

## *The Lightbringers' New Groove*

*Baduh-baduh! Buh badudududuh, baduuuuuh! Badubaudh...*

The little ditty played pleasantly through Howlader's head as he walked, a subtle skulking sway to his gait. The human walking along beside him, a human of tan complexion and short, dark hair, watched the taller man's expression in quiet curiosity a moment before speaking again.

"So anyways, this is the commissary. Meals are eight to nine-thirty, twelve to one, and five to seven. The hours on Pendroh-I are somewhat longer than the galactic standard timescale, but you'll get used to it."

"Mhmm..."

His guide looked at him curiously. "Did you have a question?"

"How many people would you say that this place serves?"

"Uhh... daily? I'm not sure, but guessing by the seating... Maybe two hundred?"

The larger man keyed some notes into a datapad, then replaced the device to its pocket in his fluffy onesie. *Oh yeah. It's all coming together.* "Excellent. And what are these up here?"

They stopped alongside several doors, Howlader scrutinizing them warily as his guide pointed to the signage. "These are the refreshers. Single occupancy, I'm afraid. The lines can get *pretty* sizeable."

"Ehh, *I'm* pretty sizeable. I'm sure I could, uh... figure it out." He paused, looking back at the cafeteria door. "I know we're doing the tour right now, but do I have time to make an order? Maybe something I can pick up later?"

His guide looked puzzlingly in the same direction, working out the logistics in his head. Such things were usually doable after the initiation tour, but he knew enough from previous iterations of the same introductory walkabout that not all of them actually allowed for ready mealtimes. It made for a bad first-day impression.

"I suppose we can put this on pause for a couple minutes. But just long enough to make a pickup order."

"Great! I saw spinach puffs on the menu, and lemme tell ya, I am *sold*."

The Dawnseeker guide watched rather passively while the larger, costumed human went about ordering lunch. The newcomer would hardly be the first recruit he'd inculcated into the ranks of the Lightbringers, and not even the most interestingly attired, though the particular choice was definitely *unique*. The only mystery is where this one might end up: his evaluation during indoctrination would form some part of the

path for this newfound recruit, but it would be up to the senior councilors and the Lighthouse to make the final determination.

Howlader knew this as well. Brotherhood intelligence could at least gather that much. Most days.

“Alright! What’ve you got next for me?”

“The next part will likely take the longest: the Placement Rectory. As a novitiate here, you’ll spend a lot of time there for training and evaluation.”

“Evaluation?” He passed a second in thought before starting with realization. He gave his guide an understanding wink. “Oh, *evaluation*. Riiiiight.”

The Mortisian blinked in slight confusion at the gesture. “Y-yes. Evaluation. Right. This way, please.”

The Nexus of Light wasn’t quite the winding, circuitous compound that many other such temples to the Force preferred, but focused on equal parts aesthetic — showing off the beautiful mountains, forests, and lakes — and practical function-oriented layout. It made the trip relatively short compared to what Howlader expected by the time they arrived at the expansive atrium that, if the doors indicated anything, branched off into various classrooms and training halls, among whatever other purpose-built alcoves they had connected to the main hall of the Rectory.

Howlader was guided toward a side room, one in which a mental switch-flip bespoke of several other presences in the room, all placid and amiable. His guide pressed the button for the door, which slid open with a gentle hiss, closing much the same way behind them.

The people seated in a semicircle before Howlader and the solitary chair presented to him seemed much more ominous than the pleasant atmosphere and soft, natural lighting of the room’s aesthetic. It was an oddly conflicting state that must have made him pause in his gait and garner attention from the various personalities presented before him. A genteel, rather spindly and shaking elderly lady, with a close-lipped smile wide enough to conceal her eyes within the wrinkles, motioned to the central seat.

“Please make yourself comfortable, Mr. Howlader.”

“Wait, do I know you?” he said back. “Wait now, don’t tell me. Coach Galek, holoball, twenty BBY?” Her wrinkles curled in the negative, though her smile didn’t disappear. “No no, Mrs. Thrane’s interpretive dance, two semesters. I was usually in the back because of my weak ankles.”

She shook her already gently-shaking head. “No, I’m afraid not.”

“Well don’t worry, I’ll think of it.”

“Perhaps your weak ankles should take a seat and relax from your walking?” another of the figures said, amiable but with a certain commanding aspect about it.

When Howlader didn’t immediately comply, the results were somewhat jarring as he was, with the barest flick of the seated man’s finger, he was lifted bodily to the empty chair and firmly plopped onto it. Despite the forceful seating, he couldn’t help but notice the very fine cushioning his posterior found itself on.

“Alright. Sitting. Got it.”

His guide sighed from the doorway behind him. “I thought perhaps this might wait until *after* the orientation.”

“With as high-profile a case as Mr. Howlader’s here,” a third questionably-human figure said, “we determined it was better to begin early rather than afford him an opportunity to report his findings.”

Their prisoner-apparent shifted in his seat toward his guide. “So you *really* know who I am?”

The old woman spoke up. “You weren’t exactly subtle, deary.” She motioned to him in general. “The... bear suit? It’s rather unique.”

“And your recruitment dossier had so many invalid fields that, even if you weren’t immediately recognizable, the number of red flags alerted us to your identity as a spy.”

“‘Spy’ is such a strong word,” Howlader said in an attempt to diffuse the non-aggressive tension in the air.

“You’re right. A proper spy wouldn’t have gotten caught so quickly.”

His mouth opened to reply, but he found himself without a witty retort. “Alright, that was just uncalled for.”

“And what do you think *is* called for?”

The bear-suited man looked up into the natural lighting ceiling to gain a moment to think, when he saw what might have been a Pendroh-I squirrel. *Escape.*

“Squeak squeak, squeak squeaker squeaken!”

The Mortisians all blinked curiously before following the Force user’s gaze up to the bushy-tailed rodent. For perhaps a split second, they thought something might happen. Common sense and recollection of his dossier won out though, and they watched with quiet amusement as the squirrel all but ignored Howlader’s spoken chittering, merely glancing at him curiously before skittering further along the decorative vine-work before disappearing back up the skylight toward the roof.

The chuckles that followed were less out of mockery, and more in line with bewilderment that he'd attempted it in the first place. Howlader likewise seemed less distraught by this, and rather just mildly disappointed.

“Huh. That usually works.”

“Perhaps it's a different dialect on this planet,” one of the council members said with an undertone of genuine theorizing, though not without some added amusement.

The apparent lead council figure motioned for a moment of silence. “We should begin the indoctrination process. Howlader, Master at Arms of the Brotherhood, prepare yourself.”

“Uhh, how long will this take?”

“It will be indefinite, if you cooperate. If, by some chance, you manage to escape, at least long enough to prevent you from aiding your fellows before our raids are complete.”

“Sooo... how long is that?”

“At least several hours.”

His face froze in shock. “My spinach puffs!”