

Never Lose Hope

A Submission to the Competition:
Legendary Encounter III



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3 ABY

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Seven year old Grex Inaris looked around at his new surroundings, fidgeting out of nervousness. He didn't know where he was, but it must have been another planet. His parents had told him that different worlds had different climates. He didn't really know what that meant, but he thought it had something to do with the weather maybe. It was hot out under the sun of this new world, and buggy, too. The plants were also different here. He missed his parents and wanted to go home. But any time he asked the adults about it, they simply laughed and told him to shut up. That wasn't very nice. He didn't know why they were being so mean, or why they wouldn't let him go back to his family. They had put some kind of collar around his neck, and it hurt. Any time he tried to take it off, it delivered a small shock — he quickly learned to leave it alone and ignore it as best he could.

There were other people with him where he was being held. He recognized some of the aliens from pictures in books his parents had shown him to teach him about the rest of the galaxy. He had always loved seeing how different everyone could be. Out of everyone gathered there, he spotted a lot of Twi'leks and Togrutas, some Humans, and even a couple of Wookiees — they were really huge. There were some other children there as well. One of them, a Twi'lek boy that looked a few years older, offered a weak, but friendly smile. Grex waved to him shyly. The boy walked over and sat down in the dirt next to Grex.

“Hi, what's your name? I'm Kinar.”

“Grex,” the young Lasat said softly.

“Are you here all alone, Grex?”

“Yeah. I told them I wanted my parents and that I wanted to go back home, but they said I couldn't go. I miss home...”

“I'm not really alone since those other over there are from my village, but it's not the same thing. My parents aren't here either. But you know what, that just means that we'll have to stick together then, right?” Kinar smiled at him.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Grex replied with a sniffle. “Do you know what we're doing here?”

Kinar's face changed as he looked down at the ground for a moment. “We were captured. The people that took us want to sell us as slaves. It happens to my people a lot...”

“What's a slave?”

“It’s like...” Kinar searched for the right words to explain it to the younger boy. “It’s like you do work for someone, but you don’t get paid for it, and they can be mean. And I don’t think you’ll be able to see your family again...I’m sorry.”

“What? Nooo! But I have to see my parents again!” Tears welled up in Grex’s eyes before streaming down his face as he hugged his knees to his chest. “I want to go home...”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Kinar frowned and put an arm around the boy’s shoulders, trying to comfort him. “You and I can stick together, just like I told you we would.”

Grex leaned into the older boy. He really, really wanted to see his parents, to go home at least, but he was beginning to think that such a thing wouldn’t be possible now that he had learned of what might await him. He had never felt so alone before, despite finding a new friend. And he was scared. So he sat there and cried. When all the tears had left him, he felt exhausted and curled up to sleep.

Morning came early the next day. The sun pour in through holes and tears in the tattered covering above where all the people – slaves – were gathered together. Of course, it didn't extend over the entire area. Grex opened his eyes slowly and, for a moment, forgot where he was. The fear that he had felt before came back in full force. Fear transformed into panic as he looked around furtively. Then he spotted his new friend, Kinar, and remembered what had happened.

A commotion drew his attention now, and he sat up, glancing over. A group of people had assembled outside the holding area and a stage had been brought in. One of the Wookiees was standing on it, with guards on either side and behind him and they were holding sticks that made a shocking sound – similar to the collar around Grex's neck – each time it touched the large alien's fur and that made him howl. He sounded angry. People were shouting out numbers in ever-increasing amounts. Grex was confused; the noise hurt his ears. He wanted to see his parents, but then remembered that he couldn't. Suddenly the numbers stopped getting higher and the noise died down.

"Do I hear any better offers?" a voice called out to the gathered crowd. The man waited a moment and people shook their heads and offered words of 'no' – some even cursing. Grex was shocked their parents let them talk like that. "The sale is final then. The Wookiee is sold! Next lot item is a young Twi'lek female, just coming into adulthood. The opening bid is five thousand credits!"

Grex looked around the holding area. It was emptier than he remembered it being before he had fallen asleep. A large number of Twi'leks and some of the Togrutas were missing. He looked to Kinar.

"Where did the others go?" he asked, confused by it all.

"They were sold off already. We're not going to see them again," the older boy replied solemnly. "Like I told you the other day, my people are often used as slaves, so they were some of the first ones to go."

Grex frowned. He still didn't really understand what it all meant, but it seemed like something to be sad about. "I'm sorry, Kinar."

"It's okay. Maybe they'll end up somewhere good," the boy smiled. Of course, Grex didn't know that Kinar didn't believe the words he spoke, or that the smile was forced. The Twi'lek had heard plenty of stories about what his people went through in slavery and feared what awaited him. But he was trying to put on a brave face for his younger friend. He deserved to have some kind of hope, after all.

The boys went their separate ways. Kinar went to spend time comforting his own people while Grex, ever the curious adventurer, explored his surroundings. Beyond the walls of the holding area there appeared to be some kind of market place. He grasped two

bars that made up the wall and peered out, in wonder at what he saw. He had seen different aliens before, but never so many different kinds in one place.

While he was looking at everything, he thought he caught sight of something familiar out of the corner of his eye. It was something big, with short, purple-colored fur and pointed ears — it looked like another Lasat! As Grex pushed closer to try to get a better view his head popped through the bars. Slightly worried but intrigued, he pulled back, and his head was back inside the holding area. Growing more curious, he turned himself sideways and stuck an arm through the opening. And then a leg. He inched his body forward until he was finally free from the bars and outside the holding area. He looked back with no small amount of glee on his face. He turned around again to face the marketplace and rushed off. He wanted to see if he could find the Lasat and also take a look at what else the marketplace had to offer.

Grex ran from stall to stall, standing on the tips of his toes to get as good a look at things as he could manage. Sometimes there was a small crate that he could climb on top of to better see what was there. He was fascinated by what he saw, whether it was clothing or jewelry, or even different kinds of fruit. He loved seeing so much variety in everything, as most small children his age would. He ran across an intersection to check what else he could find. In his excitement, however, he failed to notice two people coming his way. He crashed into a large pair of legs and fell to the ground.

“Oi! Watch where you’re going, ya runt,” a gruff voice scolded him.

“Oww,” Grex said, rubbing his backside as he stood up. He looked up from the ground to the foot and leg that he had bumped into. It had a certain similarity to it, almost like his dad’s leg. His gaze continued upward and he saw that it was the Lasat he had spotted earlier. Suddenly Grex smiled from ear to ear and threw his arms around the man’s leg. “Daddy!”

“What? Sorry, kid, I think you’ve got the wrong guy.”

Confused, Grex looked up. He realized his mistake at once. In wanting to see his parents so badly, his eyes had played tricks on him and he had mistaken this Lasat for his dad.

“O-Oh...sorry mister...” Grex said sheepishly as he let go of the man’s leg and taking a step away.

The other Lasat looked down at the young boy. His eyes focused on the collar around his neck. He frowned. The other man that he was with, a Human with blonde hair and a trimmed beard, was urging him to move on.

“Come on, Zeb. We’ve got to finish getting our supplies.”

“Give me a minute, Kallus, will ya?” He knelt down and looked at Grex. “What’s your name, kid?”

“Grex,” he said quietly, not able to meet his gaze. “Sorry for bumping into you.”

“Ah, don’t worry about that. You were probably just excited. I bet you haven’t seen your parents and missed them. That sound about right?”

Grex nodded, finally looking up at the man’s face. “Y-Yeah, I do... What’s your name, mister?”

“The name’s Zeb. What are you doing here anyway, little guy?”

“I don’t know. I was with my parents, but I wandered away and then something bit me and I woke up here.”

“Something bit you? What do you mean?”

“Something metal, but it had tiny little feathers coming out from the end of it.”

“Hold on, what happened to you?”

Grex frowned and began to explain. Just two days ago, he had been with his family as they took a vacation to Felucia. His parents had been saving up for a long time so that they could all go on a special trip. They wanted to show their young son just how different the various planets could be, so they decided on Felucia. They had chosen wisely — Grex couldn’t believe how alien the planet was compared to his home on Lira San. And it wasn’t just the plant life, either. All of the other types of people were so different too! His parents had said they were different species, whatever that meant.

“Well that must have been fun for you to see. Did you like it there?” Zeb asked.

Grex nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah! It was really fun, I loved it! But...then I got lost...”

“How’d you end up doing that?”

“I got so excited that I went off to go explore some more. I guess my parents weren’t looking or something. But it wasn’t their fault!” he explained again.

With his parents’ attention diverted, even for just a moment, Grex had been able to wander off and explore the new environment of the alien world on his own. He hadn’t exactly tried to sneak off, and he was anything but stealthy, especially at that young age. Still, he had gone off without his parents noticing. However, something sinister was hiding in the thick foliage of Felucia’s plant life. Once Grex had wandered far enough away from

his parents he felt something sting his arm. Thinking it was a bug, he slapped a hand at it in annoyance. But something didn't feel right. When his hand made contact, he instead found something small and metallic. He pulled it out of his arm and studied it, confused. A moment later everything in his vision swam and everything blurred together. The world began to grow dark, and he fell to the ground. What Grex didn't see was a lizard-like alien that came out from behind the cover of leaves and scooped up the young Lasat. Had he seen anything, he would have recognized the form as belonging to a Trandoshan. When Grex had awoken, that was when he found himself on this strange new world, alone and afraid.

"I bet that was a hunter of some kind, looking for people to capture and sell," Zeb said with a growl. "It must have been pretty scary for you, too. I'm sorry you had to go through that, kid. So you're here all alone, then?"

"Yeah, it was so scary, and it's just me, my parents aren't here," Grex said sadly, looking down. He thought a moment and looked up with a grin. "But I made a friend! His name's Kinar. He's back there," Grex said, pointing towards the holding area.

Zeb frowned as he looked to where the boy pointed. He saw the pen that the slaves were being held in, how they were all huddled together and afraid. He also saw a few guards searching for something — or more likely someone. One of them pointed towards the marketplace and two others went through the guarded exit and began to go from stall to stall.

"Listen, kid, I'd love to help you out right now, believe me — especially a fellow Lasat and one as young as you." He glanced from Grex to his companion and back again. "Unfortunately, I'm in the middle of doing something really important that can't exactly wait. I'm sorry, truly."

"That's okay. I still have Kinar. And maybe I'll see you again some time!"

"Yeah, maybe you will," Zeb laughed. His face changed as he noticed the collar around the boy's neck, and he jabbed a large finger at it. "They put this on you, did they?"

Grex nodded. "Yeah, they did. I don't know what it is, but it hurts me when I try to take it off, so I don't do that anymore."

"Well how about I let you in on a little secret, just between you and me?"

"Sure, what's that?"

"It gets better, kid. No matter how bad things get for you, always remember that life will get better in time. It won't always be bad. I promise you that much. There will always be light in the darkness. Never look back, only forward. Don't lose hope."

Grex looked up at the older Lasat and nodded, grinning. “Okay! You know what? I hope I can grow up to be like you one day, big and strong!”

“You’ve got a long way to go before that happens, kid,” Zeb said with a chuckle. His face softened and he returned the smile. “But if you keep at it and put your mind to it, I bet you can do it someday if you really try. Now, why don’t you head back before you get into trouble, yeah?”

“Sure. Thanks Mr. Zeb! I’m gonna try real hard to grow up to be just like you!” Grex grinned and ran back to the holding area.

The young Lasat wanted to tell Kinar all about what had just happened. He didn’t know what was going to happen to him in the near future, but now he at least had a goal. He was going to take things one day at a time, always working to do his best so he could grow up to be like Zeb. He seemed like a nice guy. He thought that maybe he could even tell his parents about him one day.

Just as Grex was walking towards the bars to squeeze through again, he was stopped short. A pair of strong hands clamped down on his shoulders. He turned around to look and saw the face of one of the guards, a Weequay.

“There you are, pipsqueak. We’ve been wondering where you were hiding.”

Grex blinked and looked up. “Huh?”

“Thought you could escape, did you? Well think again. And it looks like you got back just in time — you’re up next on the auction block,” the guard said with a wicked grin, laughing. He lifted the boy up and carried him to the stage. The other man up there, a Human, nodded before turning to face the crowd.

“The current lot up for bid is a juvenile Lasat. Make no mistake, folks. Though rare, we can assure you that this is the genuine article. Once he grows up, he’s sure to make a fine laborer for you! Now, given the rarity, let’s start the bidding at eight thousand credits.”

The people began to shout again. Grex was confused and looked back to see Kinar. His friend tried to smile, but it was clear, this time, that he just couldn’t put on a brave face. Fear shone in his eyes. Grex offered a small wave to his friend before facing the crowd. Zeb’s words echoed in his mind: things will get better. He held onto those words and kept them close to his heart. He didn’t know what was in store for him, but he tried to hold onto hope, just like Zeb had told him to do.