

## Entrenched

**Assault Preparation Area**  
**Outside Eos City**  
**Arx System – Brotherhood Territory**  
**41 ABY**

War had already begun. The portal to the Ethereal Realm had been activated by the Grand Master and was fully operational. A loud roar could be heard throughout the camp as the Brotherhood's troops and ships charged through it, flooding into the Reflection of Eos City. The Selen Training Corps, led by Corsair Zuza Lottson, was on standby until the city had been taken. They were mostly serving as the rear detachment due to this being their first time seeing action of this magnitude. Among the members of the training corps was Meero, a young kushiban mechanic keeping himself busy inspecting weapons and ships that had yet to be sent through the portal.

"Let's see... hyperdrive looks good. Laser cannons and torpedo launchers working fine..." He said while inspecting a T-65B X-wing. "Yeah, that's another one in perfect condition and ready to fly! Alright, which one's next?" He asked his little L0-LA droid companion that was just hovering close by.

The little droid looked around the camp and beeped in a confused way. "Uhm... I guess any ship you *haven't* checked already?"

Meero looked at the little droid and sighed. "Lola, I thought you were keeping track."

"It's not *my* fault there's so many ships! I lost count!" She beeped at him.

While the two were discussing, Meero's wrist link suddenly began going off. "Oh, it's miss Lottson" He said pushing the button to allow the call to go through. "Yes, ma'am? What can I do for you?"

"Hi, Meero! Listen I'll try to be quick! I just got a message from the ASC saying they're short on pilots to transport troops. So I thought, maybe you'd like the opportunity? I know you're pretty good on a ship."

Meero's eyes widened. "Y-yes ma'am! It'd be an honor!"

"Great! Now listen, it's just transporting troops so you shouldn't run into any enemies but, and I cannot emphasize this enough, *be careful!* I'm sure you've heard about the weird gravity in the Ethereal Realm." She said in a somewhat serious tone. It's clear she wasn't comfortable sending one of her recruits out to fly knowing how dangerous it was. But she wanted him to have the opportunity. "I want you coming back in one piece, alright?"

"Understood, miss Lottson! I won't let you down, ma'am!" He said very excited.

"I know you won't! See you once you're done!" The transmission ended.

Meero took a deep breath and whispered to himself: "You've got this. You've got this." He then quickly left, with his little droid hovering behind him, to join with the Arcona Starfighter Corps. As he approached their section of the camp, he couldn't help but feel extremely excited but also very nervous since this would be his first time flying a ship under such circumstances. Once there, he was greeted by Major Brank Treij who filled him in on the situation. Due to most fighter pilots being occupied, they were running short on pilots for transport ships. All Meero would have to do is take a small number of troops across the Shattered Plains to where their other forces were gathering near the Corpse Fields. After being briefed, Meero was then entrusted with a Sheathipede-class Transport Shuttle called

“Firefly” for his mission. As he sat in the pilot’s seat, he took a moment and looked around the cockpit. He couldn’t believe he was finally going on his first official flying mission. Even if it was just transporting six troopers to a designated location, he was ecstatic. The troopers were in their seats and the ship began humming as Meero activated it, making sure everything was operational before taking off.

“You ready?” He asked Lola.

She looked at him and beeped nervously. “Ready as I’ll ever be...”

Meero had the biggest smile on his face as the Firefly took off and headed towards the portal. “Alright... Here we go.”

### **Somewhere in the Shattered Plains The Ethereal Realm**

The Firefly’s alarms were going off as Meero struggled to keep the ship flying straight and on course. Everything was fine until the Ethereal Realm’s infamous twisted gravity took its toll on the ship. The six troopers in the back clung to their weapons as the ship flailed about and they could hear Meero trying to contact command. “Can anyone hear me?! This is the Firefly! The realm’s twisted gravity is knocking us off course! I can barely keep her in the air! Anyone?!”

Unfortunately, for some reason, no one was answering. Meero tried with all his might to fight the bizarre gravity while Lola hid in his pocket out of fear. Despite his best efforts, the realm’s gravity eventually overpowered him and forced the ship down. As the ship was crashing into a massive trench in the plains, Meero looked back at the troopers and yelled: “Hang on!” Then, suddenly, everything went quiet and dark.

“...eero!...Mee...” He could hear a voice call to him in the dark. “Meero!”

Meero opened his eyes and saw Lola nudging him to wake him up. “Uh... Lola? What happened?”

“Oh thank goodness you’re ok! I was so worried!” She beeped as she nuzzled him.

Meero coughed, fixed his glasses and looked around. There was smoke and sparks coming from every nook and cranny of the cockpit. Nothing was working. He got off the pilot’s seat and went to the back to check on the troops. “W-what?” He asked confused as he saw that the seats were empty. He rushed outside to make sure they hadn’t been thrown off the ship when it crashed, but there was no one outside either. All he saw was dirt, rocks and the canyon-like walls that stretched as far as the eye could see. He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to sense anyone nearby using the Force but still no luck. It was as if they were never with him to begin with, but that couldn’t be. They had been with him since he left the camp. He remembers them talking amongst themselves as he flew above the Reflection of Eos City.

“Lola, where are the troopers? Did you see what happened to them?” He asked his little droid.

“I don’t know... I was hiding in your pocket when the Firefly crashed. When I went back out, I only saw you.”

“But... that’s not possible...” He said while looking back at the Firefly as it continued to billow with smoke. “What luck... my first flying mission... I end up crashing the ship and losing the troops.”

“H-hey now! It’s not your fault! We knew the gravity here was bizarre. It could’ve happened to anyone.” She beeped trying to help him feel at least a little better.

“Thank you, Lola. I appreciate it. But that still doesn’t explain how the six people that were with us suddenly vanished without a trace...” He looked around the trench to see if he could spot a way out. Unfortunately, it looked like it was

a very deep and treacherous place. Trying to climb out could be very dangerous even for a small and nimble kushiban like himself. No one was answering him, the Firefly was in no condition to fly and he lacked the proper tools and materials to repair it. The only thing he could do was brave the depths of the trench and hopefully find a safe way out.

Before setting out, Meero and Lola searched the Firefly to see if there was anything that could be useful. While they were searching, Meero suddenly stopped. His ears twitched as he heard what sounded like footsteps approaching. "Lola, get behind me." He said taking out his blaster. He tried once more to sense something using the Force but again he felt nothing. His ears twitched again in the direction the sound was coming from so he pointed his blaster in the same direction, waiting to see what emerged from the shadows being cast by the trench's walls.

"Woah, woah! Don't shoot!" He heard a voice say.

Meero could see there were two figures in the shade with their hands up, but couldn't make out who they were. "Step out into the light."

"Alright, alright." One of them said as they stepped to where Meero could see them. It was a young human male with pale skin and dark hair and a blue-skinned female Nautolan. Although Meero didn't recognize them, he felt at ease and lowered his blaster once he saw they were wearing Brotherhood robes. Although he was relieved to have found someone, he was slightly disappointed it wasn't the troopers he had been transporting. Why couldn't he sense them? Was his connection to the Force somehow weaker here?

"Did you crash here as well?" He asked them.

"Yes, a while ago." Said the Nautolan woman. "We've been walking along the trench trying to find-" she was suddenly interrupted by the human.

"Well don't tell him! For all we know he could be one of *them* trying to trick us!"

Meero and Lola looked at each other confused. "Uh... if you're referring to the Children, I can assure you I'm not one of them."

He explained to them what had happened. The crash, the troopers disappearing and his connection to the Force feeling off since he arrived. While the Nautolan believed him, the human still seemed somewhat reluctant and on edge. She then introduced herself. "Well my name is Nyt Mizos, and this is Haron Warall."

Meero gave her a gentle bow. "A pleasure! My name is Meero, and this is Lola."

Lola beeped at Nyt. "Heya!"

"Well..." said Meero looking at the Firefly. "I can't repair her here. But I guess we can use her for shelter until we find a way out or someone finds us."

Haron looked at Meero with an annoyed expression. "Ooh no, fuzzy! I'm not waiting around to be rescued. That could take days. I say we keep going down the trench until we see a way out. I'm not planning on dying down here."

"I hate to agree with this jerk but he's got a point, Meero." Lola beeped softly at Meero as if whispering. "It could take forever for someone to find us."

Meero sighed, hating having to just leave the Firefly, but then nodded in agreement. "Very well. We'll go with you."

Nyt then gave Meero a big smile. "That's great! The more the merrier!"

"Yeah, *great*..." said Haron in a sarcastic tone.

Meero knew he could trust Nyt, but was cautious about Haron. He looked like he could become a problem. The three of them and the little droid then left the crash site and walked down the massive trench. All they could see was dirt, rocks and the giant walls on both sides for miles. As they walked, Meero kept feeling uneasy. He could hear unintelligible whispers in the wind and felt like they were being watched, but he couldn't sense anything in this place. His connection to the Force remained unreliable. He couldn't even sense the two people that were right next to him. Eventually, they saw what appeared to be a crystalline growth protruding from the walls.

Meero looked at it and thought for a moment but was interrupted by Haron. "Hey, fuzzy! You can stare at crystals all you want when we get out of here. Either keep walking or we're leaving you."

"What is it, Meero?" Nyt asked.

"Hmmm... I could try to break that crystal. We could use the pieces to climb out." He said while looking at the growth.

Lola hovered close to him and beeped. "Are you sure? Your Force abilities haven't been working properly."

"True..." he said while thinking. "But maybe I'll have better luck with this? It's worth a shot." Meero then closed his eyes, focused on the crystalline growth and extended his hand. A few seconds passed and nothing happened.

"Pfft oh yeah that's *great*." Haron scoffed and kept walking. "Stop wasting time and let's keep moving."

Meero ignored him and kept concentrating for a moment. Suddenly, he opened his eyes and was shocked as he felt something different. Up until this point his connection to the Force felt almost nonexistent, but that quickly changed when he felt a surge of power out of nowhere. He gasped as the crystalline growth didn't just break, it shattered into a million pieces with a loud boom. Crystalline shards shot in every direction like darts as Meero reacted by quickly grabbing Lola and hiding her in his pocket so she wouldn't get hit. He then tried to take cover behind a nearby boulder as the shards shot by and gave him several cuts. Noticing what happened, Haron and Nyt also took cover behind a boulder.

As soon as it stopped, Meero poked his head out making sure it was safe. Lola flew out of his pocket and beeped in a relieved way. "Phew! Thanks, Meero. Are you ok?"

He checked his cuts but could tell it wasn't anything serious. "Yeah, I'm alright." He then looked at where the crystalline growth was, which was now a hole in the wall. "What... just happened?"

"HEY!" He heard Haron call out as he emerged from behind the boulder. "What do you think you're doing?! Are you crazy?! You could've killed us!"

Meero didn't know what to say. That had never happened to him before. "I-I'm sorry, it was an accident."

"Haron, its alright!" Said Nyt trying to calm him down but he shook her off.

"No! It *isn't* alright, Nyt! We've been down here for what feels like ages! I *hate* this place!" Haron was visibly furious. He then started pacing while talking to himself seeming more and more unstable. "What was I thinking? I never should've come here. Now I'm gonna die at the bottom of a gorge with these two..." He started shaking, reached for his blaster and pointed it at Nyt.

"Woah, woah! Haron stop!" Said Meero as his eyes widened.

Nyt was frozen in place with a terrified expression. "Haron, what are you doing!?"

Haron glared at Nyt. He was sweating and shaking as he held his blaster. "We don't know how big this trench is. The three of us could survive for maybe five rotations. Just one could survive ten... and I'm not gonna have you two slowing me down." He closed his eyes and slowly pulled the trigger. The blaster went off and Haron opened his eyes but was shocked by what he saw. Meero had rushed over and protected Nyt by summoning a barrier using the Force.

"Haron please don't do this! We can find a way out together! None of us has to die here. Please. Put down the blaster." As Meero said this, the barrier began to fade. His connection to the Force was vanishing again at the worst possible moment. "No no no.. not *now!*" The barrier then completely faded.

"Very brave, fuzzy. But you brought morality to the wrong place." Said Haron about to pull the trigger again.

Meero stayed between him and Nyt with his arms stretched out to defend her. He knew his death was imminent so he closed his eyes. If he took the blaster fire then maybe Nyt could use the opportunity to escape. The blaster went off with a loud echo that resonated throughout the trench, then there was only the sound of wind. Meero slowly opened his eyes, surprised to still be alive. He looked at his chest but there was no wound. He looked over to where Haron was and was shocked to see he was gone.

"Wait... what? N-Nyt, what happened to-" He said looking back to where Nyt was and his eyes widened seeing she wasn't there either. He looked around and called out for them but no answer. Only the emptiness of the trench. He looked back in the direction they had come from and was shocked to see only one set of footprints: his own. Haron and Nyt were never really with him. "What is going on? Am I going insane?"

Lola flew out of Meero's pocket and beeped loudly: "Meero! Don't you *ever* scare me like that again!"

"Hello?" They heard a voice in the distance. "Is anyone there? Meero!? Is that you!?"

Meero recognized the voice. "It couldn't be..." he walked further and saw who he thought it was. It was one of the troopers he had been transporting on the Firefly.

"I found him! He's over here!" The trooper called out and the others rushed over to help him. "Sir! We've been looking for you! Are you alright?"

He looked at them and stretched his hand to touch one of their legs making sure it was really them and not just another illusion. "What... happened to you guys? When I woke up you were just gone."

The troopers looked at each other and one of them said: "We actually don't know, sir. We assume the bizarre gravity knocked us off the ship when it was crashing. We woke up just outside the trench and have been looking for you ever since." He then pointed in the direction they had come from. "But don't worry! There's a climbable wall just ahead. It's how we managed to get down here safely."

Meero felt an incredibly sense of relief as he followed the troopers back the way they came. As he walked alongside them, he couldn't help but wonder what just happened. His on and off connection to the Force and the two people he had been with that apparently were never really with him. Just what is this place? Are others in the Brotherhood experiencing something similar? He suddenly stopped as he noticed something in his peripheral vision. His eyes widened slightly as he saw what looked like a couple of skeletons by the trench walls. They appeared to be a human and Nautolan skeletons with rusted blasters between them.

"What is it, sir?" One of the troopers said then looked at the skeletons as well. "Ah... poor sods. Looks like they've been here a while. They were so close to finding the way out too... What a shame. Well there's nothing we can do for them now. Let's go, sir."

"Y-yeah..." said Meero following the troopers out of the trench with Lola hovering close to him. "Let's leave this horrible place."