust knock her back into the tunnel.

With a laugh, Tendir Blue pointed his ship to the stars.

Ylenic helped Aayla up. "You are unhurt?"

"My pride is wounded," she said, "but I'll live." She brushed her backside off and used the Force to call her lightsaber to hand and tucked the weapon inside her jacket again. "I think he believes you're dead and that he just barely escaped. Dooku can sift his mind all he wants. Amnesia explains the lack of memory of the fight, and his fear will confirm the 'truth' of what he says happened here."

Nejaa and Inspector Horn came up, with Lorfo hovering behind them. The Corellian Jedi nodded, "And he thinks Lorfo was apprehended by you, so he will not suspect he was really working for us all along. A neat and tidy package."

"As it should be, Master." Aayla smiled. "After all, tying things up that way must be why I was put in charge of this mission, don't you think?"