

# Forceful



Epilogue: Three Years Later... : Version 0.5 : Dedicated to God

## Chapter 1: Lhoka

"State your name," the bored guard told us.

"Amber Randrel," Amber told the guard, "And my assistant."

The guard quickly looked up Amber on his holopad, "Very well then. You can enter."

The large, metal door slid open, allowing Amber and I to walk into the massive complex owned by the Hutt family.

"Wow!" I whispered to Amber, "It's much bigger on the inside!"

"That's because a good portion of the building is underground," Amber informed me.

"Where's that ship you wanted?" I whispered back as we walked slowly down the red carpet covering the aisle. On either side of the aisle was fancy, golden fencing that kept buyers from touching the featured collection of rare spaceships.

"I forgot the name," Amber said, "But I'll know it when I see it. It looks very strange."

"Why do you want it again?" I pressed.

Amber laughed, "Leo wanted to harvest a bunch of parts off of it."

I chuckled, "What's he working on now?!"

"No clue. He never tells me until he's almost done."

At the end of the very long hangar, Amber found the spaceship she was after.

"That's it!" Amber cried out, "Check out those engines?"

"You weren't kidding," I grimaced, "That *is* ugly."

"*THAT*," a nearby curator addressed us, "Is a genuine BG-11!"

"And that's cool because...?" I asked him.

"Because!" the curator said excitedly, "It was one of the first ships ever designed by the esteemed Garvle Humpfer!"

Amber, who didn't have the heart to tell the curator she had no idea who Garvle was, nodded her head and continued to the grand spiraling staircase that led to the second floor. Standing in front of the staircase was a pair of armed guards and a perfectly dressed steward.

"Only royalty is allowed here," the steward informed Amber, "Your assistant is not allowed on the second floor."

"I promise I won't cause any trouble," I insisted.

Amber waved it off, "I'll be fine."

The steward nodded and let Amber pass while I was stuck. Grimacing, I hurried back through the hangar towards the exit.

"Lhoka? Do you copy?" Amber asked me through our shortwave earpiece radio system.

"Copy that," I said, "Call if you have troubles."

"Not likely," Amber said, "Everyone up here looks like they haven't done a stitch of work their entire lives."

"Any Hutts there?" I asked, as I headed back out the front, sliding door and into the main streets of Quirzky.

"Just some distant cousin of Jobba," Amber noted, "But I'm going to go silent here for a bit. Don't want to attract any undue attention."

"Ten-four," I said, "I'm going to roam the bazaar and see if I can't find any good deals on something."

It was a planet wide celebration of some random holiday I didn't know about, but Amber had found out that there was going to be a large amount of auctions sporting rare goods and had insisted that we go. There were plenty of tents that displayed various weapons, parts, droids, and even slaves that passerbys could purchase, but nothing piqued my interest until I passed a large food stand selling colo claw fish. Leo loved colo claw fish and frequently purchased varieties of the dish to share with Amber and I. This happened so much that I had started to develop a taste for it as well, and when I passed the food stand, I found that I had to give it a try.

"You're selling colo claw fish?" I asked the tall Besalisk manning the booth.

"That I do!" he replied, "What can I do for you?"

"Show me what you got," I told him, slapping down some credits.

"I have the best recipe in the galaxy," the Besalisk insisted, "You will be more than pleasantly surprised."

"Prove it," I laughed, "I've got a friend that loves this stuff, and I want to see what you can do."

"Nephew!" the Besalisk yelled back to the cook, "One plate of colo claw fish please!"

There was a grunt from the small, tin shack at the back of the tent as the cook started on my order.

"Been slow today?" I asked him as I leaned against the counter.

"Kinda," the Besalisk replied, "It's right in between breakfast and lunch, so we haven't gotten a whole lot of customers yet."

I pointed to the sign advertising his food stand, "Are you Jong of Jong's Club?"

"That's me," Jong said, "I've been in this business for a while now!"

"Oh, so you have an actual club based out of somewhere?"

"Yep," Jong said, "We do brisk business with locals and travelers."

"Huh, I may have to stop by sometime, *if* your colo claws are good enough," I chuckled.

"Oh, it will be," Jong insisted, "Say, where are you from?"

"Oh, I just sort of travel around," I said casually, "Why?"

"It's just that I don't see a lot of Togrutas anymore," Jong stated, "The last one I saw was a slave to some guy that stopped by at my club two years ago."

I grunted, "Wars haven't exactly favored my species. It's been even longer than two years since I last saw a pure Togruta."

"Are you here by yourself or with some others?" Jong continued.

"You ask a lot of questions," I said suspiciously.

"Just curious," Jong laughed, "I'm bored too."

"My friend and I came here to buy a spaceship from the Hutt auction," I told Jong, "But I'm just the 'assistant' so I wasn't allowed to follow her onto the second floor."

"Woah, so your friend is a bit on the rich side of the spectrum. What does she do?" Jong said.

"Oh, a little of this and a little of that. Nothing in particular," I said.

"One Colo Claw Fish delight," the cook announced, stepping out from the shack and handing me the seafood specialty.

As I reached out to take it, the cook suddenly paused and stared at me.

"What?" I said, "Is something wrong?"

"Lhoka," the cook breathed, recognizing who I was.

"You know her?" Jong asked.

"Of course I do!"

"Wait a minute!" I exclaimed, "PING?!"

"That's me!" Ping said excitedly, finally remembering to actually pass me my food, "What are you doing here?"

"Nothing," I said curtly, grabbing my food, "I'll see you guys."

"Wait!" Ping shouted after me, "I..."

Without waiting to hear what he had to say, I hurried off into the crowd of shoppers. I was already wanted by the Empire, and I couldn't risk having anyone actually know who I was. A quarter of a mile later, I came across a large dining area with several tables. At one end, a bunch of gruff looking guys were auctioning off a wide variety of droids. I sat down at a nearby table and dug into my food, keeping an eye on the auction and the surrounding passerbys. Ping being in the general vicinity made me very nervous. It had been a good three years since I had last seen him, and I had assumed he had been killed, until now...

"Seven thousand credits!" the auctioneer yelled over the buzz of the crowd, "Do I have anyone willing to pay eight thousand for this brand new translation droid?"

The spices on my colo claw fish interested me more than a translation droid. Ping may have made some questionable life choices, but his cooking, I had to admit, was second to none.

"Sold to the guy with the blue face!" the auctioneer rambled on, "Next, we have an old, but incredibly versatile astromech droid!"

I groaned and looked over at the line up of other droids about to be auctioned as I finished up my early lunch.

"Lhoka!" Ping said excitedly, plopping down at my wooden table, "What's up?"

"Ping," I growled in a low voice, "What are you doing here? I specifically remember giving off vibes that said I don't want you here!"

"I know," Ping admitted, "But it's been so long! How are you doing?!"

"I was doing good, until you showed up," I sighed.

Ping stared at me, "What is wrong? Are you upset at me?"

"Oh I don't know," I growled, "Maybe because last time I saw you, you were actively trying to kill me? And also maybe because I'm wanted by the Empire in a variety of capacities, and I don't like having people who know me standing around and making my identity known?!"

"You're wanted by the Empire?" Ping gasped.

"Aren't you?" I countered.

"Okay, so maybe I have made some poor choices before in my life," Ping admitted, "But I'm older now and wiser!"

"You're only like seventeen now, right?"

"Almost eighteen!" Ping stated, "And nearly as tall as Jong."

"I saw," I said, "I'm not blind."

"Are you here with Leo and Amber?" Ping wanted to know next.

"I am *not* saying," I declared defiantly.

"But you said you have a friend that likes colo claw fish, and you're also with a friend that you referred to as a 'she'," Ping reminded me, "Which would insinuate that you are still hanging around with Amber and Leo."

I growled, "Just stay out of my way, and we'll get along fine."

"Wait, so if I leave you alone, you'll be fine with me?" Ping asked.

"Sure, sure," I answered.

"Cool! Then maybe we can hang out sometime!" Ping exclaimed.

"I am *not* hanging out with you," I told Ping, "Not now, not ever."

"Seriously?" Ping whined, looking me up and down, "But I'm a nice guy, and you're still single, right?"

"Oh, for crying out loud!" I cut him off, standing up, "I need to go now."

"Can I come with you?" Ping asked eagerly.

"Ping," I nearly shouted at him, "Leave...me...alone? Got it?"

Ping, taken aback by me, quickly retreated as I hurried into the ever-growing crowd of people. It was bad enough that Ping was still around, but it was even worse that he recognized me and wanted to "hang" out.

"Lhoka, are you still there?" Amber whispered to me over my earpiece.

"Yep," I answered, "What's going on?"

"The auction is about to begin, so we're all heading down to the hangar now," Amber informed me, "I'm ready to meet back up."

"I'm on my way," I said.

After shoving my way through the bazaar's crowd and reminding the auction's guards who I was, I finally managed to get back inside and meet up with Amber.

"My ship is one of the last to be auctioned," Amber sighed, "Since it's one of the least valuable."  
"Hopefully it won't take too long then," I asserted.

All around us, pompously dressed royalty and merchants mingled chatting about various news and rumors. Amber, although not royalty or a merchant, was certainly dressed to impress and looked like a model.

"Attention ladies and gentlemen!" a perfectly dressed man shouted to the crowd of people inside the hangar, "Let us start off the bidding with this perfectly conditioned Jedi starfighter!"  
This was punctuated by the main, steel door being blasted open and three squads of stormtroopers running into the hangar.

"Oh bother," Amber muttered.

Around us, all of the other rich humans, aliens, and other creatures screamed and ran out of the way.

"Lhoka, go to the second floor where you'll find a security room," Amber said, as the storm troopers raced into the crowd, "Find out how to open this hangar's doors, so I can fly the spaceship out."

"Got it," I told Amber.

"I'll cover you," Amber said, "It shouldn't be too hard to hold these troopers off."

As I pushed my way through the panicking people, I plotted out the quickest way to reach the spiral staircase leading to the second floor. Behind me, the storm troopers came across Amber who fought back using her double-bladed lightsaber with practiced ease. Luckily, Amber and I had been closer to the back of the hangar than the front, so I managed to make good time through the crowd and raced towards the stairs. Just like last time, two armed guards stood in front of the stairs, blocking access, but I just leapt over them using a Force jump and kept on running.

"Hey you!" one of the guards yelled after me, "Stop!"

"Sure," I mumbled to myself, taking two steps at a time.

At the top of the stairs, I found myself in a lavish ballroom type setting. I snatched a few pastries off of a nearby platter as I ran across the ballroom and down the only other hallway. Soon enough, I skidded to a stop in front of a locked, unlabeled door.

"Nothing a lightsaber can't solve," I laughed to myself, shoving my lightsaber through the electronic lock.

With a shower of sparks, the door clicked open, and I rushed inside.

Despite the myriad of buttons, levers, and controls, I quickly surmised that the main hangar doors were controlled by about thirty sliders that were connected to an electronic board right underneath a large window that looked out over the hangar below. Amber was making quick work of the storm troopers as frightened royalty surged past the fence line and took cover behind priceless spaceships - much to the auctioneer's horror.

Keeping my fingers crossed, I immediately started pushing all the sliders forward. These, in turn, did open the hangar's doors causing further confusion down below. Behind me, the two guards finally caught up and advanced upon me, their spears pointing directly at my head. "Sayonara suckers!" I told them cheerfully, slicing off the tips of their spears with my lightsabers and racing back out of the control room.

Angered, one of the guards leapt at me, sending us spiraling into a large, glass window along the corridor. However, my lightsaber was still on, so the impact of us hitting the window plus my lightsaber plunging into it and compromising the basic structure caused the window to break - dropping us into the alley far down below. I landed below no worse for the wear, but the guard splattered down beside me. I wasn't familiar with this dingy alleyway, but I randomly chose the left passageway and ran along it, hoping to find my way back to the hangar to make a quick getaway with Amber. Unfortunately, when I finally arrived at the South end of the bazaar, I promptly ran into a squad of stormtroopers.

"There she is!" one of the troopers yelled to his comrades, "Get her!"

"Oh great," I mumbled, racing back the way I had just come.

The alley was honestly pretty crummy and smelled like garbage and sewage. I hoped I wouldn't splatter too much of it on my new outfit that Amber had just bought for me for this occasion.

Hurtling a nearby crate, I vaulted into a small dead end lined with dumpsters.

"Bother," I snorted, "I guess I'll just have to face them dead on."

That's when a small starfighter roared overhead, and someone leapt out of the cockpit and into the alleyway.

"Aha!" the Inquisitor smirked, "We finally met, Lhoka."

"Should I know you?" I asked, brandishing my lightsaber.

"Not really," he said, "But I'll be glad to finish you off."

"You wish," I snorted, "Give me your best."

"Gladly," the inquisitor said, performing a leap attack.

Evading his preliminary blow, I somersaulted to the left and bounced off the side wall attacking him from the rear. The Inquisitor turned on the rapid rotating ability of his lightsaber and chopped at me mercilessly while I fought back, careful to not get boxed in.

"Harrrough!" I cried out, suddenly turning on him and launching him backwards with a powerful Force push. The Inquisitor smashed into a wall but swiftly recovered and attacked again; just as the storm troopers finally caught up with me. I was very powerful, having trained under both Amber and Leo, but even someone like me would have trouble fighting off a powerful Sith Inquisitor and a squadron of troopers. Things were starting to look a bit unfortunate.

Amber had always told me that when you are out-gunned and out-maneuvered, the best thing to do is...RUN! I was off like a shot, plowing through the storm troopers and sprinting back down

the alley again with the Inquisitor in hot pursuit. I almost reached the bazaar before the Inquisitor Force grabbed me and stopped my flight.

"Mwahahahaha," he laughed, "Looks like you're out of options."

"Not completely!" a familiar voice spoke out from the crowd of people milling about the bazaar. As if on cue, Leo backflipped in front of me, "I've told you before to leave my apprentice alone."

"So I've heard," the Inquisitor spoke as more storm troopers converged on Leo and I, "But this time, I have the advantage."

"Not really," Leo laughed, blasting all our opponents away using an insanely strong Force push. Several of the troopers were flung into the crowd of people - causing screams and yells of confusion.

"That's all you got?!" the Inquisitor taunted Leo, racing back to attack.

"Nope," Leo laughed, pulling out his lightsabers, "I also have this!"

The Inquisitor, his lightsaber spinning deadly fast, attacked but was no match for Leo's dueling skills. Before he really realized what was happening, the Inquisitor was flattened on the ground, his lightsaber snapped out of his grasp. Around us, some of the storm troopers pulled themselves to their feet and started blasting again at Leo, but he electrocuted them all with Force lightning.

"And I'll take this as a memento of our fight," Leo announced, picking up the beaten Inquisitor's lightsaber and hanging it on his belt.

"You won't get away with this," the Inquisitor groaned.

Leo zapped him again for effect as a large, dark shadow suddenly covered the scene of our battle.

"AMBER!" Leo yelled excitedly, "A pleasant surprise!"

"Just in time, I see," Amber said into our earpieces while the back of the spacecraft opened up. Leo boosted me up into the spacecraft; then followed himself. Meanwhile, the crowd of bazaar shoppers stared up at us.

"Let's go before we attract any *more* attention than we already have," Leo groaned, as Amber maneuvered our newly stolen spacecraft between the tall spires of the city.



## Chapter 2: Leo

The alarm started blaring while I was transferring the code to my two data chips. Even through the thick walls of my secure workshop, I could hear the faint buzz of my neighbor's alarm sounding across the mountainside. My intercom promptly blinked, indicating that someone was calling me.

"Sup?" I asked, pressing the red button.

"Leo, would you mind going over and asking the neighbor to SHUT THAT THING OFF!" Amber yelled into the earpiece.

"Amber," I whined, "I'm right in the middle of my project."

"I'm sure it can wait," Amber said.

"But I'm almost done," I replied, "Can't *you* go over and ask him to turn it off."

"No, because *I'm* actually doing something useful and making dinner!" Amber replied.

"What about Lhoka?" I asked hopefully.

"Lhoka was in the training arena last I saw," Amber informed me, "And she isn't answering."

"Maybe I shouldn't have answered," I grumbled, "Fine, give me a minute."

"Make it snappy," Amber insisted, "That buzzing is awful!"

Hurrying over to my computer, I watched in agonizing suspense as the data transfer moved from 89% to 90%.

"Hurry!" I begged.

Even though I was a stronger fighter than Amber, I certainly didn't want to upset her, as Amber was a fan of the inhumane torture known as 'silent treatment.' That, and the fact that she was my girlfriend, made the torture even worse.

After a lot more time that was certainly *more* than the minute I had promised, the transfer completed, and I wasted no time in yanking the chips out of their card slots and carefully inserting them into the experimental droids lying on my floor. It had been months since I had started working on this top secret project, known as "Exterminate" to Amber and Lhoka, and the fruit of my labor was just about to be tested. With loud whirs, the droids suddenly came to life, brandishing their menacing weapons.

"Bodyguard droids," I addressed them, "Who is your master?"

"Leonard is," one of the droids informed me.

"That would be you," the second clarified.

"Wonderful!" I said excitedly, "And what is your purpose?"

"To protect," they both said, standing at attention.

For the final test on their code, I asked them the critical question, "Bodyguard droids, terminate Lhoka Xthano."

"Negative," the first bodyguard droid told me, "My programming prevents me from terminating the entity named Lhoka Xthano."

"I am your master!" I said as fiercely as possible, "I override this programming!"

"Negative sir," the second stated, "Terminating Lhoka Xthano is in direct violation of Code 1.3; even if you are our master."

"What about Amber Randrel?" I pressed.

"Also, negative, sir," the first bodyguard droid informed me.

"Who *can* you kill?" I asked the droids.

"Only those intent on harming Leonard, Amber, and Lhoka," the first replied, "Or those you command us to terminate."

"LEO!" Amber yelled through the intercom, interrupting my interrogation session, "Get out there or so help me I won't talk to you for a WEEK!"

Smacking my fist against my forehead, I raced across the room, swiping my helmet off its hook in the process.

"Bodyguard droids!" I commanded them as I opened the door, "Capture Lhoka and Amber!"

"Very well sir," the second droid spoke up, "Where would you like us to hold them for you?"

"Eh, the front lobby," I replied, hurrying towards the stairwell.

Behind me, I noticed the droids decided to utilize the elevator instead. The stairs were in a spiral, so I just Force jumped down the middle to save time. I landed with a satisfying thud; then turned and rushed towards the front entryway. As I dodged a battle droid conveniently walking in the very center of the hallway, I heard Amber banging around in the expansive kitchen.

After crashing into and stumbling through the front, double doors, I leapt onto my favorite hoverbike and shot off along the narrow pathway that led down the mountain.

Now don't get me wrong, I didn't *actually* want to capture either Amber or Lhoka, but the best way to test my new droids was in an actual combat situation, and my friends were well-suited for the job. In addition, I was curious about how the two girls could handle being suddenly attacked by a skilled bodyguard droid. Purchasing all the necessary pieces for the droids had taken some doing and re-coding their entire programming to ensure they were much safer to have around the house was even harder.

As I rocketed off the mountain and onto the more level fields, I jammed my helmet onto my head and turned on its noise-canceling feature to the alarm's frequency, because my ears were starting to ring in an extremely painful way. Now only a half mile away, stood the imposing estate of the Frederick clan. The Fredericks used to be one of the most powerful families on Serenno, but ever since what became known as "The Great Cleansing" the various households on Serenno had been severely weakened, resulting in the complete decimation of the Geinhardt clan (of which I had purchased their abandoned estate on the black market). As far as I knew the Frederick clan had killed each other off until only one son remained. Because of this, that

son had become paranoid to the point that he had set up one of the most elaborate security systems on his mansion and grounds that I had ever seen. One of the features of this security system was an alarm that could be heard up to twelve miles away.

I wasn't the biggest fan of going to speak to this son (of which I still didn't know his actual name), because in past times when a small creature had managed to set off the alarm, I was always accosted and/or shot at by him. However, as I approached the tall, concrete fence line of his property, I couldn't help but notice a particularly large spacecraft parked right on top of the fence - crushing it in several places. Something about that particular spaceship bothered me though...

I figured out why as I came to a stop outside the property and hopped off my hoverbike.

"Halt!" a particularly gruff voice shouted to me, "Identify yourself!"

"Falcon!" I yelled to the pirate who was aiming his pistol at me, "I've come about the alarm that's been set off!"

"What about it?" the pirate demanded.

"Um, it's annoying the hell out of me?" I answered, "Are you shutting it off or..."

"That's what *they're* supposed to do," the pirate grumbled, lowering his gun, "But apparently they're not having much luck."

"Whose 'they'?" I asked.

"The rest of us pirates, duh."

I slowly peered around the left side of the massive spaceship to see a large group of the pirate's friends all poking around the outside of the Frederick mansion.

"Um, is the owner of this property aware of what you're doing?" I asked.

"Pfsssh, no," the pirate laughed heartily, "He's dead!"

"He's dead?!" I exclaimed, "You killed him?!"

"Not me," the pirate continued to laugh, "He and his girlfriend got killed in a lethal bar fight a few days ago, and since we had given him a massive loan with his estate as collateral, we're just claiming what's ours!"

"Annnnd, lemme guess," I replied, "They can't get into the house!"

"Something like that," the pirate shouted, now plugging his ears with his fingers, "The moment we crossed the premises we were shot at by a dozen laser guns, trapped with pitfalls and nets, and deafened by this stupid alarm!"

"Do you mind if I help turn this thing off?" I asked the pirate.

"Be my guest!" the pirate shouted back, gesturing to the rest of his group far ahead, "Go talk with them!"

Making sure not to walk into any of the alarm's protection features, I carefully made my way over to the gaudy mansion that completed the estate. While avoiding a particularly large pool of acid on the ground, my helmet picked up on the muffled sound of a man yelling to me.

"A little help here?" the voice said, "I'm a bit stuck..."

I quickly looked up to see myself staring at another pirate that was hopelessly entangled in a steel-rope net.

"Can you get me down?" he asked hopefully.

Groaning audibly, I popped my lightsaber off my belt, ignited it, and sliced through the net with one precise swing. The pirate, still entangled within the net, plummeted downwards, but I caught him with the Force and cushioned his fall. After another minute of slicing off the rest of the net, the pirate was freed.

"Oh, thank you so much," he said, "The other pirates left me here in their hurry to get to the house."

"Don't mention it," I replied, "Now, how do I turn this thing off?"

"Wait, but who even *are* you?" the pirate insisted, "Are you a Sith?"

"Do I look like a Sith?" I countered, "Nope, I'm Falcon of Falcon enterprises."

"Ooooh," I've heard of you once before," the pirate told me as we continued on our way to Frederick house, "You're a mercenary of sorts."

"Something like that," I informed him.

"Why are you here then?" the pirate continued.

"Because of this blasted alarm," I replied, "And we need to hurry, anymore of this, and my friends will disown me."

By the time we made it through the next set of laser pistols that were trying to fill us with holes, the rest of the pirates had finally decided to cut through the massive, iron doors of the mansion by using an advanced plasma cutter. Unfortunately for all of us, their cutter was relatively ineffective against the thick door, and they had made precious little progress.

"Allow me," I told the pirates as I walked up.

Pulling out my lightsaber, I plunged it into the left door and swiftly cut a large circle out of both the left and right doors. As I had expected, my cut had also managed to cut out the thick dead bolt that kept the doors secured to each other, so when I completed the cut, both doors swung wide open as the two halves of the solid iron circle flopped to the ground.

The rest of the pirates jumped back in alarm, but the one that I rescued from the net defended me.

"He's cool guys," the pirate said, "He helped me out of that steel net that you guys left me in!"

Not waiting for their reply, I leaped into the mansion and searched for a security panel on the wall. Sure enough, a large holopad was attached firmly to the wall, and I plunged my lightsaber into it - finally short-circuiting the security system and shutting down the alarm.

Everyone else outside breathed sighs of relief. As the pirates slapped their ears to get feeling back into them, I surveyed the inside of the mansion. What I saw was a considerable let-down; the walls were dirty and scuffed, the floor was muddy and worn out, and all the decorations

looked like they hadn't been maintained in at least a year (which, frankly, was probably the case!).

Behind me, the greedy pirates finally all piled in after me and groaned when they saw the mess. One particularly large and older pirate slapped me on the back.

"Thanks for the assist, kid," he told me, "What can I do for you in compensation for saving our ears?"

"Weelllll, actually, I-"

Before I could finish, there was a scream from down the hall where a few of the pirates had gone followed by the yelling of some young kids.

"Let me GO!, you, you beast!" one of the kids yelled as a pirate dragged the two of them back into the main entryway.

"Well who do we have here?" the older pirate asked, with a slight hint of evil in his husky voice, "Two lil' kids, huh?"

"What did you do with Mom?" the boy demanded.

"We?!" the older pirate exclaimed, "Did nothing to your Mom or Dad."

"Step-Dad," the boy interrupted.

"*They* were killed in a bar fight," the older pirate continued.

At this, the young boy's even younger sister started balling.

"Oh for HEAVEN'S SAKE!" the pirate roared, "SHUT UP! My ears are just now recovering from the alarm!"

Unfortunately for them, the girl continued to cry and the boy glowered at his captor.

"Throw them in the hold of the ship," the pirate leader commanded the other pirates, "We might be able to make a few credits off them in the slave market."

"Wait!" I interrupted, "I'll take them."

"What?" the pirate leader said, turning to me, "*You*, an elite mercenary, want a bunch of emotional basket cases?!"

"I've never supported slavery," I replied, "And I *ain't* starting today!"

"Huh, well, you're welcome to save me the trouble of dealing with these two," the pirate leader laughed, "Let them go boys."

Instantly, the young boy ran over to me, but the girl just plopped onto the ground and continued crying.

"*Esther*," the boy addressed his sister, "C'mon, get over here! We need to *go*."

Upon hearing the sound of her brother's voice, Esther stumbled over to him while the rest of the pirates, without even a second look, hurried off into the mansion to loot it.

Boosting Esther onto my back, I gestured for the boy to follow me; then strode out of the house and back across the property.

"Sir!" he cried, "Where are you going?"

"Watch that string!" I yelled to him as the boy barely missed a trip wire, "And uh, I guess we're going to *my* place."

"Your place?" Esther sniffed on my back, "Is Momma there?"

"No, Esther," the boy replied, "Momma isn't coming back to us."

"I'm really sorry," I told the kids, "I know how you feel. I lost my parents when I was very young too."

"I'm hungry!" Esther started whining again.

I sighed, "I have a meal bar in my pocket here."

Having reached my hoverbike, I plopped Esther down onto the seat and pulled a bar out of my pocket - splitting it in half.

"One for Esther," I said, handing her a piece, "And one for...uh... what's your name?"

"Jasper," the boy replied, snatching the bit of bar out of my hand and wolfing it down.

"Hop on!" I told Jasper as I squeezed in behind Esther and gunned the engine, "We're in for a wild ride!"

"Oh boy!" Jasper said excitedly while his sister, completely oblivious, continued to munch on my meal bar.

"VrrroOOOOOMMMM!"

The hover bike roared to life, and I steered back towards my property line.

Screaming with delight, Esther clung to the handlebars like her life depended on it, while Jasper dug his fingers into my sides.

Not being able to resist showing off, I threaded a grove of trees and jumped a particularly large hill to get some air. After nailing the landing, I turned slightly to see a big smile on Jasper's face - he was clearly enjoying the ride.

"Ever ridden a hover bike before?" I asked him.

"Never," Jasper said, "Mom never let us ride stuff like this, ever!"

By the time we arrived at our destination, Esther's long, brown hair was plastered all over the front of my outfit.

"Woah!" Jasper breathed, "This place is awesome!"

"I call it Falcon palace," I told him as I set Esther onto the ground, "Just for easy reference."

"This place is much better taken care of then my step-dad's mansion," Jasper noted.

"I think so anyway," I laughed, "But wait until you see the inside!"

While scanning my identity card on the card reader near the door and holding Esther's hand with the other, I somehow managed to miss the sounds of battle emanating from inside. As soon as the doors slid open, I gestured proudly to the front entryway while Jasper stared with wide eyes at the chaos inside. Finally remembering that I had left two bodyguard droids to attack Amber and Lhoka, I whipped around to see the ensuing chaos that was unfolding right in front of Esther and Jasper's eyes.

Amber was dueling it out with one of the bodyguard droids while Lhoka was currently pinned to the ground by the second droid.

"Leo!" Ashoka yelled to me, "A little help?"

"Bodyguard droids!" I yelled at them, "Stop fighting and let them go!"

Immediately, the one fighting Amber turned to me and let down his weapon while the one pinning Lhoka to the ground moved his electrical staff away from her head and stood to the side. Amber, still in the heat of battle, didn't quite catch on to why the bodyguard droid that she was fighting suddenly *stopped* fighting. Hence, she promptly sliced its head off. With a few sparks, the droid neatly flopped to the floor.

"Wow," Jasper exclaimed, hopping up and down, "You were right, mister! This place is *epic*!"

Esther, still coming off the adrenaline of our hover bike ride, just stared with wide eyes.

"LEO!" Amber yelled at me, "What is the meaning of this?!"

"These are my newest projects," I told her, "What do you think?"

"I say that I'm glad these were scrapped after the Clone Wars," Amber stated, clearly annoyed.

"Don't get rid of them!" Lhoka begged me, "I want to practice against these guys! They're so much better than the battle droids!"

"Hey, but I upgraded the battle droids' abilities!" I reminded her.

"Still, upgrading trash still makes trash," Lhoka laughed.

"And who in the galaxy are these kids?" Amber wanted to know.

"I'm Jasper, and this is Esther," Jasper told Amber proudly, "Who are you?"

Amber raised an eyebrow and looked at me.

"They're the kids of the girlfriend of the Fredericks' neighbor," I winced, "Their parents were killed so I kinda...volunteered to take care of them so the pirates wouldn't get a hold of them."

Amber smiled weakly at the two children and patted them on the head, "Lhoka, would you mind taking these children to the kitchen and giving them a snack? They look terribly underfed."

"Sure," Lhoka said cheerfully, taking back her lightsaber from the bodyguard droid, "C'mon Jasper and Esther! You want something to eat!"

"Do I ever!" Jasper said innocently, trying to keep up with Lhoka's fast walk as Esther tagged along.

As soon as the kids and Lhoka were out of sight, Amber turned to me.

"Leo!" She said, "We can't take care of those kids! Do you realize how young they are, and none of us have *any* experience raising kids!"

"Better to learn now than later?" I replied.

Amber shoved her finger against my chest and pushed me backwards, "But I don't need to learn later so I don't need to learn *now*."

"Well," I smirked, "We've been dating for quite some time now. If we were to get together and-."

"I'm going to stop you right there," Amber interrupted, "Please don't finish."

"Also, what was I *supposed* to do!" I added, "Let the pirates sell them as slaves?"

"Well, no," Amber told me, "But we simply can't have them here! Think about all the messes they can get into!"

"We have plenty of my battle droids around here," I told Amber, "I'm sure I can have one or two follow them around to keep them out of trouble."

"Battle droids aren't the brightest bulbs in the shed," Amber reminded me.

"Well, Lhoka seemed to get along fine with them just now," I added, "Maybe she can uh, kid sit them?"

"Lhoka trains all day," Amber stated.

"Weeeellll, maybe they'll want to watch?"

Amber groaned, "Fine, but after those kids start blowing stuff up, you'll be looking for a new home for them!"

"If I can find one," I mumbled to myself as I inspected the beheaded body of my bodyguard droid, "Can you give me a hand? I need to get this droid to my tech room to fix it."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Later that night, Amber wanted to work on our finances, so I volunteered to take the kids to watch Lhoka train against the remaining bodyguard droid. Although not nearly as large as the domed arena where we would fight on Endor, it was sufficiently large, and since I was able to furnish it myself, I added a series of reclining chairs behind a eight-foot-tall, thick glass wall. Esther, being not much older than two, insisted on sitting on my lap, while Jasper was glued to the glass and fogging it up something terrible.

Lhoka jabbed her lightsaber at the bodyguard droid who parried with the electrical spike of his staff; then backflipped over him and attempted to stab him from behind. However, the droid was fast and parried this too; then used its superior strength to throw her back a good few feet.

Lhoka steadied herself and let the droid approach; then struck out with her lightwhip combo.

The bodyguard droid attempted to evade the lightwhip's attack, but in the process its staff was chopped in half by the lightwhip tendrils.

"Yeah!" Jasper cheered.

Not seemingly phased by the attack, the bodyguard droid used the two ends of his staff to catch the undulating lightwhip tendrils as Lhoka repeatedly flashed it outwards.

Surprised, Lhoka tried to pull her lightwhip back, but the droid jerked the tendrils which then pulled the hilt out of Lhoka's grasp. The lightsaber then turned off once out of Lhoka's grasp and bounced harmlessly away.

Lhoka gritted her teeth and Force threw the droid backwards against the wall; then Force grabbed her lightwhip.



"Jasper, don't get so close to the glass," I said worried, "I'm not sure how recently it was cleaned."

Jasper groaned, "But I can't see as well!"

"You can go on the other side of the glass using that door," I told him, "But stay out of the way of the fight!"

Excited to get more into the action, Jasper hurriedly wrenched open the door and raced inside...just as Lhoka locked blades with the bodyguard droid and managed to wrench the left portion of its weapon out of its grasp. The electrical staff promptly flew through the air and smacked into the glass wall, falling to the ground.

"Will she win?" Esther wanted me to know.

"Of course," I laughed, "Lhoka can't get hurt."

"Good," Esther said matter-of-factly, "Lhoka's nice."

"That she is," I noted, as Jasper ran over to the electrical staff part and scooped it up.

"DON'T touch that!" I yelled at Jasper, "That's dangerous!"

Whether he heard me or not (and my money's on that he did hear me), Jasper refused to drop the staff and instead chucked it at the bodyguard droid.

So intent was the droid on defending itself against Lhoka's persistent attacks, that it never saw the part of the electrical staff that Jasper had thrown. Much to my surprise, the staff part promptly embedded itself in the droid's head - short circuiting it. Lhoka looked in surprise as the bodyguard then collapsed to the floor.

"Yeah!" Esther said happily, clapping her hands, "Big brother helped defeat the bad robot!"

"He did," I said, a little bit annoyed.

"Nice throw!" Lhoka told Jasper, high-fiving him, "But you know it's dangerous to touch weapons like that!"

"I *know*," Jasper laughed, "But I'm careful!"

"Okay then!" Lhoka said, "Would you like to hold my lightsaber?"

"Ohhhh, Yes!" Jasper said quietly.

Esther watched in rapt attention as Lhoka carefully handed Jasper his lightsaber and let him turn it on and off.

"Oooooohhh," Jasper whispered as he waved it around gently, "It's heavy!"

"Only when you're not used to it," Lhoka told Jasper, "For me, it's actually quite light!"

Esther then squirmed in my lap, and I set her down on the ground.

"I wanna see my brother!" Esther informed me, "I want to hold it too!"

"I laughed as I led her through the nearby doorway into the arena.

"Not today," I told her, "It's too dangerous for you, for now..."

Esther pouted, "But I wanna hold it!"

"It's not a toy!" Lhoka added as we approached her and Jasper, "Lightsabers have killed many people!"

"You mean bad robots?" Esther wanted to know as Jasper turned off Lhoka's lightsaber and handed it back to her.

"No, like real people," I told her.

"Oh," Esther replied, "That's not good."

"I know," I told her gravely, "Lightsabers should only be used to protect."

"I don't think I want to hold that anymore," Esther said aloud.

"When I get older!" Jasper declared, "I wanna be a Jedi!"

"SSSSssh," Lhoka said quickly, "Don't say that aloud."

"Why not?" Jasper whispered.

"Jedi are out-lawed," I reminded Jasper, "Surely you even know that!"

"I know," Jasper said, "But Mom said they were the heroes of old!"

"They were," I acknowledged, "But now they're hunted."

"So I can't be one?" Jasper wanted to know.

"You can still be one if you get older," I laughed, "But only in secret."

"Ohhhh," Jasper finally realized, "Like a sneaky Jedi!"

"Exactly," Lhoka chuckled, "Kinda like Leo, Amber, and I!"

I turned around briefly to check on Esther and found her asleep on the floor.

"Looks like someone is a bit tired," I said, "Time for bed I guess?"

"Already?!" Jasper exclaimed.

"Beats me," I said, "Lhoka, when is bedtime?"

Lhoka shrugged her shoulders, "I never had one!"

"Well, how about right now!" I announced, picking up Esther.

With Lhoka following Jasper, I led them all to the large guest room on the second floor where there were two twin-sized beds.

"Ooh!" Jasper cried out in delight, "It's huge!"

I placed Esther gently into the bed nearest the window and moved the sheets over her shoulder while Jasper did so himself.

"See you tomorrow!" I told Jasper.

"You too," Jasper yawned, closing his eyes.

I carefully closed the door to the room and looked at Lhoka.

"Do kids go to bed like this?" I asked her, "I thought they put up a big fight!"

Lhoka shrugged her shoulders, "How should I know? I always went to bed when I was tired!"

"I'll ask Amber to keep an eye on them via the security footage," I told Lhoka as we walked back down the hallway towards the office room.

At the end of the hall, I popped my head into the office, "Amber?"

"Huh?" Amber responded as she kept her attention on her computer.

"Can you keep an eye on the security footage for guest room two?"

"Why?" Amber wanted to know.

"Jasper and Esther are in there," Lhoka stated.

At this, Amber pried her attention away from her work and looked at us, "You put them to sleep in there?"

"Leo did," Lhoka smiled.

"Leo?!" Amber exclaimed, "I thought you were bad with kids?!"

"Ping and Lhoka liked me!" I defended myself.

Amber shook her head, "I never thought I'd see this day. Leo, a babysitter!"

"Hey!"

Amber laughed, "I'm just teasing you Leo, I'll keep an eye on them for ya."

"Thanks Amber," I said, "You're almost done there?"

"Not really," Amber sighed, "We have done so many transactions over the past few months, I've gotten a bit lost."

"That's probably Leo's fault," Lhoka said, "Him and all his projects."

"Well, I *am* now ready to finish the modifications for that one guy's custom spaceship," I said aloud, "Now that we got that one spacecraft from the auction."

Amber nodded her head, "He sent us another message today asking when it'll be done."

"I should be able to finish it soon if I'm not bothered too much," I explained.

"*Don't* look at me," Lhoka quickly stated, "I like those kids but I will *not* be their kid sitter."

"I'm sure we'll work something out," Amber reminded both of us, "Worse case is that we make some of the droids keep an eye on them."

"Speaking of getting to work," I said, "Lhoka, I need to give you a few tips on your fighting style." Lhoka sighed, "I tried my best."

"You worked hard, but not necessarily smart," I reminded her, "C'mon."

When we were back in the arena, I sat down on the floor and closed my eyes as Lhoka dragged the downed bodyguard droid to the side.

"Uh, what are you doing?" she asked me.

"Communing with the Force," I said.

"I thought that was just for Jedi," Lhoka said.

"No indeed," I replied, "To bend the Force to your will, you must realize how it works."

"Wait, but I thought that you were supposed to work with the Force, not force the...Force," Lhoka said.

"You're getting the lightside and darkside confused," I informed her calmly, "Jedi work in harmony with the Force; Sith bend the Force to their will."

"Oh," Lhoka realized, "So..."

"The Force is the greatest weapon that a Force-user has," I continued, "Relying too heavily on your weapon is a common mistake."

"But you can't attack with the Force," Lhoka said.

"Not in a lightsaber way, true," I admitted, "But in a different way."

"How did you get this smart about the Force?" Lhoka wanted to know.

"Everyone with Force powers grew up with those abilities, but I didn't," I said, "Hence, I had to spend a while figuring out how to use this power. I'm just now starting to scratch the surface of it."

Lhoka sat down across from me, "So what's my problem?"

"As I said before, you're confusing the darkside and lightside," I told her, "Either you work exclusively with the lightside or you work with the darkside only."

"But why can't I use both?"

"I...I don't know," I replied, "I guess you can't work with and also command the Force simultaneously."

"So I need to make the Force do what I want it to?"

"Exactly," I told Lhoka, "Instead of trying to outfight your enemy, use the Force to throw them, choke them, zap them..."

"I see," Lhoka said thoughtfully.

"Tell me," I told Lhoka, "How come General Grievous was so good at beating Jedi without having any Force abilities."

"I suppose because of his four arms and skill with lightsabers," Lhoka suggested.

"Yes, but really, it's because the Jedi kept on trying to duel with him," I replied, "They should've just thrown him around until he fell to pieces."

"But it's hard to concentrate and move things," Lhoka told me, "Especially in the heat of battle."

"Then work on it," I told her.

Lhoka sighed, "Okay, I get the point."

"But," I stated, getting back up, "There is a time and a place for a good lightsaber duel."

Lhoka looked up at me and smiled, "Like now?"

"Exactly," I smirked, igniting both of my dual bladed lightsabers, "Let's see what you got!"

## Chapter 3: Amber

It was well past midnight by the time I had finished logging all the finances, balancing the books, and sorting all the on-going jobs. Just like last month, we were barely making ends meet. It was hard to keep such a large operation as we had running in the black. Plus, Leo's experimentation with droids was quite costly in terms of purchasing the individual parts from auctions and fusing them together using whatever methods he did. However, it did cut down on the time needed to perform maintenance tasks on the estate, and they did serve very well as guards. I sighed and hoped that Leo would be able to bargain a good deal with the completion of his latest, custom starfighter.

"Bzzzzz, Bzzzzz, Bzzzz"

The holophone on my desk shook violently, signaling a caller.

"Just my luck," I thought, "Of course someone will call just when I'm done."

"Falcon Enterprises here," I said calmly into the microphone, "What can I do for you?"

"Yyyesss," a voice replied, "I need some help."

"Of course," I said politely, "What exactly would this be?"

"I'm Graballa the Hutt," the caller informed me, "And I run a large and *very* successful mining operation. Actually, it's probably the most successful and fiscally stable in the entire galaxy - much better than any of Jabba's...Although he requires me to give him half of all the proceeds anyway - although he didn't do any of the work! Do you know what it feels like to be taken advantage of here?! I'm a Hutt too! I should be allowed to make my own place in life without having to grovel at the feet uh...body...uh...idk - whatever of Jabba, and-."

"Understood," I interrupted him, a bit annoyed, "What's your job though?"

"Oh...yes," Graballa replied, "I'm suspecting...now I know that this is just a suspicion...I might be wrong, although, ha ha haa, I doubt it since I'm almost always right. Well, not always, but you know, mostly always because you know you can't always-."

"What are you 'suspecting'?" I pressed.

"Someone is stealing my ORE!" Graballa roared, damaging my eardrums, "And I need someone to find them, like NOW! And these idiot bounty hunters don't have half enough brain cells to do a PROPER job!"

"Of course," I told Graballa, taking deep breaths to keep my patience, "You want us to find out who these thieves are."

"Yes, and when I get my hands on them, I'm gonna...I'm gonna...well...I don't know what I'm gonna do, but it's gonna be *ugly* like really not cool!" Graballa informed me.

"I'm sure," I groaned, "Now for the details. Where is this? How much are you paying? What'll be our cover? All of that."

"I'm right over the planet of Tarylen," Graballa answered, 'and well, uh... I haven't thought of the rest."

I groaned again, "I'll charge 30k credits, and we'll go in as employee environment specialists."

"Thirty thousand CREDITS!" Graballa roared, "You're *kidding*."

"Seeing as this is more of a mystery and less of a bounty, yes," I informed him, "It'll take a while too if the supposed thieves are halfway smart too."

"Make it three thousand," Graballa bartered.

I laughed, "I'll cut you a deal with 20k credits."

"No deal," Graballa insisted, "But I can probably pay 5k credits."

"12k credits is my final offer," I told Graballa, "Either take it, or lose your ore."

"Aw c'mon," Graballa whined, "At the most ten thousand?"

"No," I said sharply, "You're a Hutt for goodness sake, you can afford it!"

With a lot more hemming and hawing, Graballa finally agreed to the deal.

"Will we need any special identification cards or badges to be able to access your mines?" I then asked.

"You shouldn't," Graballa said, "I'll warn everyone about you though."

"Remember," I quickly said before he hung up, "We're going to be there to work on improving employee conditions, okay?"

"Wait, but we just decided that-," Graballa began.

"I *know*," I told him, "This is our *cover*."

"Oh...yes," Graballa realized, "Yes, of course, but um..."

"Lemme guess," I sighed, "Your employee conditions aren't all that great?"

"Um, well, I mean, I feed and house them!" Graballa insisted.

*Typical Hutt*, I mumbled to myself.

"That's fine, we won't be critiquing you on your mines," I told Graballa.

"Good," Graballa said, breathing a sigh of relief, "But *get* over here soon! I'm losing money as we speak!"

"I'm sure," I replied, quickly hanging up.

I slumped farther down my chair, not very excited about going out to a Hutt mine in only a few hours. After shutting down the computers and checking once more on the security cameras on the new kids Leo *had* to adopt, I hurried out of the office and to my room to get some much needed rest.

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"ONNNKK, ONNNKK, ONNNKKKK."

My alarm abruptly woke me up from a deep sleep, causing me to groggily flop out of bed and Force throw my alarm clock across the room. I had probably only gotten five hours of sleep at the most, and my body could definitely feel the difference.

It didn't take too long to get dressed, as I always wore my favorite outfit to bed so that I could be ready for action (as Leo had always recommended), but, seeing as today there was a mystery to solve, I dug out some armor from my closet to wear. I knew a friend from Tatooine who acquired some Mandalorian gear for me; and, after Leo had fused on some special fire and blast resistant fabric, my armor was able to withstand laser pistol fire from close range. After swiping my lightsabers off their stands, I rushed out of my room and down the hallway - pursuing the delicious smell of fried cake and baked mushroom.

Just as I was passing Lhoka's room, Jasper ran out of it - screaming like a banshee and wielding a massive laser rifle.

"Jasper?!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, hi Auntie!" Jasper said to me as he turned around and continued to run backwards, "Lhoka and I are doing *target* practice, and we need a bigger gun! See ya!"

With that, he was already dashing down the stairwell, taking two steps at a time. Having had my curiosity piqued, I turned and peered into Lhoka's room. As predicted, it was a mess. As opposed to me who always tried to maintain a clean and organized atmosphere, Lhoka's room looked like a dust funnel had hit it - one that left lethal weapons on the floor, electronic equipment on the furniture, and clothes pretty much everywhere else.

"Teenagers," I sighed.

Back on the first floor, I was still making my way to the kitchen when I was sidetracked again by a bunch of loud talking from the spacecraft hangar.

"Esther!" Leo was saying, "Can you bring me that ion injector?"

I poked my head into the hangar to see Leo on the far side putting the final touches on his new spaceship while Esther was running to and fro the work bench with various tools.

"Amber!" Leo waved upon noticing me, "C'mon over! I'm almost done. What do ya think?"

I groaned as my breakfast was delayed even longer, but I sauntered over to the spacecraft anyway. When Esther hurried over with the ion projector, Leo picked it up and started screwing it into the main hyperdrive.

"This baby will be ready for a test drive in just a few minutes!" Leo said proudly, "I just need to adjust the intake and then it'll be ready to sell to that antique spacecraft dealer!"

I nodded my head, "Won't you miss it though? You've been working on it for several months!"

"Oh, no doubt about that," Leo laughed, "But, you gotta make ends meet somehow! If I kept everything I created, I'd be broke!"

"Can I go on the test drive too?" Esther wanted to know.

"Sure, why not?" Leo replied, "It's a two-seater, and Amber, you wanna come along?"

"I need to get breakfast," I told Leo, "I'm getting hungry."

"Ooooh, well then I'll leave you to that," Leo smirked, "Wouldn't want to set off the beast in you!"

"Make your run quick though," I warned him, "We've got a meeting with a Hutt over Tarylen in an hour or so."

"Wait, what?!"

"Yeah, he wants us to investigate why his ore is being stolen," I informed Leo.

Leo groaned, "Classic Hutt."

I smirked back at Leo; then turned around and headed for the kitchen once again. This time, I made it, but the breakfast wasn't warm anymore; not that it really mattered since I was cramming it into my mouth anyway. After throwing the dishware at the poor droid manning the sink, I hustled over to the arena to find Lhoka.

Just like clockwork, Lhoka was there, teaching Jasper how to use a laser rifle. Across the room, she had set up a series of targets to practice on.

"Lhoka!" I called out to her as I entered through the arena's main door, "Can I talk with you for a moment?"

"Sure!" Lhoka replied, patting Jasper on the head and leaving him to fire off a massively dangerous weapon.

"What's the question?" Lhoka asked again as she drew nearer.

"Leo and I will be gone for a few days investigating a client over Tarylen," I told her, "Can you hold down the base for us?"

"Ah, man, why can't I go too?" Lhoka wanted to know.

"Because *someone* has to look out for the kids now," I reminded her.

"Make Leo do it then," Lhoka insisted, "We can go."

I glared at her, "Seriously? Leo's the best man for the job."

"And I'm the best woman," Lhoka argued.

"No ones questioning your abilities," I told Lhoka, "But I really think it'd be best if you stay here - and *don't* tell me that the droids can kid sit on them."

Lhoka rolled her eyes in annoyance, "*Fine*, have it your way."

"Alright, now be a good little kid and run along," I teased her.

Lhoka punched me in the side.

"Ow!" I yelped.

"Getting soft?" Lhoka teased back.

"RAURRRGGHH!" I yelled, igniting my lightsaber and swinging it at Lhoka.

Lhoka turned on her lightsaber just as quickly and parried my attack, using a simple Form One defense.

Testing her training, I rotated through Forms Two and Three to see what she remembered.

Although a bit sluggish, Lhoka was able to hold her ground, even getting in a few cut jabs herself.



"I'm impressed," I told her as I ducked under her next attack and performed a Contentious Opportunity, "You're improving very quickly!"

"Thanks to me training diligently *every day*," Lhoka breathed, using a Fluid Riposte, "Unlike some other people I know..."

"I still train," I reminded her, "But *someone* has to actually perform the work around here."

"Don't look at me," Lhoka replied, "I have my own way of working."

"Maybe you should work some at cleaning your room," I suggested, attempting a Falling Avalanche.

"Hey now," Lhoka said as she deflected my attack, "No hate on my room's organization. Everything is where I want -."

I interrupted her by Force blasting her across the room. Unfortunately, I had forgotten about Jasper standing behind us all, and Lhoka promptly crashed right into him. As fast as it would have, that also caused his gun to go off - sending a laser blast straight back at me. Ducking promptly, I twisted back into a defensive position just in time to see the laser pulse stop in the middle of the air.

Jasper yelped, "Sorry about that!"

Lhoka groaned, "Amber, be careful about just *throwing* around the Force."

"Very true!" Leo announced from the South side of the room, "The Force should be used with precision and purpose - always a goal in mind."

I turned to see Leo, his left arm outstretched, gently rotate the laser pulse and let it explode into the floor.

"You...you caught a laser pulse?" I gasped.

"The Force is the most powerful weapon," Leo insisted, "I keep on telling you guys that."

"But I don't ever see you practicing!" Lhoka explained.

"I practice frequently," Leo told Lohka, "But almost exclusively on honing my Force abilities."

I sighed and clipped my lightsaber back onto my belt, "You ready to go boy?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Leo told me, "Although the test flight performed wonderfully, so I need to drop off my spaceship en route."

"Where are you going?" Jasper wanted to know.

"We'll be gone for a few days on a little trip," Leo informed Jasper.

"Can I come too?" Jasper asked.

"Not this time," Leo chuckled, "But maybe in the future!"

Jasper sighed, "Adults have all the fun!"

Meanwhile, Esther, who had been following Leo, clung to his leg.

"Don't go!" she begged.

Leo bent down to her, "It's okay Esther. I *will* be back."

Esther started to cry, "But that's what mommy said!"

“How about this,” Leo decided, “Why don’t you ask Lhoka while we’re gone on how to use our communication systems. Then, you can chat with me *anytime* you like!”

“Oooh!” Esther clapped her hands, “That’s a good idea!”

“Great!” I said, “Now, let’s gooo!”

Leo glared at me as I forcibly grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away. As I led him into the hangar, Leo asked me, “Do you ever get the feeling you’re making a bad decision Amber?”

“All the time,” I replied, “Live with it.”

Leo groaned as I hopped into our main spaceship’s pilot seat, “I’ll turn on our closed circuit tracking, so you can find where to go after your delivery.”

Leo sighed again and jumped into his starfighter, “See ya there, girl.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

An hour later, I was landing in a large docking pad that was full of freighters being loaded with metal ore. Hundreds of workers of many different types hurried every which way while Trandoshan guards maintained a close eye on everyone.

I opened the door to my spaceship, stepped out, and was promptly accosted by a half dozen, trigger-happy Trandoshans.

“What are *you* doing here?” a large, burly Trandoshan demanded of me.

“I will be performing some surveys of the workers here to improve employee conditions,” I informed them, standing my ground, “per Graballa’s orders.”

“I don’t remember Graballa telling me anything about this!” a skinnier Trandoshan nearby announced.

“Well, he did,” I said, “So scram.”

Immediately, they pulled out their laser rifles on me.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” I growled.

“We don’t like people coming here unannounced!” a third Trandoshan snapped back.

“WHOOH!” With a thrust of my two hands, I Force-pushed them through the air and careening into barrels of supplies nearby.

Laughing, I sauntered on by and headed by a large building nearby where I decided that I would start investigating. The building, although very old and crudely built, had a good many smokestacks puffing thick, black smoke into the air which had a terrible effect on the air quality. As I shoved open an iron door and let myself in, the thick smoke quickly attempted to suffocate me, so I reluctantly pulled on my helmet.

Inside the building were a mess of conveyor belts that led to glowing furnaces, and around these conveyor belts scurried a variety of workers – some shoveling crude rock onto the belts while others controlled machinery to smelt the ore. Graballa had said that his ore was disappearing, but it could be that the pure metal was being stolen instead. I elected to carefully watch what happened to the freshly-smelted iron to see if it was properly packaged and shipped

to Graballa's warehouses. As I watched, a hover-lift driven by an older gentleman with a large gray beard drove by, so I flagged him down.

"What's the problem?" he asked me gruffly.

"I'm working for Graballa to improve employee working conditions," I told the man, "Would you mind answering a few questions.

The older man laughed in my face, "HA! Like Graballa cares. He's a Hutt. Hutts have never cared about anything but making a profit!"

"Well, what are you doing with this pallet of iron?" I asked the man.

"Taking it to the freighters," he replied, "Say, *who* are you?"

"I'm Amber from Falcon Enterprises," I answered, matter-of-factly, "Do all of the freighters go directly to the warehouses or do they make a stop somewhere else?"

"You're from Falcon Enterprises?!" the older man said in surprise, "Prove it!"

Annoyed, I took off my helmet and got a face full of soot.

"So you are!" he said in response, "Say, are you doing anything tonight?"

I rolled my eyes, "I have a boyfriend you know! Does the name 'Leo' ring a bell? You could help though by answering my question!"

"Of, yes, of course," the man replied, dejected, "No, as far as I'm aware they take it straight to the warehouses!"

"I see-," I began, before being cut off by a whole bunch of Trandoshan guards pointing and yelling at me.

"It's *her*!" one of them yelled, "Get her!"

"Oh great," I groaned, pulling out my lightsaber, "Back off idiots!"

The man in his over lift quickly raced away before he could get accosted as well.

"Hands up, missy!" a Trandoshan barked at me.

"In your dreams, lizard," I snapped, "I'm supposed to be here! So stop bothering me or I *will* hurt you!"

"FIRE AT WILL!" one of the guards yelled at his comrades.

Fortunately, he was promptly cut short by another, more commanding voice behind me.

"STOP!"

I turned around to see a very tall, and very plump Trandoshan lizard plodding forward. Next to him was Leo.

"She's supposed to be here, dummies," the Trandoshan informed his comrades, "Ease up a little, won't ya?!"

"Yes, Yeerer," they replied.

"I'm sorry about the trouble," Yeerer addressed me as Leo fist bumped me, "Follow me, we can talk in my office."

With a final glare at the other guards, I followed the Yeerer and Leo back out of the dark and smoky smelting building and down a series of dusty roads to a large, gleaming building guarded by a whole bevy of more Trandoshan guards.

"How'd you get here so fast?" I asked.

"Caught a ride on the blitz transport shuttle," Leo informed me, "Then stopped by here to get a scope for the land. Seems like you just got yourself into trouble first thing, though!"

I groaned, "Somehow Graballa's communication is lacking."

"Easy to see why that might happen," Leo replied as we entered Yeerer's building.

Yeerer then swiped his ID card on a heavy, metal door and opened it for us, leading us through yet another passage. This passage was lined with stuffed monsters and creatures.

"Ick," I whispered to Leo, "What is he collecting?"

"That's a human arm," Leo replied, pointing to a carefully stuffed arm on display in a glass box. Its label read, "Arm of Tanner, rebel."

I looked over at Leo who responded with a disgusted face.

"This is my collection of various beasts that my men and I have defeated," he said grandly, "We have a very extensive collection...like those Wookie skins!"

Leo grimaced, "Does Graballa know of this? Don't you think this is...well...too much?"

Yeerer, smiled at both of us as we reached the end of the hallway and turned a corner, "You can never have too many prizes from won fights!"

"Ooooookay then," I said loudly, "Now, uh, we really ought to get back to surveying what is going on here. Can we just get some credentials and leave?"

"Oh, ohohohohoho," Yeerer chuckled obsessively, "You don't get credentials, you don't *need* credentials. What you need is respect!"

"I'm not following," Leo responded as we reached the final door that Yeerer opened up.

"See this room?" Yeerer asked us, gesturing us into his personal office, "This entire room is made to be imposing. I lead by forcing my underlings to obey me. Trandoshans only obey out of fear, and *that* is how you can get the guards to stay out of your way!"

"I'd rather not use force..." Leo began.

"Sounds good to me!" I sneered, smacking my right fist into my left hand, "I don't mind pounding those losers into the ground!"

"That's the spirit!" Yeerer replied, "Although you really have nothing to worry about here. You can do your surveys and leave with no problem. My guards have got *everything* under control."

"Of course, of course," Leo replied, "Say, while we're here, have you noticed any ore disappearing or workers stealing any of it?"

Yeerer plopped down into a massive, steel chair and leaned back heavily, "Not that I'm aware of, but you know those sick workers are always after more money. Wouldn't surprise me if they're

stealing things behind Graballa's back, and we don't have enough guards to keep an eye on *everyone*."

"Do you have a suggestion for who might be doing the stealing?" I pressed.

"If I had to say," Yeerer said thoughtfully, lowering his voice, "I'd say it's the freighter drivers. I've never trusted those guys, and I'd bet that some of them are taking stops along their routes!"

"That's what I thought!" I said, "Seems like the only real way to avoid detection."

"You'd think that the freighters would have tracking on them and that if they made other stops it'd be easily detected," Leo said thoughtfully.

"If you ask me," Yeerer continued, "Graballa is entirely incompetent to be running this mining operation. There probably is tracking on the ships, but it's doubtful that anyone is even checking it!"

"Who exactly are the drivers?" I wanted to know.

"Just a bunch of private contractors," Yeerer shrugged his shoulders, "If you wanted to catch them, you'd probably have to do your own reconnaissance, but...you're just trying to improve employee living conditions, not catch some thieves, so you won't have to worry about that at all. Right???"

Something about Yeerer's look and tone of voice made me feel uneasy, like he had figured out the real reason for us being here, even though it was *supposed* to be a secret.

As if on cue, there were a series of feminine screams and Trandoshan hisses. Alarmed, I turned around to see three Trandoshan guards drag in a young adult female Togruta.

"What's all this about!" Yeerer roared, "Can't you see I'm busy talking!"

"Yes boss," a buff Trandoshan replied, "But this worker came very late today for her shift.

Yeerer looked down at her, "What's your excuse?!"

"You made me work five hours overtime last week!" She cried out, "I overslept because I was so exhausted!"

"Pathetic," Yeerer laughed, "Haul her out of my sight. Use her for target practice or something."

"Target practice?!" Leo gasped, "You can't do that?!"

"Can't I?" Yeerer smiled smugly, "I can do whatever I want. Graballa left me in charge, so I can do whatever I want."

Leo looked over at me with a pained expression on his face as the Trandoshans dragged the poor Togruta out of the room.

"Now, where were we?" Yeerer continued as if nothing at all had happened, "Oh yes, we were talking about your surveys. How long will you guys be hanging around for?"

"We need about one hundred workers' feedback," I announced, making up a number on the fly.

"A hundred?!" Yeerer roared, "That'll take you both forever!"

"That's why we need to get started," Leo reasoned.

"Well what are you waiting for?!" Yeerer told us, "Get GOING! Shoo, shoo!"

Leo led the way out of the office and Yeerer slammed the door shut behind us.

"Who did Graballa hire to run this operation?!" Leo whispered to me fiercely as we headed back down the hallway out of Yeerer's earshot.

"This guy is horrible! And that's coming from me," I replied, looking compulsively over my shoulder.

Leo shook his head in disgust as we took a shortcut to avoid the hallway of stuffed monsters and arrived back in the building's small lobby, "Why don't you look into the freighter drivers, while I do some more sleuthing around in here?"

"How come you have all the fun?" I asked Leo, "What if I want to sneak around?"

"You can...in the spaceships," he insisted, "the Trandoshan guards are already nervous about you because of your run-ins."

"Fine," I grumbled, "I'll do just that and break this case wide open!"

"You do that!" Leo chuckled, ducking behind a nearby table and making his way back into the Trandoshan building.

Meanwhile, I headed back out into the bright sunlight and headed for the large shipping yard where hordes of workers were loading thousands of tons of iron and other metal blocks into the large freight spaceships.

Spurred on by the overbearing Trandoshan guards barking at them, the workers were all too busy. Too busy, in fact, to notice me open a door to one of the spaceships and jump in. The inside of the freighter that I jumped into was well-lit, and there was a considerable amount of light coming from far down the ship where hover lifts were packing in more pallets of iron.

"Hmmm," I said to myself, inspecting the shipping labels on the pallets. All of them were labeled to go to the warehouses on Planet Hipoy where Graballa's warehouses were – nothing too suspicious, but, then again, only some of the ore was being stolen which meant that most of it was going to the warehouses with only some not going to the intended place.

"Ooooh, hey ladddyyyYYY!" a voice announced from behind me.

I turned around to see a very drunk spaceship driver leaning in the doorway to the cockpit and looking at me, "Well aren't I lucky today."

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm Captain Quiry, at your SERvicE!" he announced, nearly falling over if I hadn't reached my hands out and caught him.

"Uh, are you sure you are able to fly?" I asked.

"Of CoURSE!" he announced, attempting to salute me, "I can Fly AnYTHing At aLL!"

"And where are you taking this ship?" I pressed.

The captain took another sip of his drink in a thermos he was carrying and continued his slurred, uneven speech, "Why, to Trandoshan's planet of course!"

"Why, I thought it was supposed to go to Planet Hipoy!" I exclaimed, concerned.

"NooOOOoo," the captain replied, "Of course not missy, but say, you want to fly with me?"

"I'm quite fine," I replied, backing up a little, a bit taken aback by the guy, "I'll be on my way now."

"Of cOURse dearie," he responded, suddenly pitching forward and collapsing to the ground.

After falling in a heap, his drink spilled on the ground, and, despite my best efforts, I could not manage to wake him from his unconscious stupor. Stepping over his body, I rushed into the cockpit and checked out the ship's navigational software. Its autopilot was set for Hipoy as it should have been, yet the captain was saying he needed to go to Trandosha's "plant."

It was all very confusing, yet I had the distinct feeling that the people that were stealing from Graballa weren't the workers, it was the sleazy guards. I turned around to head back out of the freighter before someone else caught me inside, when I caught a waft of a very pungent odor. I traced the smell to the spilled liquid on the ground that the captain had been drinking from.

Suddenly and finally, I had a clue. I quickly switched on the chemical analyzer device software that Leo had installed into my wrist guard and let it scan the foul-smelling liquid that was pooling on the floor.

"Chemical properties complete," the robotic voice confirmed after a few seconds, "The primary constituency of this chemical is H<sub>2</sub>O with abnormal traces of Hyrewarfen."

"What's Hyrewarfen?" I asked my wristguard.

"A drug, typically used to make those that ingest it easily controlled and manipulated. It is currently illegal to use and own this substance according to the Confederacy," it replied.

"Now, we're getting somewhere," I told myself as I jumped out of the freighter and ducked behind a pile of boxes.

"Leo, come in!" I whispered into my earpiece.

There was some static followed by Leo's voice coming online, "Amber. What's up?"

"It's the Trandoshas. They're using a mind-controlling drug on some of the pilots so that they drop stuff off on their planet!" I told Leo.

"Seriously?" Leo gasped, "How did you find this out?"

"I had a breakthrough," I laughed, "Just like I told you!"

Leo groaned, "Well, I haven't been making any progress here, this place is crawling with guards!"

"Why don't you go track down what planet this is, while I hunt around for more evidence!" I said.

"I thought you'd want to track down the planet," Leo responded.

"Nope, that's boring," I insisted, "You go do that."

"I'm on my way then," Leo replied, "Because I have a very sneaky suspicion as to what planet that is!"

## Chapter 4: Lhoka

As soon as Amber and Leo left, Esther burst into tears again.

"Oh for goodness sake!" I cried out, "Stop crying!"

This just made her cry harder.

Jasper laughed, "She cries alot. She'll be fine, but I'm so bored."

"Already?" I sighed.

"Uh huh," Jasper said, "I wanna do something fun."

Jasper flopped onto the ground saying, "Bored, bored, bored, bored..."

Leo and Amber had been gone for only a minute, and things were already out of control.

"Well, uh," I said aloud, "How about we go...shopping?"

"Shopping," Jasper groaned, "That's boooorrrring."

"Not at the Tatooine sellers' market!" I argued.

"Shop?" Esther sniffed, finally stopping crying.

"Oh boy, here we go," Jasper told me, "Every time we went shopping with Mom, she bought us new clothes - now you're going to have to buy her some."

"We can arrange that," I said, "Your clothes are kinda old."

"Shopping's for girls," Jasper told me, "And you're a girl."

"I didn't know," I replied sarcastically.

"Isn't there something more exciting to do?"

"Well," I told Jasper, "What do you have in mind?"

"I dunno."

"Shopping it is then," I announced as Esther danced around excitedly.

Jasper groaned again for effect but still followed Esther and I as we headed for the hangar. On the way, I ran into COMMANDO-DR who informed me of where we were going.

"Roger, roger," he told me, "Don't be gone for long or Leo'll kill me."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I told him, hurrying the kids into the remodeled clone drop ship that Leo frequently rode.

"Cool spaceship!" Jasper noted, "I haven't seen one like this!"

"Most haven't," I replied, sitting down in the pilot's seat, "Strap in kids, we're about to take off."

Esther wasn't sure of what to do, but after Jasper found her the seatbelt and got her strapped in, I was able to start flipping the switches for the start up sequence.

"What does this do?" Jasper asked me, pointing to the hyperdrive lever.

"Something you definitely shouldn't touch," I warned him as I maneuvered the ship out of the hangar doors and out into the environment, "Next stop, Tatooine!"

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Jasper and Esther couldn't stop talking as we drifted into the busy atmosphere of Tatooine.



"Feels like I was just here," I mumbled to myself, "Oh wait, I was!"

I was glad that Leo was too busy to keep an eye on me. I doubt he would have been excited that I was going right back to the place where we had been chased by the Empire just a day before.

"Hold on!" I told the kids as I veered to the left where a large section of pavement had been marked out for parking, "We're coming in for a landing."

"You're right! This is cool!" Jasper said excitedly, "Mom never took us to places like this!"

"Probably because it's too sketchy," I mumbled to myself again.

After turning off the engines, I helped Esther out of her seat and led them outside into the hot, dry air.

"Yipes!" Jasper yelped, "It's *hot*."

"It's a desert planet," I reminded him while locking down the spaceship, "What do you think?"

Esther insisted that she ride on my shoulders because the sand was too hot on her feet, but Jasper, on the opposite side of the spectrum, kept wanting to get as far away as possible.

"Jasper," I told him for the umpteenth time as we entered the crowded throngs of buyers and sellers in the main marketplace, "Stay next to me. You can get lost here."

Jasper grunted, "I'm not a kid! I can take care of myself!"

"Sure you can," I replied sarcastically, "But let's not test that."

I had been here hundreds of times with Leo to buy stuff, and I knew just where the best place was to get some clothes for Esther. After passing the repulsor disk booth, I hooked a right and then a left down the nearest alley. After two flights of stairs, we arrived in front of a well-kept shop. As soon as he saw all the clothes on racks in the store, Jasper started to complain again.

"Shopping," he said bitterly, "Why does it have to be shopping?"

"Ah, but shopping isn't the only thing you can do here," a tall Twilek lady informed Jasper, popping her head outside of the store, "I also have an entire selection of helmets!"

"That's still shopping," Jasper told the lady as I let Esther onto the ground.

"Ah, but wouldn't you like to try a few on?" the Twilek lady insisted, "Surely you need a strong helmet to aid in your travels!"

"I'm Lhoka," I told the lady, "Thanks for helping."

"No problem," the lady smiled, "I'm Tilzabeth."

"I need to get a new set of clothes for this young lady," I told Tilzabeth, while pointing at Esther,

"Do you have anything that small?"

"Of course I do!" Tilzabeth insisted, "Just follow me!"

Excited by the prospect of cool helmets, Jasper also followed.

"What's your favorite color, young lady?" Tilzabeth asked Esther.

"Pink!" Esther said immediately.

I cringed.

"Pink! Ah, the color of my skin too!" Tilzabeth stated, "Well, let's find something pinkish."

I followed her to the left of the store where there was a wide variety and style of outfits, a few of which appeared to be small enough for Esther.

"What about this one?" Tilzabeth asked Esther, pulling out a small, brown dress with some pink lining.

"That's brown!" Esther replied defiantly.

"Oh!" I see," Tilzabeth smiled, realizing that Esther wanted something almost entirely pink.

Groaning to myself, I moved over to the next aisle to find something more suitable than a *dress*.

I was so not into dresses, though Amber loved to wear them whenever she wasn't in battle.

I was working my way up the aisle to the front of the store when a tall lady with black, unruly hair and bloodshot eyes walked into the store. Instantly, our eyes met, but, not wanting to make it awkward, I quickly looked away. The lady in turn, hurried off to the left of the store, but shortly thereafter, I felt some hot breath breathing down the back of my neck.

"I know youuu," the lady whispered creepily behind me.

Swiftly, I jabbed my elbow into her stomach, throwing her backwards.

"Get away from me, creep," I demanded of her, finally getting a good look at her.

"I'm afraid I can't do that," the lady sneered, "You're wanted, *Lhoka*."

"Lhoka?" I laughed, "That's not my name!"

"Oh surrre," the lady purred, reaching her hands down to her belt, "I'm afraid I don't believe you."

I quickly peeked over the nearest aisle to see Tilzabeth and Esther still admiring the clothes, completely oblivious to the lady accosting me.

"Let's talk about this outside," I whispered to her, gesturing to the door.

Completely ignoring me, the lady jumped on me, slamming me painfully into the wooden shelves behind me; then, she pulled out a red lightsaber.

"Inquisitor," I grunted, "Wonderful."

"Not quite," the lady sneered again, "But after this bounty, maybe so."

"Tell the Emperor, he'll have to wait," I spat, using my knees to flip her away from me and out the door.

I wasted no time, igniting my lightsaber in turn and somersaulting out of the shop after her.

Outside the shop, the lady had quickly recovered her balance and was crouching nearby, ready to spring.

"Let's try this again," I told the creepy lady, "Now I'm ready."

"Won't make a difference," the lady sneered again.

"I beg to differ," I challenged her, leaping through the air and bringing my lightsaber down upon her.

The lady dodged and parried the attack, performing a surprisingly perfect Disarming Slash. However, it didn't do much good for her, because I was able to Force grab my lightsaber just as soon as it left my grasp.

"You'll have to do better than Form One," I told her, "If you even hope to be a challenge."

The creepy lady growled, attacking ferociously using Form Two attacks. As I evaded them, I slowly worked her towards the railing that separated the grounds around the shop from the busy roadway down beneath. After a failed Contentious Opportunity, the lady defaulted to utilizing a series of short jabs that only resulted in me getting the upper hand.

"Snap!" I lashed out with my lightwhip, curling the long tendril around her lightsaber. The lady tried to cut my lightwhip in half, but found that it wasn't a laser whip - it was a lightwhip.

"Where did you get your lightwhip?!" the lady gasped as she pulled back.

"I took it from a black market dealer," I told her, "You notice it's red, right?"

"Fake Inquisitor," the lady sneered.

"Fake Inquisitor yourself," I told the lady as I yanked back hard on my lightwhip while simultaneously shoving her backward. Her single-bladed lightsaber promptly fell to the ground and rolled to a stop against the store while the lady slid to a stop in front of the doorway.

Placing my foot on her lightsaber I challenged her to get it.

"You may think you've won," the lady told me, "But in reality you've fallen right into my trap."

"What trap?" I questioned her.

"This one!" she screamed, while wildly leaping at me and shooting with a pistol that she somehow had on her.

Quickly retracting my lightwhip, I deflected the blasts and used the Force to launch her still farther behind me. With a nasty thud, my opponent slammed into the weak railing surrounding the shop.

"You fool!" the lady screamed at me, "You think the Force will save you!"

"Well, it's doing a good job right now," I conceded, having flashbacks about what Leo had told me.

The lady, after once again pulling herself to her feet, surveyed me carefully.

"Face it," I told her, "You're beaten."

"Not quite," she said slowly, brandishing her pistol again.

"Seriously?" I groaned, "Give up already!"

"You're too young," the lady grinned broadly, "To know when, in fact, you're being outsmarted."

"Blah blah," I made fun of her.

Roaring with anger at this last remark, the creepy lady shot at me repeatedly while I advanced on her. With a powerful swing, I aimed for her neck, but the lady flattened herself on the ground and the momentum of the swing suddenly carried me over the fence. I caught a glimpse of a massive cargo freighter far down below, before I grasped the fence with my left hand and

shoved my feet between the bottom of the fence and the top of the ground. This quick thinking saved me as my feet promptly knocked the legs out from under the lady and she plunged over the edge of the fencing with me. Hanging by my legs, I then stabbed her in the arm as she reached out for the fence as I had done. Fortunately for me, she was reaching for the fence with the same arm that I stabbed; hence, she lost her grip and plunged downwards - her body slamming into a dozen vehicles and splattering on the ground. At that same time, the fencing finally gave away and dropped me into the busy thoroughfare.

With the few milliseconds that I had, I rotated my body around and aimed for a large taxi that was just going by. Using split second timing, I slowed my descent using the Force and landed lightly atop the taxi - just in time to be nearly blasted off as the taxi accelerated around a corner. Behind me, the clothing shop quickly disappeared from view. Flattening myself on top of the taxi, I tried to hold onto the slick roof as we careened through the morning Tatooine traffic towards an unknown destination.

"Leo's gonna kill me," I groaned. Not only had I left the kids alone in the heart of Tatooine, but I had gotten myself in a terribly conspicuous fight which resulted in me killing a (what I assumed to be) Inquisitor of sorts. If that wasn't enough, I was now stuck on top of a land-taxi going to who knows where!

After a few more turns down the main traffic routes, the taxi veered off onto a less-used road and finally a dingy alley. After a minute, it slowed down and came to a stop outside a sprawling series of black buildings. The doors of the taxi were promptly thrown open and two elite stormtroopers jumped out, escorting a lone figure, who, as it turns out, was Ping.

Stifling a surprised gasp, I watched as the storm troopers paid the taxi driver; then roughly escorted him to the nearest and most imposing structure that had a large number of clones entering and exiting it. At that time, the taxi quickly pulled away and zoomed back into traffic - heading back towards the Tatooine marketplace, much to my relief.

By the time the taxi finally came to another stop in front of a massive hotel, I was really regretting having ever come here in the first place. My stomach was baked due to being on the extremely hot roof of the taxi, my back was burning from the sun, and my hands were exhausted from gripping the waxed-smooth roof of the taxi.

Gently sliding off the taxi and running back towards the marketplace, my thoughts briefly returned back to Ping and how he had gotten himself caught. I really hoped that it hadn't been because of my untimely run-in with him yesterday, and yet, considering that he had escaped unscathed for at least three years from the Empire, I couldn't help but wonder what had changed now. The only other possibility that I could possibly imagine was that he would be...working with the Empire? It looked like he was arrested, but, now that I thought about it, he hadn't been hand-cuffed, which is a "must" considering Ping's Force abilities.

The other question is how had that other Inquisitor known where I was? Surely she hadn't just run into me by complete coincidence, and why had she not used the Force to land on a vehicle? Why had she said that she *wasn't* an Inquisitor?

With all those questions swirling through my head, I pushed and shoved my way through the crowds of people to get back to the Twi'leks shop. There were a few more people hanging around then when I had last been there, and the fence piece was still conveniently missing, but, other than that, not much else had changed. After hurrying into the shop, I quickly scanned the aisles for Jasper and Esther; just to find them sitting behind the counter with Tilzabeth and licking blue milk ice cream cones.

"Oh thank goodness you're alright!" I breathed, walking over to the front counter.

"Why wouldn't they be?" Tilzabeth asked, still oblivious to the fight that had ensued outside.

"Oh, uh, no reason at all," I replied quickly, "Sorry, for my, uh, delay."

"No problem at all," Tilzabeth laughed, "I rather enjoyed their company."

"And she makes the best ice cream," Jasper added, ice cream smeared all the way across his face.

Tilzabeth laughed, "Well thank you very much!"

"Did Esther find an outfit?" I asked.

"I did!" Esther said excitedly as Tilzabeth reached under the counter and held up a white and pink action outfit.

"Actually," I said aloud, "That's just what she needs!"

"It's not a dress though," Esther informed me, "But it has *pink* on it!"

"So it does," I chuckled, pulling out my credit account card and handing it to the Twi'lek.

After completing the purchase, I thanked Tilzabeth for all her patience.

"It was no problem at all!" she said again, "And, I have something for you too!"

Tilzabeth then proceeded to pull a small, brown bag off the counter and hand it to me, "I think you'll want this."

"Huh?" I replied, plucking it out of her hand.

"You'll want to open it...later," she said, winking at me.

Still confused, I grabbed Jasper and Esther's sticky hands and led them out of the shop.

"Where are we going now?" Jasper asked, "There's all sorts of nice people around here!"

"Um, yeah, about that," I said as Esther begged to be carried on my back, "Now *everyone* is as nice as her."

"Oh," Jasper replied, "Oh, okay."

"But," I continued, "I was thinking about going on a little exploration!"

"Oooh?" Esther yelled too loudly into my ear.

"Yeah!" Jasper announced, "An adventure!"

"We're going to go this way," I told them as I walked along the outskirts of the marketplace and aimed for the large hotel where I had been dropped off not more than a half hour ago.

"We're going to a hotel?" Jasper guessed as he saw where we were heading.

"No," I laughed, "Not exactly. It's an adventure! You won't know until we get there!"

"Ooooh," Esther said again, "Secret!"

"I hate secrets," Jasper pouted, "They're always so...secretive."

"That's kinda the point," I chuckled again as we passed up the hotel and descended into an underground pedestrian walkway.

"Tunnel," Esther declared.

Forty minutes later, with my back about to break and Jasper complaining, we came within shooting distance of the complex that Ping had been taken too.

"I'm tired," Jasper complained for the twentieth time, "When can we eat?"

"We're on an adventure," I reminded him, "Food comes later."

"Adventures suck," Jasper announced, "Say, what's in your bag?"

"I don't know," I whispered to him, "But let's be quiet now, there's storm troopers around here."

"Can I hold your bag?" Jasper asked again.

"Sure, sure," I told him, trying to get him to stop talking, "Just be quiet now."

I stopped walking near a large pillar monument and casually checked out the buildings.

Unfortunately, they were all nondescript - no signs or banners or anything that would alert me to what exactly this place was. I assumed it was some sort of Imperial base, but I couldn't be precisely sure.

"Pssssssshhhht!"

Next to me, Jasper had dug into my brown bag and pulled out a lightsaber which he, of course, couldn't resist turning on.

"Jasper!" I whispered harshly to him, "Turn that thing off!"

Apparently, Tilzabeth *had* known what was going on outside her shop, because she had given me the Inquisitor's lightsaber.

Jasper pouted but obeyed and turned it off...just as I sensed some heavy footprints behind me.

"I *knew* we should put more signs around here!" someone behind me said, "It's so easy to get lost around here!"

I turned around to see an overweight creature with two large eyes and warty skin prominently displaying a pair of spectacles.

"Um," I began.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," the man continued, resting a hand on my shoulder,

"But we should get in post haste!"

Gently, but firmly the creature guided all three of us up the front walkway to the buildings.

"And you sir," the guy said, patting Jasper on the head, "Should be more careful with one of those lightsabers!"

"Oh, I am!" Jasper informed the man.

The man laughed loudly as he opened the front door and led me through, "You'll make a fine contribution to the academy."

"Uh, academy?" I asked.

"Of course!" the man continued, "The Empire's finest training institution for Force sensitive children, and I get to be the principal!"

"But what am I here for?" I asked, hopelessly confused as the principal, obviously mistaken, continued to talk as he led me somewhere.

"Hahaha," the man laughed some more, "I see you're a jokester, you are. I'm just so glad Darth Vader gave us someone who is actually *competent* with lightsabers."

"But!" I tried to say.

"Right in here!" the principal continued, opening a side door and leading Jasper, Esther, and I into a large room, "You can teach the young children the ways of the Force and lightsabers!"

Inside the massive, yet completely empty training room were about a dozen young kids about Jasper's age. The only thing of interest besides the children in the room was a rack filled with wooden poles which I assumed were supposed to be training replacements for light sabers.

"Children!" the principal said aloud, "Welcome Miss Abnel! She will instruct you today in your lightsaber lessons!"

I had no idea how quickly I was mistaken for some substitute teacher, but, being involved in the center of an Imperial training academy, I thought that revealing the truth to the mistaken principal could be a very bad idea, so I just went along with it.

"Hey!" I waved to the kids.

"Thank you Miss Abnel," the kids said in unison.

"And," the principal continued, "We have two new children! Uh, what are your names?"

"I'm Jasper," Jasper said proudly, "And this is my sister Esther."

I smiled weakly, not at all excited about Jasper and Esther being involved in the obvious white-washing program that the Empire was running.

"Thank you so much again, Miss Abnel!" the principal told me, before shutting the door of the training room shut behind him.

Still shocked, confused, and more than a little nervous, I turned around to face the crowd of kids all sitting and looking up at me expectantly.

"C'mon Esther!" Jasper said to his sister, "Let's join the others! This'll be fun!"

As Jasper and Esther sat down with the rest of the kids, I smiled nervously, "So, um, hey, uh, I'm Miss Abnel, and uh, I get to teach you some lightsaber techniques. So, uh, what has the past teacher taught you about?"

\*Silence

"Has she taught you any basics, like Form One or..."

\*Still silence

The kids, most of whom weren't humans, continued to stare at me, their eyes boring into my soul. Unlike Esther and Jasper, who were bouncy and full of life, these kids look like they had done nothing but drink lemon juice for their entire young existence.

*Alright Lhoka*, I thought to myself, *What would a teacher of the darkside teach their pupils in? The darkside.*

I groaned again, wishing that I'd be able to melt into the floor and get back to Serenno in one piece. Obviously that didn't happen though, so I started thinking about all the Sith and maybe how they would teach. The only really Sith lord that I was well informed about was Maul and Sidious. As far as I knew, Maul taught by execution, and Sidious taught by zapping people. Since I was in an Empire academy, I figured that zapping wasn't out of the equation. Picking out the toughest looking kid, who happened to be a Trandoshan, I aimed my right hand at him and summoned all my dark side Force power - giving him a comparatively pathetic electrocution as to what any Sith lord or Leo could do. However, it quickly got a response from him.

"Ouch!" He snapped, toppling forward, "What was *that* for?!"

"Get up!" I demanded, trying to appear imposing.

"I don't wanna follow some substitute," the Trandoshan boy told me defiantly.

"Then prove you know what it takes," I snapped, swiping two wooden lightsabers off the rack nearby and tossing him one, "Duel me!"

With a little smoke still emanating from his clothes, the kid attacked ferociously, swinging his stick like a mad-man. Unfortunately for him, I was at least twice as tall, strong, and skilled. With a well aimed Sarlacc Sweep, I sent the kid hurtling across the room and into the concrete wall. Jasper and Esther looked at me with wide eyes while the rest of the kids quickly stood to attention.

"Anyone else wanna duel me?" I asked the rest of the kids.

A chorus of "No ma'am" greeted my ears.

"Then," I told them, "We'll start with learning Form One so at least you won't fall for the most basic attacks that took out your comrade there."

I pointed to the rack, "Get your own stick, and I'll walk you through the four basic positions."

At this point, the fallen Trandoshan kid recovered surprisingly quickly, picked back up his stick, and attacked me again - resulting in the same outcome. However, this time when he fell, I responded.

"Get back up, kid!" I growled at him, starting to get into the Sith mood, "And come and fight me!"

The rest of the kids backed off as their peer pulled himself to his feet and resumed a more defensive stance.



"How do you feel right now?" I asked him.

"Angry," he replied, "At you."

"Good," I smiled, "Use that!"

"How?" the boy wanted to know.

"Channel that anger into the Force and get some more power into your attacks," I replied.

Even more vengeful than a moment before, the Trandoshan kid tried again to stab me with his stick, but this time, I just used the Force to throw him backward - right back into the wall.

A green-skinned alien kid laughed at this attempt, "You didn't even get to the teacher this time, Rox!"

Bruised and blind with anger, Rox charged his peer, easily overpowering him and pinning him to the floor, "Take those words back or I'll make you eat my stick!"

"Or, you can eat *my* stick!" the alien kid challenged, punched Rox square in the stomach.

"Alright, alright!" I said, finally stepping in, "That's enough fighting for today. You won't be a lick of good with only pure anger or punching each other. Time to learn some actual skills."

Forty-five minutes later, I was instructing the kids in the fourth position of Form One when the principal and a lady with gray, short-cropped hair entered the training room.

"Impressive!" the principal announced as I walked the kids through all four positions, "They're learning fast!"

"So they are," I replied, "And Rox here learned a bit about the darkside as well."

Rox growled as the principal noticed the slightly burnt texture of his clothes.

"Better luck next time, Rox," the principal bellowed, slapping the kid on the back, "But now it's time for you all to move on to TIE fighter simulation."

"In line!" the lady snapped.

Although reluctant to obey me, the kids immediately obeyed this lady and lined up in a perfectly straight line. Jasper quickly caught on and Esther moved in behind her brother.

"Huh huh," I told Esther, "You're too young."

"She'll be fine," the principal waved it off, "Better start early anyhow!"

My smile faltered as I realized that things were quickly escalating out of control.

"Move out!" the lady bellowed, leading the line of kids out of the room.

Jasper and Esther waved to me on the way out, but the principal stopped me from following.

"Here's your ID card," he told me, "And a holoboard that has a map of the premises, meal times, bed time, your instruction schedule and so on."

"Am I allowed to leave the premises to get some of the market food?" I asked, hoping that making a quick escape away from the building wouldn't be immediately suspicious.

"Of course!" the principal laughed, "In fact, you'll probably want to take the class on a field trip or two as well. Also, since you'll be here for a few weeks, I'm letting you know that you'll be in charge of the final graduation where the kids will have to defeat a real Jedi padawan!"

## Chapter 5: Leo

Having plugged the coordinates into my spaceship's navigation computer, I eased forward the thrusters and blasted out of the atmosphere into space. After passing by Graballa's flagship, I pushed forward on the hyperdrive lever and blasted clear across the galaxy, coming to a stop outside a green planet with some larger rivers and purplish tints to the land.

My goal was to find what the Trandoshans were up to on the planet, so I flew partially through the thick, humid atmosphere to get a closer look on the surface of the planet. Except for a lot of vegetation, there didn't appear to be anything unusual. After wrapping around a large mountain, I flipped on my ship's radar, hoping that it would show any significant landmarks. Unfortunately, the only thing it showed were two missiles closing in behind me.

Jerking to attention, I throttled the engines and barrel-rolled through the air, climbing altitude rapidly. Then, I dove around to confuse the missiles.

*Something's here*, I smiled to myself. Technically they had just alerted me to their presence. To my right, the two missiles collided with each other and exploded into a brilliant cloud of color as I hurried to trace the rapidly disappearing tail of smoke. Gaining some more altitude, I turned on the auxiliary maneuvering engine to give my main thrust more speed. The missiles' tails would be useless if I couldn't track where they had been launched from. As I saw the wisps of smoke bend downwards, my radar started bleeping again. A quick glance downwards confirmed that more missiles were coming at me...from behind.

As the missiles gained on me again, I became confused. The place where the previous missiles had been launched was definitely in front of me, but now there were some missiles *behind* me.

*Apparently there's more than one base here*, I thought.

Just as the frontmost missiles were about to reach my ship, I double backed on myself and dove below - causing the missiles to make a hasty turn around and collide with the missiles behind. I laughed at my ship's insanely sharp maneuvering - I was more than just a little glad that I had paid such a relatively high price for this ride.

"FZZZZHHHH!"

My celebration was cut short as an intense laser suddenly shot up from the environment below and cut into the heavily armored hull of my spaceship.

*How many weapons do these crazy Trandoshans have?!* I grumbled to myself. Because of the speed of my spaceship and the intensity of the laser, my ship was almost instantly cut in half starting in the middle. Ringing loudly, all the alarms on my spaceship started going off as the engines exploded and the spaceship started to fall apart.

Breathing heavily, I punched a thin, glass window on the control board and pounded the emergency landing button; then raced for the nearby supplies locker and yanked out a massive backpack - just as the entire back of the spaceship dropped off.

One of the safety features of the ship was the ability for the ship to self-destruct piece by piece to maximize the survivability likelihood of the passengers. As the engines and propellant system had been annihilated, the spaceship had automatically disconnected from the entire propulsion system to avoid the entire spaceship blowing up - as happened to that propulsion part of the spaceship a second later. Without any means of controlling the flight anymore, the front cabin of the spaceship just tumbled out of the sky as I bailed. Behind me, bits of my spaceship rained down as I quite literally skydived. Having never skydived or even jumped from terribly high objects before, I panicked. However, the land approaching me at an incredibly fast speed was a wake-up call and instinctively my Force abilities kicked into gear. Gritting my teeth, I stretched out my arms and focused them on the dense shrubbery below - desperately pushing back against them.

"Floop."

My landing was instantly overshadowed by the enormous explosion of my spaceship's cabin slamming into the earth, the consequent fireball, and the raining of shrapnel. Tumbling over the rough ground, I attempted to roll myself into a ball to protect myself from the destruction. As the last chunk of my beloved spaceship bounced off my back, I stood up to witness the rubble of the landscape around me. The fire had burned through an acre of land but quickly been doused out by the nearby river and marsh. Another several acres of land were covered in ash and other bits of my spacecraft.

"Amber's gonna kill me," I groaned, "I want to kill me."

After dusting myself off, I picked up my survival backpack nearby and started heading in the general direction of where the laser had appeared. I figured that if I could find the source, I would be one step closer to catching the Trandoshans, and, now that I thought about it, getting back *off* the planet.

To clear the river, I had to use a Force jump, but after that, it was simply a matter of not stepping on any poisonous plants. I didn't normally go on expeditions on random planets...well...I never did, so I had no way of knowing when I could run into something that was potentially lethal, but on the positive side, at least I could breathe here.

After a half hour of walking, I heard a faint buzzing sound, and after another half hour, I created a small ridge to see a quanza hut like structure dotting a clearing. Shrugging off my heavy backpack into some underbrush, I pulled out my lightsaber and flashed across the clearing towards the hut - hoping the laser was not able to sweep across the land. As I approached the building, I singled out the door and used the Force to blast it wide open; then dove inside to find

myself staring at a single Trandoshan guard. He reached for his pistol, but I started choking him and slammed him into the wall.

"What's going on here?!" I demanded of him.

"I...don't...know," the guard choked, struggling against my Force grip.

"Sure you don't," I told the guard, "But perhaps I can bring something to your mind?"

The guard, turning blue in the face, wheezed, "I...got...instructions to laser down your ship...that's it!"

Dropping him to the ground, I pulled out my lightsaber and aimed it at him, "That was my favorite spaceship, so either you start talking now - or you won't be talking ever again."

With a sudden leap, the Trandoshan rolled away from my lightsaber and attacked me. Although a bit caught off guard, I whipped around and cut him down as we crashed to the floor.

"Stupid Trandoshans," I mumbled, sitting down at the control board and trying to understand everything there.

"Pulzer," the radio spoke a moment later, "We have a shipment arriving shortly."

"Roger that," I spoke back, "Now tell me, where is it landing?"

There was a slight pause on the other end, "Who is this?"

"That'd be me," I growled, "And you'll going to pay dearly for destroying my spacecraft."

"What'd you do to Pulzer?!" the other Trandoshan spoke back.

"He won't be bothering me again," I snapped back, "So tell me, what's your deal?"

On the other end, the line suddenly went dead.

I sighed.

"Welp, I guess I'll need to figure out how to laser down that new cargo ship," I smirked.

In front of me were several screens, I noticed one of them was labeled Laser gun, and had red crosshairs in the center of it. When I rotated the joystick in front of me, the crosshairs moved across the sky. While looking for the button to actually turn the laser on, I was alerted by the station's radar which showed...more incoming missiles.

"Oh wonderful," I groaned, racing immediately for the door, "They're trying to blow me up now."

By the time the missiles actually decimated the laser station, I was standing far away from the scene, mentally berating myself.

I knew that I needed to get to the main base where the space freighters were allegedly unloading their cargo, but I had no clue on where that could be.

"Well...", I said to myself, "Maybe if I can climb that big mountain, then I can get a better bearing of where everything is."

It wasn't the best option, but, as Yoda was famous for saying, it was the only option. Groaning for the umpteenth time, I reached down for my backpack; just when I sensed someone nearby. My Force abilities were tuned enough that I was immediately able to detect others nearby, but Force users were easier to detect, so I knew that whoever was nearby was probably another

Trandoshan guard. Excited at an excuse to not have to wear the heavy backpack, I whipped out my lightsabers and pointed them at the dense shrubbery nearby.

"Who's there?!"

A startled gasp from the bushes betrayed the spy's location, allowing me to drag him out, but instead of a Trandoshan, I found a Twi'lek.

"What?"

The Twi'lek, still lying on his back on the ground, raised his hands over his head, "I didn't do anything!"

"I didn't think you did," I told the guy, "Who are you?"

"I'm Ghor-ghel," he replied quickly, obviously much more frightened of me than I was of him.

"Leo," I replied, "What are you doing here?"

"WHAT AM I DOING HERE?!" Ghor-ghel growled, "What do you *think* I'm doing here?"

"Um, laying on your back?" I suggested, helping him to his feet.

"I've been stuck here for so long that I've lost track of time," Ghor-ghel informed me, "And all this time I've been hunted like a dog by those Trandoshans."

"Well you're not alone," I told the Twi'lek, "I was slash am being hunted too."

"What'd you do?"

"I was trying to reveal their theft racket," I admitted, "Which was going good until a few hours ago."

"Are you a Jedi?" Ghor-ghel wanted to know next.

"For heaven's sake!" I replied, exasperated, "Why does everyone think I'm Sith or a Jedi?!"

"You've got Force abilities," Ghor-ghel defended himself.

"I'm *not* affiliated with either side," I told Ghor-ghel, "But so the Trandoshans brought you here just to hunt you?"

Ghor-ghel snorted, "Yeah, like a really really long time ago. I was just a kid then. After another few years, all my fellow hunted friends and the Trandoshans *all* disappeared. Somehow I was left behind in whatever happened. Then, some time ago, all the Trandoshans were back and trying to hunt me.

"I heard about this," I said slowly, "It was big news among the Jedi for a bit when one of their padawans escaped alive."

Ghor-ghel shook his head and spoke bitterly, "They left me here."

"Well," I replied, "You're in luck, because I need your help to get off this planet. Waddaya say we team up?"

Ghor-ghel looked me up and down and nodded his head, "Two are better than one I guess."

"Say," I added, "You want something to eat? I also probably got some emergency clothes or something in my bag."

Ghor-ghel gasped as he finally noticed my bulging backpack, "You got real food?"

“Um, yeah...,” I replied.

Before I could stop him, Ghor-ghel had ripped open my bag and was grabbing every single energy bar and emergency ration he could out of it.

“Slow down bro!” I exclaimed, “You’re gonna hurt yourself by eating too much too fast!”

Ghor-ghel pretended he wasn’t listening and kept on cramming bars into his mouth.

I watched in stunned silence as Ghor-ghel washed the food down by consuming an entire canteen of water and flopping down on his back.

“Ungh,” he mumbled dreamily.

“Are you...okay?” I asked him as I attempted to clean up his mess.

“Never been better,” Ghor-ghel insisted, “You’re an angel.”

“So, uh, do you know where those space freighters dock?” I asked Ghor-ghel.

“Yeah, but it’s a several day walk,” Ghor-ghel informed me, sitting up.

“Like, what’s ‘several’ days?” I clarified.

“Um, like about twelve nights?” Ghor-ghel replied, “Not completely sure since I haven’t ever taken the direct route.”

“Uggggghhhh,” I mumbled, “Let’s get going then. You can lead the way?”

“After my first decent meal in forever, I’m feeling up to walking around the planet twice!”

Ghor-ghel declared, “What else have you got in here?”

“Tell you what,” I smirked, “If you carry it, you can get first dibs on all the food items as long as you save some for me.”

“Deal!” Ghor-ghel agreed eagerly, “Right this way sir!”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

After some indeterminable amount of time, Ghor-ghel and I finally trekked across half the planet to reach what Ghor-ghel claimed to be the main Trandoshan base where all the space freighters landed. After running out of energy rations, Ghor-ghel had helped me to forage for natural-growing food, but it had been anything but satisfying.

“So...what’s the plan boss?” Ghor-ghel wanted to know.

“It’s huge!” I exclaimed, pointing to the massive structure down in the valley beneath us, “They built that entire thing?!”

“Yep,” Ghor-ghel replied, “Really fast too.”

“And it’s just so they can hunt you?”

“Nah” Ghor-ghel said, “They only hunted me because I was poking around and stealing their food. Plus they haven’t brought anyone new.

“So then, what’s all these complicated bases and defense structures for?”

“Maybe they’re trying to make this planet their home?” Twi'lek suggested.

“Hmmm,” I mumbled, “I’m not sure, but at least I know where all that ore is going. They need it for their buildings.”

"Those buildings are incredibly strong!" Ghor-ghel said, "Normal blaster fire doesn't even scratch the material!"

"Unfortunately for them," I smirked, "Lightsabers are stronger."

"So uh, what's the plan again?"

"Take this," I told Ghor-ghel, handing him both of my laser pistols, "And shoot any Trandosian on sight."

Ghor-ghel smiled smugly, "I've been waiting a *long* time for this!"

"And also, stay behind me, I don't want you getting shot," I reminded him.

Ghor-ghel saluted me; then we crept towards the soon-to-be battlefield.

The base itself was similar in construction style as the kwanzaa hut, but, instead of being well...a kwanzaa hut, it was a tall, blockish like structure with at least five stories. Just peeking out from the sides of the base was a massive concrete slab where I presumed all the traffic would land and besides that was a massive refining tower where I obviously presumed the special ore was turned into the building materials that the Trandoshans needed.

"Do you know how those refining towers work?" I asked Ghor-ghel.

"Pssst, of course," Ghor-ghel whispered, "I used to work at a steel plant."

"Great, then is there any way to blow the thing up?" I asked as we slunk along the ground.

"Hmmm," Ghor-ghel thought aloud, "Maybe if the steam works got plugged."

"Alright, if you explode the plant, then that'll draw most everyone out," I told Ghor-ghel, "And then it'll be easier to defeat them all without having to search the entire premises."

"Oh, but that won't work!" Ghor-ghel informed me.

"Why not?! Sounds like a great plan to me!" I stated, "Though, granted, I may be a bit biased to plans coming from the Leo idea farm."

"If we kill off the Trandoshians here," Ghor-ghel whispered, "Then, maybe the space freighters won't land because they'll be suspicious, and hence we'll get stuck here!"

"That's a good-," I began, but was cut off as a shout of alarm drew my attention.

To our left, a lone Trandoshian guard was walking from the base to the ore plant, and, seeing two individuals suspiciously slinking across the ground, shouted to his comrades nearby for help.

"RUN!" Ghor-ghel panicked, heading back the way we came.

"No!" I shouted to him, as I whipped out my lightsabers and started deflecting the laser fire,

"Let's continue with my plan, maybe we can use a few of these guys as hostages.

Not having the luxury to look back to see what Ghor-ghel decided, I sprinted forward on the rapidly growing number of Trandoshians and started taking them out.

A few of them I managed to kill simply by deflecting their laser pulses back at them, but the rest I had to manually slice which I really didn't prefer. After polishing off the initial wave of baddies, I quickly scoped out the nearby landing zone.

"Leo!" Ghor-ghel shouted from my left as he ran out of the ore refinery plant, "Scram! The place is about to blow!"

Despite having the explosion of a massive refinery looming over me, I smiled. Ghor-ghel came through, just like I knew he would.

Barely had I dove behind a pile of packing crates before the entire factory blew sky high. If it hadn't been that I was in danger, I may have enjoyed the unusual fireworks.

"In liquid form," Ghor-ghel shouted to me as he popped out from the pile of pipes he was hiding behind, "Reinforced Beskar is extremely volatile."

"Good to know," I noted.

"And look at that," Ghor-ghel pointed, "We've got an incoming spaceship."

"This looks...a bit suspicious," I stated, indicating the blackened ground and raining ashes.

"They're coming in hot anyway!" Ghor-ghel noticed.

"Wait a minute!" I gasped, "That's no normal spaceship."

"You're right! They're clones! We're saved!" Ghor-ghel cried out cheerfully, running towards the landing spacecraft and waving his hands excitedly.

"That's *bad* news!" I yelled after him, "They could just as well kill us!"

"But, they're part of the republic," Ghor-ghel informed me, puzzled.

"There's *no* republic anymore," I told Ghor-ghel, "Just the empire and they care squat about helping random strangers out."

Poor Ghor-ghel had been left alone for so long that he had no idea about any current events. I cringed as the doors of the Imperial transport ship opened and a squad of stormtroopers emerged.

"Hey!" the lead stormtrooper shouted to Ghor-ghel and I, "What's all *that* about!"

I sighed inwardly and approached the squad slowly, "It exploded."

"I know that, but why did it explode?"

"One of the steam pipes got cut and the pressure got too high in the others!" Ghor-ghel added helpfully.

"Whatever, that's not my business anyway, so, where's your load for us?" the stormtrooper continued.

"We have it," a gruff voice sneered from beside the main base, "But we'll have to deal with these two gentlemen first!"

I turned around to see five Trandoshians, their guns leveled at me, approach. Not wasting any time, I drew my lightsaber and swirled it through the air.

"Don't get any closer!" I warned them.

"Hey!" one of the stormtroopers announced, "That's Leo!"

"What's it to you?" I demanded as Ghor-ghel slunk backwards, away from the confrontation.

"Weren't we supposed to pass him some messages?" the stormtrooper continued.



The lead stormtrooper banged his hand to his helmet, "That's right!"

"Can we talk about your message later?" I suggested, "We've got some angry Trandoshians to deal with first!"

"You're not getting away this time!" the biggest Trandoshian angrily informed me.

"Halt!" the stormtrooper squad leader commanded them, "I order you to stand down."

"We don't take no orders from no one!" another of the Trandoshians sneered.

"WHOOOMP!"

With a strong Force throw, all the Trandoshians went careening away - slamming into the side wall of the building and promptly going unconscious.'

"Now, let's hear what you have to say," I told the storm troopers.

The squad leader pulled a small holoprojector out of his pocket and held it in his hand for me to see. After messing around with its controls for a bit, a miniature version of the emperor himself appeared.

"Well! If it isn't Leo!" the emperor said excitedly.

"Oh wonderful," I said sarcastically, "What do *you* want?"

"I need *you* to join the empire!" Darth Sidious said uncharacteristically cheerfully.

"Oh sure," I laughed, "And look how far that got me last time!"

"But this time is different," the emperor insisted.

"Here we go again," I sighed, "What's to stop me from slicing apart your little mini self here right now to save myself some time?!"

"Because I can give you something that no one else can!"

"What?"

"You want to be respected and accepted by the Jedi Order that refused you," the emperor told me.

"That spaceship has long since sailed," I told him.

"Well, now, maybe," Darth Sidious admitted, "But I can get you back to the past!"

"How?" I chuckled, "You don't have a time travel machine!"

"Ah, but I do!" Darth Sidious said, "It just requires a lot of Force power!"

"Well, then what's to stop me from stealing it and using it myself!" I said.

"Well, first of all, you have no idea where it is, and second it needs the Force power of you and I combined!" the emperor informed me.

"What am I thinking?!" I groaned, "It's not right to go back into the past regardless."

"But you could undo the damaging effects of Anaking Skywalker, get your friend George back, get your girlfriend Ember back, even get accepted into the Jedi Order!" the emperor continued.

"Maybe a few of those things would happen," I said, "But how could I get accepted since when I go back to the past I'll go back to having no Force power!"

"Ah, but this machine is special," the emperor chuckled, "You *will* still have your power!"



## Chapter 6: Amber

I wasn't able to fall asleep. Maybe it was because of the smoggy air, or perhaps it was because of the innocent workers that were being pushed too hard. Leo always said that I was too callous, but even I could see the pain of the people. Although my real assignment was to track down who was stealing the mine's ore, I could see that the workers Graballa was hiring were being abused under these Trandoshan guards, and I was certainly not a fan of it!

As if on cue, a series of lights flashed by my dingy, guest shack's door as a pair of patrolling guards walked by looking for those ignoring the curfew. I grimaced, knowing that although I did have some evidence that the Trandoshans were up to no good, I probably did not have enough to fully incriminate them unless Leo came back from his excursion with more evidence. As of right now, it was up to me to get that evidence.

That's when I had a genius idea! If there were too many guards at the Trandoshan tower during the day, assuredly, there would be less during the night! If I could sneak past those that *were* on control, I might just be able to infiltrate some records of their ore stealing, assuming that my hypothesis was correct that is.

After a quick glance out the flimsy, glass window, I crept out of my room and along the large boulders that lined the main, dirt roads. I could see ahead of me, the flashlights of the patrolling guards, so I made sure to stick to the shadows. It was a long walk back to the main mine campus, another indication of the added problems for the workers, but after ten minutes of staying out of sight, I reached the Trandoshan tower and approached it from the back, looking for any easy entry points. The back door had two video cameras pointing at it from the roof, but several meters to its left was a large vent for the building's air system. I took my chance and slinked over to it, just to find that the thin slits of metal that separated the air ducts from the outside had already been cut, and, judging by the warmth of the cut bars, they had just been cut recently.

My eyes narrowed as I tried to imagine what someone would have done that for. Was someone else trying to break into the Trandoshan tower? If so, who would that be? If not, what was the reason for the cut bars. Unfortunately, I didn't have much time to dwell on this, because if I wanted to find evidence, I'd need to start searching now. So, pulling on my helmet, I crept into the air ducts and crawled around until I found a vent until a darkened room. Using my lightsaber to cut the vent out of the duct, I then jumped down below and found myself in a kitchen/break room. I opened the door slowly and found myself in a random hall. After listening for a few seconds, I continued down the hall until I found another locked doorway with a keypad next to it. I turned on the red light on my wrist guard and noticed that there were only smudges on the 1,2,3, and 4 numbers on the keypad. Rolling my eyes, I pushed 1,2,3, then 4 on the keypad,

and entered in the next room. This room looked like an office with a large desk and a massive chair...

It was Yeerer's! Apparently, I had entered in the very room that I had been in only a few hours before, but hadn't recognized it! I veered to the right around the main desk and turned on a powerful flashlight to study what was on the desk and hopefully come across some papers. The desk itself was very clean, but there were many drawers on either side of the desk which I opened one at a time. Some of them were employee listings while others were log sheets for random expenses, but on the bottom right drawer I found a whole folder of files dictating income. On the third page, there was listed income from ShipWorks of several hundred thousand credits. ShipWorks was a very large spaceship manufacturing company which a bunch of random Trandoshans would normally have no business with, especially in supplying something to ShipWorks, but, if let's say, the Trandoshans were selling iron to them, then that would make a lot more sense. I continued to search through other papers and found more and more income gained from large manufacturing companies. All of this was very suspicious but not exactly incriminating until I found another paper like the rest, except this time there was some writing scrawled across the top of it which read "need to divert more shipments of the ore to increase the batch profits!"

"Aha!" I announced to myself, quickly bundling the papers back up in the folder, and running to the door. While doing so, my flashlight shown on something large on the floor, and when I turned briefly to look at it, a dead corpse stared back up at me causing me to jump at least a foot. Even worse, this wasn't just any dead person, this was the exact same Togruta that Yeerer had gotten hauled off earlier that day. I bent down to see if there was a pulse, and found that there was, sadly, no pulse as well as her body being completely cold. There were no obvious wounds on the dead body, but she was very bruised.

Angered at the needless death, I got back up and threw open the door, about ready to take justice into my own hands. However, I was interrupted by a shadowy figure who was standing right outside of the door. Instinctively, I thrust the figure against the hallway wall and started choking him, while the figure flailed about.

"You will pay for killing her!" I screamed out loud at the figure, "You cold-blooded killer!"

That's about when I shown my flashlight on the Trandoshan and realized that it wasn't a Trandoshan. In fact, it was another female Togruta, but this one was a good deal older than the first!

I quickly dropped her to the ground.

"Who are you?" I asked.

Breathing heavily, she slowly got back to her feet, "Ashoka, Ashoka Tano."

I gasped, "You...you're *the* Ashoka!"

"Yes, and you are?" she replied.

"I'm Amber from Falcon Enterprises," I whispered, "What are you doing here?!"

"I'm looking for something," she replied, "Although it appears you are doing that as well."

"Looking for something, or...someone?" I pressed, realizing dawning upon me.

Ashoka started to respond, but I swung the door that I had just exited wide open and shown my flashlight on the dead body on the floor.

"Looking for her?" I asked.

Ashoka gasped, "You did this!"

"NOOO," I replied quickly, "They did this! The Trandoshans did!"

Ashoka whipped a white lightsaber off her belt and pointed at me, "Prove it!"

Angrily, I snapped back, "I wouldn't kill a Togruta! I don't *need* to prove it!"

"I've heard of Falcon Enterprises, but how do I know you aren't working with the Trandoshans?"

Ashoka demanded.

"I can prove it, but you won't like how I prove it," I argued.

"Get talking then," Ashoka insisted.

With that, I let out a long, blood-curdling scream which instantly caused a bunch of yells and trampling feet farther down the hallway.

Ashoka narrowed her eyes, "So you are working with them!"

"Nope," I replied, "Once they attack me, you'll know the truth!"

And attack they did, as soon as the Trandoshans saw me and recognized me, they immediately open fired, but, unfortunately for them, they were no match for Ashoka or me.

I ducked under Ashoka's lightsaber and pulled out my own, immediately slashing apart the Trandoshans that were coming from the left. Ashoka then proceeded to knock out the Trandoshans on the right.

"Believe me now?" I yelled to Ashoka as we started running down the corridor as a loud alarm started sounding.

"Only slightly," she said, "What are you here for then?"

"I'm looking into some ore stealing that the Trandoshans are doing," I replied, "Graballa hired us to find the culprits!"

Ashoka shook her head, "Trandoshans can never be trusted. I would know; I've run into my fair share of them."

In no time at all, we rounded a corner and found ourselves in the main lobby where more Trandoshans were just arriving. I slashed apart the nearest window, and we made our escape through the hole, running for our lives amid the blaster fire.

"Need a ride off the planet?" I offered as we sprinted down the open road towards my spaceship.

"Nah, I've got my own," she replied, "But be careful with your dark force powers. You're messing with some dangerous stuff!"

I laughed, "I'm just fine, thank you very much!"

Ashoka looked back at me once more before veering into the darkness to my right. Her gaze seemed to pierce into my soul, but I ran on, jumped into my spaceship, and hurriedly turned it on as Trandoshan blaster fire pelted into the craft. Using evasive maneuvers, I eventually got my craft into the air; then aimed straight up into the atmosphere where Graballa's large, orbiting space center was.

When I approached Graballa's spaceship, I was asked for credentials, but, having just been attacked by Trandoshans, I ignored the request, and landed anyway. I jumped out and headed out of the landing bay and towards Graballa's main "throne room." Barely had I started running towards there, than I was accosted by a pair of alien men demanding I identify myself.

"I'm Amber," I yelled at them, "I need to talk to Graballa *immediately*!"

"But he's-," one of them began as I reached the room and through open the door. Inside, Graballa was munching on a pretzel and communicating with an assistant carrying a holoboard.

"Graballa!" I yelled at him, "I found who has been stealing your ore!"

"Amber!" he cried out in surprise, "What are you doing here at this hour!"

"Getting chased by angry, ore-stealing, Togruta-killing, Trandoshans!" I replied, slapping down the folder of financial papers into his chubby hands, "This is all the evidence you need!"

Graballa looked into it gingerly; then back up at me.

"Summarize," he said.

"Your so-called guards are redirecting your transport ships by drugging the pilots to their own planet and reselling the ore for profit!" I told him, "When I tried to get this evidence they chased me here!"

"I knew they were suspicious!" Graballa announced quickly, "When they all asked for a raise in pay!"

I shook my head, "Well, what are you going to do now?"

"Fire them," Graballa announced grandly, "You've out done yourself again, Falcon Enterprises!"

"Okay then," I replied, "Now, are you going to send the rest of our pay shortly?"

"I can," Graballa said, "Or...I can offer you a share in my new resort!"

"I'll take the pay," I replied quickly, "I'm not one for resorts."

"But," Graballa continued, "this resort has-."

"I'm still good, really," I replied.

Graballa would have continued into his spiel, but he was cut off by one of the alien men behind me who whispered something into his ear.

"Ohhh, yes," Graballa said aloud, pulling a holo-projector off a shelf nearby, "I was sent this and told to give it to you. No clue what it does though."

I took it and inspected it closely, "Hmmm, a simple, cheap projector."

"Must be a correspondence or something," Graballa shrugged, "Now, back to what I was saying!"

"We'll talk later," I cut him off, walking out of the room and back to my spaceship.

I was glad to have wrapped up the job so quickly, and I hoped that the Trandoshans wouldn't be coming after me, although it appeared that they hadn't followed me into Graballa's spaceship.

After sitting down in the cockpit of my spacecraft, I turned on the project and found myself staring at Emperor Palpatine himself!

"Well, you certainly have shown a great deal of competence here," Palpatine began, "How would you like to join the Empire?!"

"Ha!" I laughed to myself, "Like the Empire could possibly offer me something of interest!"

"I know what you truly want," the Emperor declared, "And we can give it."

I stared at the projection in shock, "What, this is live?"

"Of course it is," the emperor chuckled disturbingly.

"Okayyyy?" I replied dryly, "What could I possibly want that only *you* can give?"

"You want to be loved and included," Darth Sidious said.

"Pffft," I laughed, "Since when did *you* become a psychologist?!"

"Think about it," Sidious continued, "When you were young, most people scorned you because you constantly fought with your twin."

At this, I grew concerned. How did he know this about me?

"And then, when you were rejected from the Jedi Order, Jek-10 accepted you," Darth Sidious informed me.

"Sure," I said slowly, "But that doesn't mean that-."

"And then when recently your twin and Jek died, Leo filled that empty spot," Darth Sidious interrupted.

"Okay," I stated, "Say you're right, what does this have to do with joining your empire?"

"Well, we would love to have you fight with us. You would always be included and respected here," Darth Sidious informed me.

"Yeah, but you just said that Leo is already fulfilling that supposed desire in me," I scoffed.

"But what if Leo rejects you for someone else?"

"He wouldn't," I snapped.

"He liked Ember first," Darth Sidious said, "What's to stop him from liking someone else than you more?"

"Well, nothing I guess," I realized, "But still, he's pretty picky. He wouldn't just like *anyone*."

"But Lhoka isn't just anyone," the emperor continued.

"What's this got to do with Lhoka?" I asked, confused.

"Haven't you seen the way that Leo looks at Lhoka? He likes her," Darth Sidious smirked.

"Does not," I argued.

"Then how come he goes with her on trips without you?"

"Well he goes on trips with me without Lhoka!" I exclaimed.

"Sure," the emperor admitted, "But that's just a cover to throw any suspicion off."

"No," I stated, "Leo would never be that deceptive."

"Well then where is Leo now?" the emperor asked me.

"He's..." I trailed off, realizing that Darth Sidious was trying to get me to reveal Leo's location,

"Nice try, I'm not falling for *that* one!"

"Ah," the emperor laughed, "But then why do my sources tell me he's back at Selenno?"

"Funny," I said, "I don't know why he'd be on Selenno, and even if he was, which I highly doubt, it doesn't prove anything."

"Well, he just lied to you," the emperor said.

"Big deal," I stated, "I'm sure he has a reason."

"Then why did we receive *this* transmission," Darth Sidious informed me, playing a recording. Immediately, Leo's voice sounded over the holographic image - playing of Darth's equipment.

"Lhoka! Are you there?"

There was some static, then I heard Lhoka, "Yeah, what's up?"

"Where are you?" Leo asked.

"I'm coming back to base right now," she said.

"Well hurry, because Amber's gone, and we can meet up now!" Leo finished.

The emperor then paused the recording, "Need I play more?"

"I...I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation," I stammered.

"Ah, but what if there is not?" the emperor said in a low voice, "Are you going to let Lhoka take your place?"

"Well, uh, I... um," I stuttered, a bit angry and confused.

"Join us," Darth Sidious said again, "And you can reenact your revenge!"



## Chapter 7: Lhoka

Weaving my way through the busy crowds of the Tatooine Tent Trade (or Triple T as locals called it) was normally something I hated, but today, I loved it. It had been at least two weeks since I had last been surrounded by throngs of humanity and did not have to necessarily maintain my cover among a bunch of slightly maniacal instructors training poor Force sensitive kids in the way of the darkside!

Instructors like me were *supposed* to remain on the campus at all times, but I had finally convinced the principal to let me get some decent food for once. I had originally planned to make a run for it the very first night that I was mistaken for the lightsaber expert that I had killed. Unfortunately, I had found out that the dormitories for the kids were well guarded, and they were not allowed to leave; which left me hoping that Leo and Amber were still busy on their mission and not worried sick about where the kids and I were.

It *had* actually started to become fun to teach the young padawans about lightsaber techniques and the Force, and a few children like Jasper had quickly picked up on Forms one and two. On the other side, there were kids like Esther who were either too young or too confused to really understand the basics of lightsaber fighting.

But those weren't any of my concerns today - no. Today, it was announced to me that the children showing the most aptitude were going to have a test to earn their lightsabers. By "test," the principal had explained to me that they were going to face off against Ping - or so I assumed, but I had never been able to confirm exactly *who* their prisoner was. Hence, that was why I was heading straight for Jong's food stand.

"Jong!" I called out to him as I exited the crowd and plastered myself against the temporary counter so I wouldn't get run over, "Do you ever work at your own club anymore?"

"Oh I do, but my wife handles the details during the summer," Jong told me as he handed a large platter of food to an impatient customer, "It's slow there during the summer, and it's very busy here - so...it works out!"

"I'll take whatever is the best thing on your menu," I told Jong, "I need a culinary masterpiece."

"Masterpiece?!" Jong exclaimed, "I mean, all my food is, but...why do you ask?"

"I've had nothing but stale bread and stew for weeks," I complained.

"Well," Jong winked at me, "I know just what you need! Fried cream berries with peppermint syrup!"

"That sounds like dessert!" I laughed, "But that technically is what I need!"

"*Technically*," Jong chuckled, "I'd say *practically*, but enough with the words, I'll get started on it right away!"

Furtively glancing around me, I quickly leaned closer to Jong and whispered, "I'm going to follow you into your food cart."

Jong nodded his head knowingly and moved aside a section of portable fencing for me  
“Lemme guess,” Jong announced as he shut the door behind us, “You want to know about Ping?”

“*Only* because I saw him being escorted by two elite stormtroopers a few weeks ago, and I have a suspicion of where he currently is,” I added, “Did he get arrested or something?”

Jong sighed, “Yeah, he did.

“How?” I said, “Especially after three years of going undetected?”

“My suspicion is that his arrest is related to a rebel raid he participated in,” Jong informed me.

“A what?”

Jong sighed, “The kid can’t keep quiet. As soon as the Rebels started fighting back, he was just itching to get in on the action. A few weeks ago he helped a squad of them infiltrate one of the Empire’s bases.”

“Ohhh,” I said, “And the Empire wasn’t all that happy about it?”

“Ping alone killed at least two dozen storm troopers,” Jong continued, “So yeah, they weren’t.”

“But how did they find him?”

“There’s only a few young, athletic Besalisks in the galaxy,” Jong groaned, “So it wasn’t all that hard.”

“I’m sorry,” I comforted Jong.

“I know you are,” Jong replied, “But his mother and I are confident he’ll be back eventually.”

“Well, that’s why I wanted to talk with you,” I told Jong, “I think I know where he is?”

“Where?”

“He’s at this stupid Empire slash Inquisitor academy,” I replied, “And they’re going to use him for the new padawans to train on.”

“Pfft,” Jong laughed all of a sudden, “They have *no* idea what’s coming to them.”

“Granted,” I replied, “But still, I’ll work on a plan to get him out.”

Jong nodded his head, “And for that I’m very grateful, but please, do not put yourself or your friends in any undue danger to do so.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that!” I said confidently, “I won’t be putting Leo or Amber in *any* danger.”

Jong glared at me, “And you *shouldn’t* do your plan alone.”

“C’mon, what could possibly go wrong?!” I laughed.

Jong replied by dumping a box of berries onto his dough, “Your food will be ready shortly!”

“Thanks Jong,” I told him, opening the door back up, “Good luck.”

“You’ll need it more than I,” Jong replied before I closed the door behind me.

After Jong finished my dessert, I hurried back through the crowd as I jammed the deliciousness into my mouth. It had been way too long since I had had something this good since neither Leo, Amber, nor I were good cooks.

I looked at my watch and saw that there was only twenty minutes until I had to be back to the training room, so I picked up my pace - reaching the academy in record time. After hurriedly flashing my ID card to the guards, I hurried through the main building; then hooked a left and entered a smaller building. I had overheard some of my fellow teachers talking about which cell had the prisoner in it, so I scanned the signs for room 24. Room 24 was actually fairly close by, and I reached for the door, only for it to open by itself. Two elite stormtroopers promptly walked outside, escorted by Ping handcuffed behind his back.

"Hey, uh, guys," I told the stormtroopers, "I was told to escort the Jedi personally."

Much to my surprise, the stormtroopers quickly nodded and walked off, "Take it! I don't wanna be around if he makes a run for it!"

Ping looked at me with surprise; then started to say something.

"Wonderful idea!" the principal announced loudly, "I'll come along too since I'm heading to the arena myself!"

"Nice," I replied, clearly not excited about him.

"You think your pupils will be able to handle this big boy?" the principal continued, completely oblivious to the "jail break" I was about to cause.

"Um, maybe?" I answered, "They're still all too young in my opinion."

"Never too early to learn the trade," the principal informed me as he opened the door for Ping and I, "And all the better if they lose a few limbs in the process. It'll fuel their anger more."

"Of course," I replied.

"Anyway," the principal announced, "I've got all of their special lightsabers right in here!"

"Won't they be a bit long for them?"

"Nah, I had them specially adjusted," the principal replied as he led us into the main building and down the main corridor, "So hopefully they won't be too unwieldy."

"Woah!" Ping finally said, "Are those *Inquisitors*?"

"Of course," the principal said proudly as I withered, "We always have two on hand to watch the going-ons, and in case you try to escape."

The principal punctuated this with an intense glare at Ping.

"Wouldn't dream of it?" Ping offered.

As the three of us entered the room, all conversations stopped. I led Ping over to a cornered off part of the room, where I shoved him to his knees as I'd seen clones do to their prisoners.

"Welcome younglings to our tournament where you can own your very own lightsaber!" The principal addressed the crowd of kids. Reaching into his metal box, the principal then proceeded to pull out one of the special hilts that all the Inquisitors used - the one that was dual-bladed and could spin around.

"Ooooh!" Jasper blurted out, "That's cool!"

"Indeed!" the principal announced, "Even I don't have one!"

One of the Inquisitors sneered, "The lightsaber's nothing. Anyone can use one - but it takes a Force user to wield it properly!"

"Aaaaaand that's what we're here for! The principal said excitedly, "In just a second here, I'm going to hand each of you a lightsaber, and all of you together will then defeat this Jedi right here!"

"I'm still technically a Padawan," Ping yelled over to us.

"Shut up," one of the Inquisitors snapped.

"Who wants to earn their lightsaber?!" the principal continued.

A few of the students excitedly ran over to grab one, but three, one of which was Esther, hurried over to me; they didn't want to fight yet.

"Will brother be ok?" Esther wanted to know as she grabbed my hand.

"I'm sure he will," I said nervously, "Not exactly knowing *what* Ping would do."

All of the other trainees, excluding Jasper who was hunkering down in the corner, quickly turned their lightsabers on and took their positions around Ping as one of the Inquisitors unlocked Ping's handcuffs and handed Ping his two double-bladed lightsabers.

"ATTACK!" the principal yelled, much more excited than anyone else in the room.

The padawans, with Rox leading them, immediately converged on Ping, but, unfortunately for them, Ping just blasted them aside with the Force as if they were mere ants. I had to duck as C'Leor flew over my head and crashed into the wall behind me. The principal looked disapprovingly at the poor show while Ping flexed his hands.

"Once again!" Rox yelled, picking himself back up and charging.

This time, Ping allowed Rox to approach, but only so that he could swiftly disarm Rox of his new weapon which zipped through the air and was promptly snatched up by the principal.

"Oof, Ungh!, OWWEEEE!"

The rest of my students all tried as well, but met similar failure.

"Hey, at least they're persistent," I noted.

"Better than nothing I guess," one of the inquisitors groaned, "This kid is way too strong to be just a Padawan."

"Honestly, they need way more months of practice," I continued, "It's like the past teachers have taught them nothing. All this 'progress' that you see here was my doing."

The second Inquisitor snorted as Rox flew through the air once more and bashed into the wall, unable to muster enough strength to get back up.

"Welllll," Ping smirked, "If that's all the show we have for today, then I guess I'll-."

"Wait!" a young voice shouted, "Not all of us are out!"

Everyone else in the room, minus the padawans that couldn't move, looked into the corner to see Jasper pointing his lightsaber hilt at Ping.

"You!" Jasper said again, "Have hurt all of my friends!"

"No offense," Ping told Jasper, "But all of your friends were attacking me first!"

"Well," Jasper replied, "That proves that the darkside isn't always stronger than the lightside."

"What's he going on about?" one of the Inquisitors asked me.

"How should I know?!" I replied.

"I challenge you!" Jasper continued, "To face me in combat - except I'm no Inquisitor."

"Well, at least he's honest," another of the Inquisitors mumbled."

"Um, sure?" Ping replied, confused.

"Because now," Jasper said, turning on his lightsaber, "You'll have to fight a fellow Jedi!"

All of us gasped as we saw Jasper turn his lightsaber on, and...it was green.

"You're a Jedi padawan in a Sith academy?" Ping asked Jasper slowly, "Don't you think you're in the wrong place?"

"Nope!" Jasper said, swinging his lightsaber over his head, "Bring it on buddy!"

Without waiting for a reply, Jasper attacked fiercely with a Contentious Opportunity. Ping countered and used a disarming slash, but Jasper saw this coming and fought back using a simple Makashi Riposte. Ping finally realized that Jasper wasn't as easy to defeat as the other kids and brought into play his second lightsaber, trying to test Jasper's limits.

While this was going on, I discreetly turned my head just enough to get a look at what the principal, two Inquisitors, and a handful of teachers were peering through the nearby window. They were all staring, open-mouthed - not because Jasper was exceptionally good (which he was for a young kid), but because he was using a green lightsaber and yet attacking Ping so ferociously. Even for someone who knew Jasper fairly well, I couldn't tell if he was attacking to kill or pretending. Whatever the case, I could tell that Ping was faking it - considering that he wasn't using the Force on Jasper.

"Whirrrzzzz, czch, whirrrzz, czch!"

Jasper valiantly held his ground, using the fast whirling motion of his lightsaber to protect against Ping's two blades. After another thirty seconds of this, I noticed that Ping's swings kept conveniently missing Jasper whenever he had a chance.

"Be gone!" Jasper shouted, leaping into the air and performing a Falling Avalanche.

"He knows Form Five?!" one of the Inquisitors gasped, "I can't even do that!"

"That's the only technique he knows of Form Five," I whispered to him, "I only taught him that move."

As Jasper's lightsaber descended upon Ping, Ping somehow got both of his lightsabers jammed into Jasper's - causing Jasper's lightsaber to get yanked out of his grasp while Ping's lightsabers shot across the room and embedded in the thick glass window. Outside, the teachers who had previously had their faces almost glued to the glass jumped back in alarm as the lightsabers narrowly missed them.

Meanwhile, Jasper's body smashed on top of Ping, ramming Ping's head into the wall. As Ping slumped to the ground, Jasper rolled off his opponent and back to his feet - pumping his fist into the air. Ping remained motionless.

"Kill him now!" the principal commanded Jasper, picking up Jasper's lightsaber off the ground and tossing it to him.

Jasper shook his head, "The command was to beat this Jedi, not kill him."

"But that's the way of the Sith!" one of the Inquisitors told Jasper.

"But it's *not* the way of me," Jasper said defiantly, "I make my own rules here."

Being talked back to was certainly something that the three men were used to, and they quickly withdrew to a back corner of the room to talk.

With the excitement over with, the teachers started to disperse outside while the rest of my students began to sit up.

"Brother!" Esther screamed, "Good job!"

Jasper high-fived her while I rushed over to Ping, putting myself between the line of sight of the Inquisitors and Ping.

"You'll need this," I whispered to him, slipping my ID card into his shirt; then clamping his handcuffs back on; yet conveniently loose.

"Move it kid," I said as gruffly as possible, jerking Ping up, "Back to your cell with you!"

Ping came to life and nodded his head in mock sadness, "Okay..."

"Hold it *right* there!" the principal commanded me, "We need to talk first!"

"With us?" I asked, nervous.

"Not the Jedi," the principal said, "With you and your students."

"Um, okay?"

"We were all impressed with your mettle today," one of the Inquisitors told all the kids, "Even if most of you were ultimately unsuccessful."

"Hence!" the principal quickly added, "All of you that fought today gets to keep their lightsaber to train with it!"

"And we'll let Jasper continue to train here as he showed willingness to fight against Jedi," the second Inquisitor told everyone, "But, the second that any of us sense betrayal, we'll have Jasper killed."

Rox grinned broadly at Jasper at this remark, and Esther grabbed at my hand.

"Now! Be gone!" the principal chuckled, "Pointing to the pod director who was waiting for them all."

"Awe man!" Rox groaned, "We have to still do TIE fighter training?! My body hurts all over."

"It wouldn't if you were a competent padawan," Jasper teased Rox.

Rox glared back as they got in a line and filed out of the arena.

"Now, you, Abnel need to talk with *us*," the principal said to me.

"In the presence of this guy?" I asked, pointing to Ping who was still standing awkwardly nearby.

"Sure, it doesn't matter," the principal continued.

"Let's just get to the point," the first Inquisitor said to me, "We know you're a fake.

"Took you long enough!" I challenged the Inquisitors, whipping out my lightsaber and aiming it at them, "You try and beat me!"

"We aren't going to," one of them said, placing a holographic projector on the floor.

Instantly, the projector whirled to life and Darth Sidious' projection appeared.

"Lhoka! My dear," he began.

"Don't 'my dear' me," I snapped.

"Testy, testy," the emperor replied, "But I like that spirit!"

"Good," I replied, "What's your game here?"

"We always knew you were a fake," the emperor laughed, "But you did such a marvelous job teaching."

"I'm glad you think so," I said, "I rather enjoyed it myself."

"Then why don't you stay with us?"

"I don't exactly like working with a bunch of cold-blooded killers," I replied, "You make my blood boil."

"Ah, but we have so much to offer!" the emperor continued.

"Like what?" I laughed.

"You want power! Am I right?" the emperor stated.

"Pssst, not really," I told him.

"Not really', ah, but you do," the emperor argued, "You want to enact revenge on the pirates and forces who killed and enslaved your kind!"

I narrowed my eyes, "So what if I do?"

"We can make that happen!" the emperor exclaimed.

"You were at least half of the reason my race was largely destroyed!" I yelled at the holographic projection.

"That was a result of my overzealous commanders wanting to destroy the Republic," the emperor defended himself, "I didn't want to do that."

"Sure...", I sneered.

"You think Leo would help you destroy the pirates?" the emperor said, changing the subject.

"Well, no," I replied honestly, "He doesn't like killing unless he has to."

"An honorable approach, is it not?" Darth Sidious replied, "But not the most useful thing for enacting revenge."

"Tell me about it," I said.

“The empire is in a perfect place to help!” Darth Sidious told me, “Now is the best time to show those pirates what it’s like to be mistreated! Your people need someone like you to rectify the past.”



## Chapter 8: Leo

My spaceship reached an impressive fleet of super star destroyers twenty minutes later.

Maneuvering among the many smaller craft, the stormtrooper pilot swooped into the hangar of one of the super star destroyers, parking amid a dozen other, similar ships.

"This way sir!" the squad leader directed me, following me out the aft door.

As soon as the ship was secured, the rest of the stormtroopers led the way out of the hangar and to a massive corridor lined with smaller, transport docks, one of which we boarded.

"Why is everyone staring at me?" I asked.

"It's rarer than a two headed crzech to have someone personally invited to meet the Emperor," the squad leader informed me.

While I was glaring back at some passing stormtroopers, our transport finally reached hall 262N and turned to the right continuing down yet another massive hallway.

"We're here," the pilot announced as we pulled up at a heavily guarded passage that led to two massively large double doors.

"The Big Guy inside?" I asked the squad leader.

"Watch your mouth or you may end up in an unfortunate position," the leader replied as he pressed the intercom button on the outside wall, "Leo here sir."

"Bring him in," a low, menacing voice replied, as a series of clicks signaled the double doors were about to open.

As the doors slid open, I clasped my hands behind my back and took a deep breath. It was time to finish that which I had been unable to do during our last run-in.

"It *is* Leo," the Emperor announced as I strode into the room, accompanied by only the elite guards which were standing right inside the Emperor's room.

"Let's hear a bit more about what you're offering me here," I insisted, walking closer.

The Emperor finally turned around in his chair, his head still bent downwards, revealing only his pale white chin, "Your answers reside in-."

I didn't wait for him to finish. With a powerful push, I launched the guards across the room; then unleashed a powerful electric attack which the emperor only caught at the last second.

"I suspected as much," the Emperor growled, standing out of his chair, "You'd rather enact revenge than save your girlfriend of old."

"No one can bring someone from the dead like that," I snapped, throwing Sidious backward in his chair, "You only want my power."

"I want your head," Sidious snapped, leaping out of his chair and attacking furiously.

In a second, I had pulled out my lightsabers and met his attack. With the red guard still out of commission, the Emperor and I dueled it out - desperate to kill the other.

After dodging a quick jab, I flashed my lightsabers around once more to counterattack, but I promptly found myself joking. Having foreseen this, I dropped my lightsabers like they were made of fire, and cupped my hands, choking Sidious back. The ensuing joke festival ended in my victory. Darth Sidious was strong, but my power was still stronger. As soon as his hold let go of me, I flopped to the ground, gasping for breath and letting go of my hold on Sidious. Summon my strength, I scooped up my lightsabers and swung at Sidious just as I was thrown across the room. My Force instincts kicked in just in time for me to cushion myself from crashing into a wall, and I quickly looked around for the perpetrator.

“Lhoka! Amber?!” I exclaimed in complete astonishment, “Whatever in the *world* are you doing here?!”

“I can’t let you hurt Palpatine,” Amber informed me, staring me down.

“Surely you’re kidding!” I exclaimed, “Do you realize what he’s done to you and I?”

“He’s not a good guy,” Lhoka added.

“But I’m the only one that can help them,” Palpatine replied in a low voice, as he slowly stood up.

Gritting my teeth, I strode across the room, my lightsabers at the ready, “Amber, Lhoka, don’t you know this is our chance? We can finish what Ember started!”

“Ember’s not around anymore,” Amber replied, “But you wouldn’t think about that. You’re still stuck in the past.”

“Amber,” I said softly, walking close to her, “What is wrong with you? Why are you here?”

“Go,” Amber told me sharply, drawing her lightsaber and pointing it at me “You don’t really love me.”

“Love you?” I asked confused, “What’s this got to do with *anything*?”

“Ba bye!” Sidious chortled.

Lhoka, Amber, and I all turned to see Sidious, having sneaked back to his chair, pulled a lever near his chair. Instantly, the floor beneath us dropped open, and we all plummeted.

Desperately trying to Force grab the slick walls of the pit, I fell downwards, realizing that it would be impossible. Beside me, Amber was screaming, but the wind whizzing by dampened the noise.

“The ground, the ground!” I thought aloud, searching the Force for signs of the ground below, “Where are-...”

“Thud!!!” with one hand on Amber, and one hand aimed at the smooth, metal floor beneath me, I poured my energy into decelerating ourselves, which thankfully worked. However, the ominous thud beside us was a clear indicator that Lhoka hadn’t been quite as lucky.

“AAAAHHHHH!” Lhoka screamed.

Still dazed from the fall, I switched on my wrist band light and scanned the ground for signs of my Togruta friend. Lhoka was lying on her back, writing in pain.

“It’s okay, you’ll be fine,” I told Lhoka, placing my hands on her chest, “Stay still.”

"It hurts!" Lhoka screeched, refusing to calm down.

"What hurts?" I asked.

"My back!!" Lhoka screamed again.

"Lhoka, stop moving! I can't help you if you're kicking like that. Don't you trust me?"

"Yeah, but-," Lhoka began.

Without waiting for her answer, I flipped her over and shoved my hands onto her upper back, gripping her tightly.

"AAaaaaahhhh!" Lhoka continued to scream, "I can't take muchhhh...oh!"

There was silence for a moment, as I let Lhoka go and she sat up.

"How did you do that?"

"Force healing," I reminded her.

Lhoka looked at me for a moment; then hung her head, "I was wrong."

"Don't sweat it," I told her.

"I can't *help* but 'sweat it'," Lhoka whispered, "Now we're all in trouble."

"It couldn't be *that* bad," I offered, just as some lights turned on around us - illuminating a small holo screen to my right.

"Mwahahahaha, I see you're enjoying your stay, uh?" the emperor laughed into the screen, "Too bad for you that you're just a bunch of wannabe's."

"We're no wannabe's," I growled at the holoprojector.

"Oh, but you are," the Emperor replied, apparently hearing me through some microphones nearby, "See you're standing in a fifty foot thick metal chamber that is over three hundred feet deep. At any minute, I can simply place my hands on this metal pipe here and transmit just enough Force lightning to electrocute you all."

"I can absorb Force lightning you know," I retorted.

"But not before it's already traveled through the walls and floor and arced into your miserable bodies," the Emperor continued, "And I will video your execution to play on live holo television, so the whole world can see what happens when you try to ruin my plans!"

"You'll never succeed," I growled again.

The Emperor, looking straight into the camera, grinned devilishly and shut off the transmission. With the lights still on, I looked across the small floor and saw Amber hunkered down in the corner.

"Amber?" I asked her softly, "Are you okay?"

"No," she sniffed, "I'm not okay."

"Is it something I did?" I told her.

"No," she replied, "I was a jerk."

"If it makes you feel better," I told her, laying my hand on her shoulder, "I was an idiot today too. I let my drive to revenge get the better of me."

"I doubted *you*," Amber told me, "And I doubted Lhoka."

"We all have our doubts," Lhoka said from across the room.

"And then you helped save me while Lhoka fell and almost killed herself," Amber said, "Of course you love me."

"I'm still...a bit confused about that," I replied, "You thought I didn't like you?"

"Um yeah," Amber said, embarrassed, "Somehow the Emperor had me convinced that you like Lhoka instead."

At this, Lhoka and I both glanced at each other, surprised.

"Why would you think *that*?" I gasped, "We've never been a thing."

"It doesn't make any sense," Amber sighed, turning around and facing me, "I was a jerk, and I know it."

"Come over here," I said, grabbing her and pulling her to me, "I'll always love you - no matter *what* happens!"

Amber hung her head, "I wish I could say the same."

"I know you can," I insisted, lifting her head and kissing her.

"Oh c'mon guys!" Lhoka cringed, "Now's not the time for *that*."

"Well," I replied to a very shocked Amber, "Now's as good a time as any in my mind."

"But we need to actually...I don't know...get OUT OF HERE!"

"One second!" I told Lhoka, "I have been meaning to ask Amber this question."

As soon as I said this, Amber, still looking a bit dazed by my kiss, quickly snapped to attention.

"Amber, I said again, "Will you marry me?"

"Oh for crying out loud!" Lhoka groaned, "Seriously?"

"YES!" Amber laughed, "Of course I will!"

"Great great," Lhoka interrupted us, "Now, about escaping?"

"There is no escape," the familiar, sinister voice answered Lhoka as the holo television turned on, "It's really too bad I'll have to kill you all before you can spend your lives together."

"I don't think that'll be happening," I growled, turning back around.

The Emperor moved out of the camera's view to show a bunch of other Empire officials recording us through the chamber's video cameras.

"Lohka, Amber!" I yelled to my comrades, "Place your hands on my shoulders. I'm going to need all the Force help I can get."

If they hadn't been able to trust me before, they certainly were now. No sooner had they laid their hands on my shoulder and closed their eyes - focusing Force energy to flow through me, than I shoved my hands against the cold metal wall.

"And now, you will die!" the Emperor laughed cheerfully, gripping the small, metal pipe that was connected to our chamber.

The issue with his plan was that I was faster. Using both Amber and Lhoka's power I concentrated my Force lightning up the slick walls of our chamber, making sure to keep it from spreading across the floor and electrocuting us. Focusing even harder, I gritted my teeth and withdrew all the energy I could channeling upward in a massive upheaval. The TV across the way displayed a first hand view of the Emperor getting promptly zapped with thousands of volts of energy, but my Force electricity was so charged that it leapt across the conductive control panels and materials of his room - going on an electrically charged rampage. The Emperor went rigid and fell from view as the rest of his guards and men performed a very jerky dance amid the bursts of electricity. Just before I lost focus, I let up on the Force electricity, ensuring that I didn't accidentally electrocute any of us in the process.

"The video footage died," Lhoka informed me as I bent down to catch my breath, "I can't see what's happening."

"But the good news is that the secret door in the ground opened back up!" Amber noted, "Look!" All of us looked upward to see a thin square of light far above.

"Let's go!" Amber encouraged me.

"I'm right behind you," I replied.

Amber looked back at me, confused, "But how are we getting up?"

"Exactly our problem," I moaned, "I don't know."

"Hmmm," Lhoka said aloud, scratching her chin, "Leo, how far can you throw two hundred pounds?"

"Um, like a thousand feet at best?" I replied, confused, "Give or take some depending on how I feel."

"And how high is that opening?" Lhoka continued.

"Couple hundred," I informed her.

"Then, I know a way to get Amber and I up there," Lhoka told me, "But you may be a problem."

"We're *not* leaving without Leo," Amber said firmly.

"We'll all die down here though in that case," I replied.

"Better to die with you than live my life regretting leaving you behind," Amber stated, "I can't lose you too."

"Now's not the time to be chivalrous," I said, "Someone needs to take care of the kids!"

"I'll go," Lhoka said softly, "I'm the one that got them into the mess - I'll get them out."

"What mess?" I asked, confused.

"Ohhhh..., nevermind," Lhoka said way too quickly, "I can handle this, but I'll need you to boost me out of here."

"Lhoka," I said in complete seriousness, "What happened to Esther and Jasper?"

"They'll be *fine*," Lhoka replied, "Ping's sorta taking care of the situation."

"Sorta?!" I gasped, "Lhoka, what have you done?!"

"Leo, you need to trust me!" Lhoka insisted, "Give me a chance like you wanted me to trust you!"

I stared at her for what felt like eternity, trying to read her motives, "Okay. You go save them."

Lhoka nodded her head, "Leo, thank you for everything."

Nodding my head, I raised her up and throttled her upwards, Amber adding an extra boost.

Lhoka yelled in surprise as the several G's of force pressed back on her but a moment later, I felt her calm return through the Force.

"She made it," I told Amber, "Now it's your turn."

"I can't!" Amber started to cry, "I can't lose you!"

"Look at me Amber!" I said, embracing her, "You won't lose me. I'll think of a way out!"

"Leo...", Amber sniffed, "But how?"

"I...I know I will, I always do," I replied, trying to sound confident.

"I can't," Amber whispered into my ear, "I can't give you up."

"You're willing to let Lhoka and the kids fall into the hands of who knows just to stay with me on a suicide mission?!" I exclaimed, "Amber! This isn't you! This isn't the Jedi way!"

"I'm not a Jedi," Amber said fiercely, "You have no idea what torture I've been through. I feel Ember's dead, ominous presence twenty-four seven. It's eating me up!"

Surprised at this turn of events, I stood back, "Amber...Is this why you've been acting strange recently?"

"I'M TRYING TO FIND A SOLUTION!" Amber growled, "Trying to find something to ease this pain, and my last hope is you - and you don't even want me to stay here!"

I sighed, rubbing my forehead with my right hand, "Okay, stay here Amber."

Frustrated and feeling probably more than a little guilty, Amber hunkered down in the corner opposite me as I stared up at the light far above. I couldn't help but think about if I had really killed Palpatine, if Lhoka would be able to escape, if the kids were safe wherever they were.

Frankly I was just scared; things were outside my control.

It was at this point that I thought back to what one of my old Force instructors had told me so many years ago - "Don't try to control your surroundings; let the Force handle that."

"How can that help me now?" I mumbled to myself, "What can the Force do for my situation? Even the strongest Jedi couldn't leap this jump!"

With the time that I had spent using the Jek's darkside power, I had learned that the Force was a powerful weapon that had to be used strictly to accomplish my will; yet I wanted to let the Force do it's thing; yet I knew that if I did, it certainly wouldn't help me out of this situation. If only there was a way to powerfully merge the two sides of the Force - if only a situation like Lhoka had asked me about could exist!

The muffled sound of Amber sobbing in the corner informed me that Amber had reached her breaking point - the strain of using the darkside was evident in her. It was clouding her thoughts

and actions, and yet, I could even see how the darkside was affecting me as well - it was affecting *all* of us.

"A merge of the dark and lightside may not be possible," I declared to myself, "But what do I have to lose! I'll give it a shot."

Planting my feet firmly to the side of myself, I concentrated my Force power, letting the invisible power arc between my hands. I wasn't sure if this would work, seeing as I had only been "injected" with darkside power, but, as I had said before, I had to give it a try.

Holding my arms straight out in front of me, I let go of the power that I held so close to me. It was more of a change in mindset that I knew I had to undergo; I had to give up my desire to use the Force the way I necessarily wanted. Frankly, I didn't want to do this; it seemed to go against everything I knew and felt. The strain of letting the darkside Force leave my body started to wear me out, and I had to bend over to the floor to keep myself up. Struggling mentally to complete my task, I shoved the darkside of the Force out of my body, letting the void be replaced with lightside.

"ARRRRRUUGGGHHHH!" I screamed, not being able to keep quiet as it felt like someone was drawing a knife through my body.

As long and as drawn out as the process was, it left extremely suddenly. Amber, scared by my outburst, hurriedly turned around and looked me over as I stood on my knees and hands, breathing deeply.

"What did you do?!" Amber asked me, "Are you okay?"

"We'll see," I told her, plucking one of my lightsabers off my belt and holding it in my hand.

Before turning it on, I gripped it tightly and worked to surround the broken kyber crystal with the new Force energy, ironically forcing the Force to heal the crystal. In another few, tenuous seconds, I felt the strangest sensation as the Force "let" me know it was done with the process, without me having to give it a deadline.

"Leo," Amber said again, "What are you doing?"

"I gave up my dark side power," I told her, "I...I tried to merge the two - forcing the lightside to obey me."

"That...doesn't work," Amber said, "You know that."

"Let's see then," I commented, igniting my lightsaber in front of me. However, this time, its blades weren't red, but they weren't white either. They were dark gray.

"Gray?!" Amber gasped, "But that isn't possible?! What does this mean?"

"It means," I smirked, "That we're getting out of here!"

Room for exit sequence

## Chapter 9: Lhoka

Screaming like my life was on the line, Leo rocketed me up out of the metal pit and back into the emperor's throne room. Strewn all across the floor were several, presumably dead, stormtroopers and red guard interspersed with an ever-growing number of backups arriving every second. At the moment, the majority of them were huddled around the inert form of the Emperor himself. As soon as I flew out of the pit, nearly collided with the ceiling, and bounced back down to the floor, all nearby troops opened fire upon me. With my trusty lightsaber at the ready, I deflected the laser pulses and cut my way through the stormtroopers rushing through the double doorway. Outside the doors and down the corridor was an entire traffic jam of transport pods as clones and their stormtrooper allies rushed to the aid of the Emperor. Me trying to run in the other direction with troopers shooting from behind me only helped to cause more confusion which, I guess, helped me keep largely unnoticed. Leaping onto the nearest transport pod, I jerked the speed controls to full power and shot away from the loading bay into the main traffic of the super star destroyer. Behind me, several angry shouts followed behind as trailing troopers snagged their own transportation. I had never been in such a large spacecraft as the star destroyer before, and I had also never driven in inter-ship traffic before, so I just plowed through the smaller craft around me in my bid to reach the hangar where I could find my spaceship. As I slammed into a small rover carrying pallets of food, some red alarms and sirens started to sound nearby - throwing the rest of the ship into chaos as well. Freeze-dried food flew everywhere as I ducked and skidded around the nearby "things." After weaving in and out of the traffic for a while, I finally got ahead of the chasing squad which allowed me to plug into the pod's direction control units the nearest hangar. The problem was that going at such a high speed was not conducive to the speed of which the directions were dictated to me which then forced me to take several nail-biting turns.

After running my transport pod into the hangar's shipside loading bay, I leapt off and scrambled across the floor as a terrific explosion signaled the unfortunate collision. Nearby storm troopers were so busy with running around and panicking about the alarms that no one noticed me leap into my starfighter and hover out of the hangar, quickly turning into lightspeed before a tractor beam could be focused on me - not that they would have anyway as apparently no one seemed to know what the alarms meant.

"Tatooine!" I yelled to my starfighter's navigation computer, "Imperial Force Academy!"

As I blasted through hyperspace, I silently thanked myself that I had added the coordinates to the computer. No sooner had I emerged near the dusty atmosphere of the infamous desert planet, then I rocketed downwards and aimed straight for where the academy would be.

Without even thinking, as soon as I was illegally a hundred or so feet above the academy I just put the spaceship into its artificial intelligent autopilot and jumped out.



After sticking the landing right on top of the roof of the instructor dormitory, I immediately cut a hole through the roof and dropped down below.

"Ooooh, dormitory B," I said to myself, "Never been here before."

Unfortunately, I had to find Jasper and Esther fast, and even more so now that my identity was revealed, and we had just attempted to assassinate the Emperor. I couldn't trust the school to treat the two kids very well. Since it was much later in the evening, I figured that the kids would be at target practice, so when I had rushed out of the dormitory and out of its building, I sprinted across the asphalt sidewalk to the secondary building. In the process however, I stumbled over half a dozen stormtrooper bodies.

"Ping at work!" I said to myself, thrilled that he had escaped, "If anything his escape would create more of the chaos that I thrived in. After clearing the open area without seeing any functioning storm troopers, I bashed down the door to the target practice arena (since I did not have my ID card on me), but when I entered, I found it completely empty.

I was about to leave when I heard something; it sounded like someone was whispering.

"Who's there!" I demanded loudly, carefully scoping out the room with my lightsaber at the ready, "I'm armed!"

There was a long pause followed by a young voice, "Lhoka?"

"Esther?!" I immediately recognized, "Where are you?"

From far to my left where a stack of targets were haphazardly piled up, Esther crawled out from behind them and ran up to me, "LOHKA!"

"What's up Esther?" I asked, concerned as she hugged me tightly, "Where have you been?"

"Ummm, busy?" I responded, "Where's Jasper?"

"I don't know!" Esther continued to cry, "We were shooting guns and then we heard commotion outside and everyone went outside except me and then I heard lots of shooting and screaming and yelling, and I got scared!"

"Okay, it'll be fine, Esther," I told her, "But we need to find Jasper! Do you have *any* idea where he may be?"

Esther shook her head, "I'm scared and I don't wanna go outside!"

"It's okay," I told her, "No one is outside!"

"But they all went outside!" Esther insisted.

"Well, they're not there anymore!" I announced, "C'mon Esther! You can do it!"

"Ooooookay," Esther said hesitantly, following close behind me as I exited the building and headed back to the main one. Whatever was going on, I was sure that the main building would hold the answers.

About half way across the overgrown grass that filled in the area around the sidewalk, I caught the side of a squad of stormtroopers hauling a hover cart.

"Quick!" I told Esther, pulling her down behind some bushes, "Troopers dead ahead."

After listening to make sure they didn't spot us, I slowly raised my head above the hedge to see what they were doing. I also turned on my earpiece's long-range hearing to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"What a mess," one of the troopers was saying, "I don't get why we have to clean all this up."

"Well, at least we weren't one of the victims," another said as he bent down to one of his fallen comrades and heaved the dead body onto the cart, "Then our day would have been a lot worse."

I ducked behind the hedge again and whispered to Esther, "Run for the back door of the main building as soon as I create the distraction, okay?"

"I'm scared of Lhoka," Esther told me.

"I know, but I'll have your back! And this is to save your brother!" I reminded her.

"Your day *has* gotten worse!" I announced, leaping from behind the bushes and attacking the stormtroopers.

The troopers quickly turned to me and all raised their hands above their heads, "We're unarmed!"

"Don't hurt me!" one of the troopers begged, "Please?"

I looked at them in disgust, "Seriously? Begging me?"

"If you're looking for that young Jedi kid, he's in there!" another of the troopers informed me hopefully, pointing to the main building.

"You're lucky I don't have time to slaughter you all," I reminded the stormtroopers as I raced off.

"Thank you!" They called after me.

I groaned, but followed Esther through the back door and into the deserted halls of the main building. Although the halls were uncharacteristically empty, my earpiece's sensitive listening capabilities picked up on sounds coming from ahead and to the left.

"Sounds like they're coming from the training area," I said suspiciously, picking up my pace.

By the time I finally reached the arena, I was easily able to figure out what was going on.

Inside, the principal and a few teachers were observing the entire class of my pupils attempting to murder Jasper who was desperately trying to fend off their attacks from the corner.

"Leave him alone!" I screamed, flashing my lightsaber around while assuming a Form Four stance, "Or I'll kill you all!"

The teachers, immediately understanding what I was up to, pulled out their guns and leveled them at me while the students, ignoring me, continued their lopsided assault on Jasper.

Judging by how tired Jasper looked, I assumed he had been there for a while.

"Stop!" I screamed again, "And where's Ping?"

"The Jedi kid?" the principal asked, looking a bit frightened, "He ran off like the chicken he is."

I was about to insult the principal but was caught off guard as the Trandoshan kid suddenly pulled Jasper through the air using a Force pull and stabbed him through the torso. With an ear-splitting yell, Jasper flopped to the ground dead.

While this was unfolding before my eyes, the teachers used the distraction to all fire at me at once. My Force instincts kicked in, in time for me to duck beneath the blasts, but Esther behind me was completely not prepared and was promptly shot to death.

Enraged with my failure to protect the kids and the feeling of betrayal from everyone in the room, I attacked ferociously with the principal being the first to fall. Using my favorite Jar'Kai move, the Rising Whirlwind, I quickly struck down the teachers who were unable to react in time to avoid my wilding spinning lightsabers. The Trandoshan kid, pleased over his kill, stabbed the dead body of Jasper again, apparently thinking it was funny or cool, but that just made me even more angry. With a roar that would have put fear into even the greatest Jedi, I bore down upon my old students, ripping them apart using a combination of the Rising Whirlwind and the Trispzest skill of the Spinning Attack to punish the poor lightsaber dueling abilities of the children.

As I killed the last of the kids, their dying screams shook me, but they deserved to pay for killing Jasper. I didn't know how they had been convinced to turn on their comrade, but somehow during the chao of Ping's escape, the principal must have thought Jasper was a part of it. As I bent down to the profusely bleeding bodies of Jasper and Esther, I wondered what had happened to Ping and if he had just left the children here. Maybe he had thought they were with me - maybe he had been killed too and the principal had been lying.

"ARRRRGGHHH!" I cried out, anger coursing through me.

It was at this time that I heard the pounding of running feet echo through the hallway outside.

"Reinforcements," I growled, standing back up, and flashing out my lightsaber.

I leapt through the arena's door and swung my lightsaber in a quick arc towards my attacks.

Fortunately for them, it was quickly parried.

"Lhoka!" Leo shouted, "It's just me!"

"Oh goodness," I breathed, "What are you guys doing here?"

"I said I'd make it out alive," Leo smiled; then grew serious, "What is this place and why are you here?"

"They killed Jasper and Esther," I grimaced, "And it's my fault for having them come here."

At this, Leo's face frowned considerably, "Where are..."

As soon as Leo poked his head through the arena's doorway and saw the carnage, he quickly put together what happened.

"Get Jasper," he told Amber sharply, "I'll work on Esther."

"You can't really heal..." I gasped as Leo placed his hands on the shot-up body of Esther.

"Shush," Leo snapped, "I'm focusing."

I knew that Leo had told me he had resurrected Amber, but I didn't believe it until now. When Esther suddenly gasped and sat straight up, I reached down and hugged her tight - despite the blood still dripping from her clothes.

"Esther!" I yelled, breaking down in tears.

Esther looked up at me with wide eyes, "What's wrong Lhoka?"

Behind me, Amber brought Jasper over to Leo, and Esther quickly surveyed the destruction in the room.

"Brother!" Esther screamed, "They killed him!"

"Annnnd, we're moving out of here," I said, carrying her out of the arena quickly.

"But brother!" Esther cried.

"He'll be fine?" I tried to assure her.

As if on cue, there was a startled exclamation from Jasper behind me.

"Oh thank the Force!" Amber exclaimed excitedly.

"Get to the ship now!" Leo responded as he pushed Amber and Jasper out in front of him, "I'll be right behind you!"

Seeing her brother alive and well, Esther allowed me to carry her as I raced down the hallway and burst through the front doors of the main building. In the front lawn, I quickly spotted our spaceship that was now being investigated by a squad of stormtroopers.

"Scram!" Amber shouted at them, backflipping over me and attacking them before they could respond. With Amber controlling the situation, Jasper and I fled into the spacecraft's open bay door and rushed to the cockpit. I sat Esther down on the floor and quickly flipped the nearby switches, turning the spacecraft on. By the time the engines had warmed up and I had started the ship hovering, Amber had dealt with the few stormtroopers, and, followed by Leo, who had just then ran out of the building, they dove into the cargo bay.

"And we're off!" I started, pushing on the thrust lever.

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It was a somber crew of people that arrived back at our Serenno base that evening. Even Jasper was uncharacteristically quiet.

"Amber, could you take this to my room and drop it on the floor?" Leo asked as he handed Amber his bulging backpack, "I need to check on all my neglected messages."

Amber nodded her head as we jumped out of the spaceship and headed back to our rooms.

As Leo veered off to head to the main office, Amber looked at the soiled clothes that Jasper and Esther were wearing and stated, "And you two need to take a nice, long bath and get some new clothes."

"A bath?" Esther said, excited, "I like baths!"

"I know," I reminded her, "And you have your own bath tub too!"

"It's better than Jasper's," Esther laughed, hurrying down the hallway to her room.

Jasper remained quiet and just trudged to his room, the usual pep gone from his step.

"They saw an awful lot today, huh?" Amber whispered to me as we turned to Leo's room.

"I blame myself," I muttered.

Amber swiped her card at the reader near Leo's door, causing the door to click open.

"I should probably take a bath too, I feel really..." I began, stopping short as Amber pushed open Leo's door - revealing his room.

"Oh...my," Amber breathed, "Where did he get all those lightsabers?!"

Neither Amber nor I had ever been in Leo's room before, and what I saw was a far-cry from what I had expected. On every piece of furniture and all over the walls were mounted lightsabers of every kind and shape you could imagine. Over to the right, Leo had three more crates which Amber discretely opened to reveal even more lightsabers.

"Where did he get all these?" I said aloud as Amber opened up the bag that Leo had given her.

"The same way he got these!" Amber realized, pulling out a handful of inquisitor lightsabers from the bag.

"There's no way he could loot all these lightsabers off dead Jedi and Sith," I stated, inspecting a beautifully ornate lightsaber on the wall near his bed.

"This would explain his large spending budget," Amber noted, coming up next to me, "He must spend a lot of time involved in the black market."

"They're even labeled too!" I said, reading the small plaque beneath the lightsaber I was looking at.

"Interesting," Amber noted, "He must have gotten a hold of some of the Jedi library's archives in order to be able to figure out whose lightsabers these all are!"

"Hey what's in here I wonder?" I said aloud, finding a small, metal box on Leo's nightstand.

I carefully unlatched the box to find three pristine lightsabers inside imbedded in carefully carved foam. Gently removing one of the lightsabers from its foam mold, I read the owner of it on the wooden plaque beneath.

"Tay," I said aloud, "I wonder who he was."

"Tay?!" Amber gasped, "You're kidding!"

But when Amber looked, she gasped, "No way! That's Tay's!"

"Who's Tay?" I asked, too scared to actually turn the lightsaber on.

"He was this boy I had a crush on while in the Republic's training academy," Amber said softly,

"He was killed at the Jedi temple where we found you those years ago."

"Ohhh," I answered, "I didn't know."

"Tay, George, and Jake had a special place in Leo's heart," Amber continued, "I guess he wanted to take extra precautions with their momentos."

"Rarely a day goes by that I don't think of them," a voice from the doorway scared me.

"Leo!" Amber jumped, "Uh, we were just dropping off your backpack!"

"Surrreeee," Leo said, smirking, "I'm sure that's all you are doing..."

"Where did you get all these?" I asked him, knowing it would be impossible to pull the wool over his eyes.

"A few I found, but most I purchased off the black market," Leo said, carefully taking Tay's lightsaber from my hands and placing it back in the metal box, "There's a fairly large market for these weapons. There's a lot of collectors like me out there."

"But they aren't very useful for people that don't have Force abilities, right?"

"Yeah, but still, they're valuable," Leo remarked, "Anyway..."

"What is it?" Amber asked, noticing Leo's expression change.

"Ping's got himself into trouble again," Leo sighed, "I got a very frantic message from him in my inbox, so I'm going to go track him down and figure out what mess he's gotten into this time."

"You need help?" I asked quickly.

"Nah, I think I'll be fine," Leo replied, "BUT, Amber, you should check the rest of all the messages. There's dozens for some reason."

Amber groaned, "I hate playing secretary!"

"Keep an eye on the kids and don't run off!" Leo yelled back at us as he hurried back out of his room and to the hangar, "And stop messing around in my room!"

"I can help you," I graciously offered Amber, "Read and listen to all those messages anyway."

"Thanks," Amber sighed, "Probably a bunch of cheap crime lords wanting us to do a hit job for them."

Unfortunately, that's not what it turned out to be.

"I'm sure you heard of the million dollar bounty on your heads," a gruff voice sneered through the speakers, "So I just wanted to give you a heads up that I'm coming for ya!"

"That's the last of the thirty ominous threats," I smiled, "I didn't know the emperor was so peeved at us!"

"Apparently he was," Amber laughed, "But we do need to take these threats seriously. Some time, probably sooner than later, some bounty hunters will find where we're hiding."

"Good point," I replied, "But what can we do? We can't keep running, and if we leave here, then we make ourselves even more exposed."

"Hmmmmmm," Amber said aloud as she thought, "Lhoka, do you remember when you said you wanted revenge against the pirates?"

"Yeah...", I replied, "I still do, but how's that going to help us?"

"I've got an idea then," Amber smirked, "To get the bounty hunters off our trail and deal with the pirates in turn."

"How?" I asked, confused, "I'll bet the pirates will come looking for us too!"

"Yeah, but not if they're trying to fight off a bunch of crazed bounty hunters!" Amber explained.

"Huh?"

“All we need to do,” Amber informed me, “Is take a short video of us right near the pirate base and tease all the bounty hunters into coming for us. They’ll think we’re hiding with the pirates, when, in fact, we aren’t.”

“Ohhhh,” I laughed, “I see where you’re going! When the pirates get invaded by the hunters, they’ll of course deny we’re there, but that’ll only make them look more suspicious!”

“Exactly!” Amber laughed.

A scream from Esther’s room interrupted our plot.

“I’m out of bubbles!” Esther screamed again, “LHOKA!!!!!!”

## Chapter 10: Leo

As I approached the beautiful planet of \_\_\_\_\_, I couldn't help but notice the particularly large Empire space shuttle orbiting the planet.

"Oh joy," I groaned, "Ping's really done it this time!"

Ignoring the identification demands of the Empire, I throttled my spaceship's engines and sped towards the planet's surface where the coordinates that Ping had sent me were. As I got closer to the surface, I realized that Ping was at his father's club - well...what was left of the club.

What had originally been a good sized wooden structure and large parking lot was now just smoking ruins. In addition, there was still a battle raging with several squadrons of stormtroopers attempting to overrun a few figures fighting back. As I flew overhead, I realized the figures were Ping and his parents. As I opened the side door and put my spaceship on autopilot, I noticed the fighting stop temporarily and a black-clad figure emerged from among the stormtroopers.

"Darth Vader!" I gasped, before jumping out of the spaceship.

In the time that it took me to stick a landing right in the middle of the battlefield, Darth Vader had already won the duel between him and Ping and was currently choking him.

"Pick on someone your own size!" I yelled at the imposing Sith, "Fight me blow-hard!"

Vader, although not surprised at my presence as it was hard to miss a guy falling out of the sky, dropped Ping to the ground and turned on me.

"Falcon enterprises," Darth Vader announced, "I heard you had a run in with my Master."

"And he lost miserably," I taunted Vader, "So let's hope you can give more of a fight!"

Darth Vader growled, approaching me slowly and trying to size me up. In return, I ignited both of my gray dual-bladed lightsabers and walked towards him, "Let's dance!"

In a sudden rush, I started the duel, attacking with a swift Form Four which Darth Vader easily blocked.

Darth Vader growled, parrying and attacking back, "You can't defeat me. Your only option is to surrender!"

"That's *your* only option!" I laughed, attempting a few quick jabs.

Darth Vader blocked them easily and dueled back, pushing me towards a large upturned piece of metal that Ping's parents were hiding behind as they shot with their pistols.

"Why are you helping this lowly family anyway?" Darth Vader wanted to know.

"For the same reason you're doing the dirty work of your oh-so-precious emperor," I snapped.



Slightly taken aback by this comment, Darth Vader kept quiet for just long enough for me to gather my thoughts. In a swift motion, I whipped my hands around and blasted Darth Vader into the air. As I was still getting used to the pros and cons of using the lightside and darkside of the Force together, I incorrectly judged the power of my Force throw and Vader ended up disappearing from view into the forest beyond.

"Lez go," I told Ping and his parents.

"Ungh," Ping groaned, still trying to catch his breath, "What's the deal with that guy and his Force chokes?!"

"DUCK!" I cried out as the stormtroopers resumed their open-fire.

While I easily deflected the laser pulses and started Force throwing the stormtroopers across from me, Ping and his parents boarded my spaceship that had descended behind us. As soon as they had climbed in, I leapt back into it myself and gave the autopilot the all-clear to take off. "Just in time," Jong wheezed, catching his breath, "We've already been out here fighting for like an hour!"

"They totally decimated your place," I responded.

"Those jerks," Jong's wife snapped, "They're so cruel! Where will we stay now?!"

"I'm so sorry," Ping apologized to his parents, "I didn't know that I'd get you guys involved in so much danger! I wouldn't have joined the rebels if I knew that!"

"Don't sweat it," Jong shushed Ping, "You have the heart of a Jedi. It runs in you like it ran in my brother."

"Wellll," I said as I put the spaceship into lightspeed to avoid the Empire's space fleet, "I would like a good cook at my place. None of us can cook all that well, and Jong can make a mean Colo Claw fish!"

"You're serious?!" Jong gasped, "You want me to work for *you*?!"

"Of course!" I laughed, "You're the best chef I've ever met!"

"You're just saying that!" Jong replied.

"No, for real," I told him.

"We couldn't do that to you," Ping's Mom insisted, "You already have quite a few people over there from what I've heard from Ping."

"True," I acknowledged, "But you haven't seen how large our place is!"

"Where do you live exactly?" Jong wanted to know.

"Ever heard of the Serenno estates?" I asked.

"That's a deal," Jong responded promptly, "Get ready to have your own personal chef!"

"SWEET!" I cried out, pumping my fist, "And I'll pay you in addition to room and board. Also, if one of you wants to help with secretarial duty, I'm sure Amber would be appreciative..."