

Chapter 5

The small, furry Jawa hand gently closed around the grip of her Ion blaster. She was on her own for another three days until the 'Crawler came by and she needed this food. Breathing slowly and steadily, she took aim at the gathering of desert scurriers in the shadows ahead. When the majority of the little creatures were in range, she gently tapped the trigger and a blue haze of energy was flung out of the muzzle, washing over them.

Five of the nine fell to the ground dead. The remaining four, which had been shielded by the others, ran away and hid amongst the rocks. Smoke rose from the less fortunate animals as she came out from behind her rock, holstering the blaster and muttering to herself as she set to collecting her dinner, dropping them one by one into a small sack.

As she did, the rock beside her popped several times, sparks flying, immediately followed by the report of a rifle. Cursing in her native tongue, she dove back behind the rock, rolling into the sand. Sandpeople, she thought to herself. Her hearts were beating hard now as she rolled over and crawled forward to get a look at where the fire was coming from. Glowing eyes peered out from beneath the darkness of her hood as she scanned the top of the cliff where it met the darkening sky. Nothing.

She scanned back across the ridgeline again and this time caught some brief movement as a raider's head protruded momentarily above the rocks. It raised its' head up again as she watched, the reddish-orange sunlight glinting off the metal eyepieces and spikes thrusting out of the wrapped bandages. It was looking for her, trying to find her again among the rocks. The Tusken Raider slowly moved its' rifle back and forth over the stone, staring through the sight and taking aim on her general area as it sought her out. Then he fired several shots which ricocheted in a shower of sparks on the stone above her.

One of two Tusksens grunted as he worked to get a better firing angle, leaning out over the edge of the rock . . . and right into the center of Danz' targeting reticle. The seasoned Sandtrooper watched as the Raider moved its' head squarely in to the center of his sight imaging. He gently squeezed back on the trigger of his rifle, releasing a bolt of energy which burst through the head of the Tusken as it roared one final time. Immediately there was a second blast, taking out the other Raider, who slumped forward across the flat rock.

The little Jawa cautiously raised herself to her knees, dinner in hand, peering from behind her rock. She looked over to where the blast had come from. A kneeling Sandtrooper was rising to his feet, powering off his rifle and slinging it over his shoulder as he ascended the boarding ramp of his ship . . . a beautiful Imperial shuttle. The little Jawa's eyes glowed brighter as she momentarily dreamed of stripping and salvaging it. She came back to reality as she remembered that she was alive because of its owner.

A moment later, Danz reappeared, emerging from the ship with an armful illuminators to mark their descending path in the hillside. The hatch to the ship closed as he moved away, starting back up the cliff toward the tiny B'Omarr shrine near the top. The little Jawa gathered up her bag of food and scampered off toward a small cave to prepare her meal. She glanced over her shoulder once or twice to make sure no more Tusksens were watching . . . and to have another look at the shuttle.

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The air in the depths of the ancient wreckage was completely still. Light filtered in from ripped openings in the hull far above. As Ddraig stepped off the last rung of the durasteel ladder to the

floor, Nadon turned and continued to lead us further along the gentle slope into the darkness. He took several steps beyond the light, and just as my thermal imaging kicked in, I heard a wooshing sound fly past me on the left, then on the right.

As I looked around to see what it was, a faint glow began to fill the room . . . a glow emanating from a dozen points around the room. I saw Nadon, arms raised up with hands open and extended, silhouetted by the glow from . . . trees.

I stepped a bit closer and pulled off my bucket, as did the others, taking in what we were seeing a little clearer. As I lowered the helmet away from my face, there were several more wooshing sounds that flew past me and disappeared into the darkness. The glow from the trees steadily grew brighter until we could clearly see that the glow came not from the trees, but from small creatures clinging to their trunks.

The arrangement of trees was circular around the floor of the room, and arranged at evenly spaced intervals up the walls and across the catwalks near the roof. At their bases, were large watering basins filled with the roots and sealed around the bottom of the trunks to prevent moisture from escaping.

Cables were stretched tight across the room, side to side at varying heights. Nadon stood in front of a small, crude bench with a coil of cable on the lower shelf and several small items strewn across the top. Danz came walking up behind us, and dropped an illuminator to the ground next to several medium sized storage crates as he pulled off his bucket.

Nadon, with eyes closed in concentration, lowered his hands and lay them out flat in the air, spreading his long fingers just above the surface of the bench. As he did, the wooshing sounds streaked past us as a half dozen remote seekers flew in from the recesses of the darkness, silently whisking past and coming to hover just above the Ithorian's hands, rotating ever so slightly.

Nadon opened his eyes and turned to us, gesturing with his arm, "Ben Kenobi's Jedi training arena."

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Laid out flat on the table, his entire body flinched and he reflexively closed his mechanical hand tightly around the rail along the table's edge as the med droid raised the control box away from the front of the bio suit and slipped the electrodes and tubes abruptly out of his chest. It immediately inserted a temporary replacement breather unit into his damaged lungs as the malfunctioning control box was taken away.

The flesh around the insertion site burned in the cool air. His glorious, seething power, his ability to wield the dark side and bend it to his will as he had enjoyed on Coruscant and Mustafar, was now as illusive and impotent as seeds scattered in the hot Tatooine winds of his youth. While he was still the most powerful of the Sith Lords to date, the chosen one would never realize the true depth of his abilities, never indulge in the intoxicating, sweet syrup of ultimate power he had but tasted.

While his Force abilities had been heightened and sharpened as a result of his injuries, the ability to channel it and command his cybernetic limbs, as he would have living tissue, was a constant struggle. Mastery over his new limbs . . . and pushing them beyond their calculated operating parameters required incredible focus, and routinely resulted in the need for painful re-fittings . . . recurring reminders of the now-distant pain that drove him to the darkness . . . reminders of that

horrible, cold fear.

He gasped as the `droid coldly removed the temporary unit and slipped the tubes of a new control unit deep into the spongy flesh of his lungs. His teeth clenched tight and eyes squeezed shut beneath the hard, dark angles of his mask as he fought to escape the searing pain . . . he reached into the Force, wrapping the dark side energy around himself as the `droid secured the bindings and sealed the edges of the entry site into his skin with infection resistant adhesives. He felt the pain dissipate as he regained his focus on the duties that now lay ahead.

The Millennium Falcon had been allowed to leave with a transponder hidden onboard. When they slipped out of hyperspace, a trace marker would send back their position and they would be instantly located, Tarkin would see. Obi Wan's death had not secured the safety of Bail Organa's daughter as he had hoped. The Princess and her rescuers might have made off with the plans, but as soon as the Death Star was in position, that insignificant Rebellion would be eliminated, and the age-old Alderaanean cries for a return to democracy would finally be silenced, as the last of her royal house was snuffed out. The old man had died in vain . . . he should not have come back.

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Nadon sat on one of the storage crates as Obi Wan balanced, blindfolded on one of the cables above the arena floor. Four of the seekers whizzed past and around him firing random blasts as they flitted about. The blue flash of his lightsaber moved at blurring speed, deflecting the blasts away as he continued his walk across the taught wire.

"There must be a way!" said the Ithorian.

One of the seekers abruptly slammed into the ankle of Obi-Wan's boot. He allowed it to be knocked off the wire, while he maintained his balance with the remaining planted foot, "Blast!"

He lowered the lightsaber in front of his body, deflecting several bolts as the ramming seeker circled the room preparing to dive toward his one remaining planted foot. As it streaked toward him, Kenobi reflexively raised the crate Nadon was seated on from the floor below. The Ithorian grabbed on to the sides to keep from falling off, as the crate flew up between the Jedi and the seeker.

The small orb slammed into the side of the crate and fell away to the sand below. Kenobi deactivated his blade and removed his blindfold, maintaining a firm Force-hold on the crate. He clipped his saber hilt back on his belt as he returned the displaced foot to the cable, and gently lowered the startled Nadon back to the floor. The remaining seekers whisked away from him and regrouped just above the bench on the ground below.

As the crate settled back to the sand, Nadon slipped off and moved away. Kenobi jumped off the wire into a backflip and landed with a spray of sand on the ground nearby. Blindfold in hand, and distressed look on his face, he turned to Nadon, "I cannot force Owen to comply. I know the need for Luke's training, but I will not revisit the paths of my failure . . . I cannot do that with him. I tried to deliver Anakin's lightsaber to Luke once before . . . Owen would not hear of it. He has the boy thinking his father was a navigator on some spice freighter. When the time is right, and the will of the Force has revealed itself, I will be waiting to uncover more information about his father."

The Hammerhead closed his eyes, and exhaled, "Dangerous this course of action is."

Obi-Wan turned to face the exiled high priest, smiling, "You sound very much like an old friend. Point taken, but the information I reveal to the boy will be that of a very specific, certain point of view. Timing of the revelations is critical. He needs to know that his father was an incredible pilot, and a Jedi Knight who fought alongside me during the Clone Wars . . . that his father was deceived and destroyed by the dark side . . . by Darth Vader. Hopefully this will serve to fuel his desire to train and fight against Vader and the Emperor. He doesn't yet need to know that his father still lives."

Obi Wan stared off into the darkness, "The pain of that revelation is one that must be handled very delicately." Closing his eyes, he saw images of his dying master, Qui-Gon, and remembered defeating Darth Maul in the duel that followed. He had stepped dangerously across into the darkness, allowing his anger to flow. He lowered his head, ashamed at the memory, "Any trust Luke may have in me could be shattered. Unless he is prepared properly to deal with the darkness that lies within us all, everything could be lost."

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We all stepped closer, into the warm, amber glow that broke the darkness. Topolev stepped into the middle of the arena floor and looked up as the rest of us followed, fanning out to take in the makeshift Jedi Academy. He leaned over to Nadon as he stared up into the trees, "Ysalimari?" The Ithorian nodded at Topolev and kept walking, "Yes, to shield the ripples that training would have created in the Force." We had all heard the stories of the secretive Jedi ways, the training facilities within the Temple, and the rigorous demands involved in mastering control of that flowing energy field that all living things created.

I stepped up to the waist-high bench and saw tools from various worlds, a small thermal blast furnace, dirtied abrasive polishing cloths and several tubular devices of varying sizes laid out on a draped cloth. Danz moved past me, dropping another illuminator into the sand as he stepped beneath the stretched cables overhead. I reached out and picked up the smallest device, rolling it over in my hand, wiping off a fine layer of dust. It was very simple . . . and I believe had originally been machined and intended as part of a thrust sequencing unit from a small ship, its type unknown to me. Somehow, though, I didn't think it would ever see service as a thrust sequencer again.

One end was sealed with a cap. The length of the shaft had been fitted with a series of traction grips, and set into the handle was a button. What appeared to be the business end of the device culminated in a small concave dish, with an emitter of some type mounted down inside. I held it out upright before me and pressed the button. As the button made contact with the internal components, I felt a subtle, shuddering vibration in the palm of my hand as a shimmering blue blade sprang up from the emitter, extending to a length of about 2 feet.

I could feel the pulsing, coursing energy rippling from the handle as the others whirled around to see what I had found, the blue light dancing in highlights across their armor. The abbreviated blade length was puzzling. I had seen lightsabers before, but never with a blade so short. I swept the blade back and forth, the low, rumbling static humming as I did so. Nadon stepped over to me as the others gathered around, "Training sabers. Ben built these for training Jedi of all ages." He reached for the saber, and I released it to him. "They're strong enough to deflect a low grade energy burst, but weak enough to only deliver a mild burning sensation" and he swiped the blade across his free arm, with no damage.

"Full intensity blades would not be a good idea for training younglings" he said, as he snapped off the lightsaber. He placed the hilt back on the bench as his hands drifted over the others, "There are several here of varying sizes and diameters, to accommodate the growth of the child's

hand and increasing ability levels. All of these are training sabers. The student, or Padawaan, as the Jedi call them, must ultimately build their own lightsaber after passing their trials, as one last symbol of attaining their full Jedi Knight status. That's what the little blast furnace was for, cooking and refining the crystals to a pure enough state for use in building these."

Felth stepped closer to the table, his eyes moving across the bench, taking note of the number of sabers laid out across the cloth. Rogue picked up several small square devices from the benchtop, "Holoprojectors?" Nadon nodded, blinking his tired eyes, "He created holographic images of himself moving through classic fighting styles to use as a training tool for the Padawaans. As it turns out, Ben was the only one who ever used this place."

Felth looked up, "You mean no Jedi were trained here?" Nadon nodded again, "That's correct." The trooper looked annoyed, "You expect us to believe that this old guy was hiding out here since the Old Republic fell and he never trained a single Jedi?" The Ithorian refugee stared back at him and replied, "Yes, that's correct. It was his intention to be a beacon, and to build a safe haven to any surviving Jedi or possible Jedi candidates, but the rapidly growing influence of the Empire and the fear of repercussions kept anyone from ever coming forward. After several years, he resigned himself to the fact that he must be the last of his Order, and used this facility to meditate and keep himself active, but it was never used for instruction, as its design was intended. The galaxy eventually came to realize that the Jedi had not abandoned them, but had in fact been the first victims of deception, destroyed by the Emperor because they stood in his way. By the time that realization occurred, there were no Jedi left."

Felth flipped on the power switch on his E-11 and drew his blaster, pointing it at the Hammerhead, "I should kill you right here for that kind of treasonous talk." It was a fantastic show, fabricated to show a loyalty to the Empire that Felth no longer possessed. The Ithorian stared blankly back at the trooper without flinching, "I am old, and no threat to you. My death will not serve the Empire, but if that is my fate, kill me." Rogue put a hand on the muzzle of Felth's blaster, lowering it, "That won't be necessary, trooper." He had killed more Ithorians on Belliran V than he cared to remember, he did not need the blood of another on his hands, "I have searched the holonet databases searching for a "Ben Kenobi" since we learned his name, and have turned up nothing of interest except ***Kenobi Freightways***, headquartered on Bakura. What is this Jedi's true name?"

Nadon paused. He knew Kenobi was dead, he had felt the passing and his connection with Kenobi shift as his friend had become one with the Force. "You will find record of him as General Obi-Wan Kenobi."

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Two of the three silvery moons orbiting the planet now illuminated the sands under a gleaming canopy of stars as Rogue closed his holonet fieldpack. The findings of our search to date had successfully transmitted. Everything we had uncovered about the old Jedi, BoShek, Momaw Nadon, the Lars' and Luke Skywalker was now waiting for the Dark Lord's review.

Vader needed to be kept abreast of the unfolding search and any new findings about Ben, Obi-Wan, Kenobi. The smallest detail might seem insignificant, but could prove monumental in the recovery of the stolen data and the apprehension of the last Jedi and his apprentice. While it was of top importance, we still needed more detailed information about this Jedi Training Arena before it was officially reported.

The crisp night air was a sharp contrast to the blasting heat of the day. Rogue reclined back against the rock behind him and breathed in the cool air as the black thermal glove kicked in

beneath the plating of his armor, sensing a dip in skin temperature. It was now warming him using energy captured from the twin suns.

The trip back to Mos Eisley would be a long one, and he was tired from the events of the long day. They had the meeting with the moisture farmers in the morning, and being around the Hammerhead unnerved him quite a bit . . . too many memories from Belliran V, but he decided they would camp here for the night.

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